Discounting the positives

If you are struggling writing positive things about yourself, then it could be that in some way you are disqualifying what you have written. Throughout the exercise, keep a watchful eye for feelings of shame, embarrassment or disbelief. These feelings may be a cue that self-critical thoughts are going through your mind. Are you, for example, telling yourself …

That it's wrong to be so smug?

Do you feel as if you are showing off?

Are you thinking that what you did was trivial — anyone could have done it?

Are you telling yourself it was only what would be expected of any decent human being?

Or that you could have done it better? Or faster? Or more effectively?

Or that you may be kind/supportive/competent or whatever some of the time, but not all of the time, and if it's not 100 per cent, then it doesn't count?

Are you devaluing qualities because other people have them too — they are too ordinary to be worth considering?

When 'yes, buts' like these intrude, simply notice their presence and put them to one side. Then return your attention fully to focusing on your list of positive qualities.

And if the disclaimers are too strong to be easily put aside, you can use the skills you have already learned for dealing with self-critical thoughts to rethink them (for example looking at the arguments for and against your self-criticism and perhaps coming to a more balanced view).

Are you for example engaging in:

All-or-nothing thinking: All-or-nothing thinking involves standards in two categories and viewing things in extremes, for example 'good or bad', 'failed or achieved'. Other examples include: 'If I cannot get the whole report finished today, I might as well not even start it'; 'If I don't get a distinction grade, I am a complete failure'. Also referred to as '**black-and-white'** thinking (there are no shades of grey).

Discounting the positive: Rejecting good things as if they did not count: 'She only said that to make me feel better'. Alternatively, you magnify any mistakes, mishaps or negatives: You speak up at a meeting and don't believe you sounded as you hoped. Then you might think to yourself that everyone thought you were stupid and were laughing at you and you will probably lose your job. You single out one negative detail and focus on it at the expense of any positive features: 'I can't believe I said that the whole night was a disaster'. Aka '**Focusing on the negative'** (the cup is half empty); '**Applying a negative filter'**; '**disbelieving**

the positive'; 'disbelieving the positive from others' (I don't want to belong to club that will accept me as a member')

Double standards: This is where you have one set of harsh standards for yourself and another set of more lenient standards for others.

*Name-calling***:** 'I'm useless . . . inept . . . stupid . . . inferior' and/or condemning yourself as a total person on the basis of a single event or mistake: 'I screwed that up which proves I am a screw up'. Aka '**Labelling'**

Perfectionism: People with low self-esteem often set very high standards for themselves which are reflected in their 'Rules for Living'. For example, they may believe that everything they do should be done to the highest standard, regardless of circumstances and personal cost. This is simply not realistic, and opens the floodgates to self-criticism and painful feelings of guilt, depression and inadequacy.

'Should' statements: Often we feel pressured by 'should' statements and then criticise ourselves when we do not meet the standard, for example 'I *should* exercise more'. Replacing should statements with statements based on more flexible ideas such as 'I would like to' or 'I would prefer to' and acknowledging that 'it's ok if I don't' helps you to feel under less pressure and so can, in fact, make us more likely to achieve our goals than when we are constantly saying 'should' to ourselves. Consider instead 'I would like to exercise more regularly if I can'**.** Aka**: 'I must' or 'I ought' …** to know better etc**.**