

THE INNER CRITIC: ACCEPTING OURSELVES

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Do you feel like you're your worst critic? Do you find yourself criticizing your body, intelligence, clothes, ability to do your job, and just about anything about yourself? We all have that voice inside, the one that can take anything about ourselves or something that we did and make it into something terribly wrong or bad.

Some people have stronger inner critics than others, but most people at one time in their lives have struggled to believe positive things that are said about them, and to ward off internal criticisms.

Many events conspire to make us question and criticize ourselves. From the little things to the big things, there are lots of people who knowingly and unknowingly put us down. Family members, peers, teachers, and religious leaders can all play a role even if they think they're helping us.

Parents often try and correct the "problems" they think they see in us, and say all kinds of things in an attempt to "fix" us. They let us know their concerns about our looks, body, hair, clothes, the way we walk and talk, and so on. All of these accumulate to make us feel less than adequate, less than whole, less than what we "should" be.

Overt and covert criticisms, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and bullying all lead to our internalizing negative beliefs. They leave us feeling hurt and ashamed, sometimes hating everything about ourselves. While overt abuse certainly leads to the creation of an inner critic, so do many other, often more subtle, forms of criticism.

The inner critic can lead to all sorts of problems including low self-esteem, self injurious behaviour, eating disorders, avoiding situations that require us to be the centre of attention or to shine, and feeling like we are profoundly unlovable and unwanted.

THE INNER CRITIC WAS FORMED TO HELP YOU

The inner critic was originally formed to help you, to help you avoid pain and shame. The thinking goes like this: "if I create within myself a voice that is just like my parents, and anyone else I want to please, I can more easily know what they want from me, how they want me to be, and I can more easily avoid their disapproval and ultimately win their approval and love."

The inner critic wants us to do well, to succeed, and to be liked, but operates on the thinking level of a child, and a child who thinks that what other people think of her/him is not only important but correct.

In order to do its job properly, the inner critic needed to curb your natural inclinations, and to make you acceptable to others by criticizing and correcting your behaviour before other people could criticize and reject you. In this way, it reasoned, it could earn love and protection for you as well as save you much shame and hurt. (Stone and Stone, 1993)

The problem is the inner critic doesn't know when to stop. It may grow until it is out of control and criticizes you on a regular basis causing some real damage. The inner critic can make you feel awful about yourself. With the inner critic watching, you begin to watch your every step, you become self-conscious, awkward and ever fearful of making a mistake.

RECOGNIZING AND SEPARATING FROM THE INNER CRITIC

The first step in reducing the power of the inner critic is to recognize when it's speaking and to separate from it. You are not your inner critic, it is a part of you, but it is not who you are. When you are able to separate from your inner critic, you are in the part of your self which is sometimes called aware ego, internal witness, higher self, or observing ego.

When you are able to step back, and observe the inner critic, you are separating from it and moving into aware or observing ego. Being in aware ego takes the sting out of the inner critic.

Some ways to get to know and separate from your inner critic include:

- ☑ Write out all the things that your inner critic says to you at different times of the day, in different situations, and with different people and notice what the patterns are. For example, does your inner critic get stronger when you're tired, hungry, or stressed? If so, taking breaks, unwinding, having snacks, and relaxing can all reduce the power of your inner critic.
- ☑ If writing out the inner critic's messages leads to your adding more and more criticisms to your list, stop writing and try to step back from being in the inner critic. See if you can simply observe that there is a part of you that thinks this way, and that not all of you thinks this way. You don't need to argue with the inner critic, just be aware of it.
- ☑ Talk to other people about their inner critic's messages and compare the similarities; you may be surprised to hear that inner critics sound pretty similar from person to person and your inner critic's messages are not specific to you. For some people, doing this would not be helpful and could backfire. If you have a particularly strong inner critic, this could lead to it finding other critical messages to give to you. Again, if this happens, or you suspect it will, don't do it and concentrate on stepping back and being aware of the inner critic as a separate voice or part.
- ☑ Draw your inner critic. This is not an art project and no one will mark you on this. Drawing the inner critic externalizes it and helps you to separate from it. What or who does the inner critic look like?
- ☑ Think about when and how your inner critic developed. Does it sound like any one you know?
- ☑ Write down both of your parents', and anyone else's, critical messages and compare them to your list. Have you adopted any one else's critical messages as your own? Separating from the inner critic can sometimes be accomplished by saying to yourself, "Ah, yes, that's what my mother would have said."
- ☑ Meditation is very helpful for stepping back and observing the inner critic, and any other part of yourself.

ACKNOWLEDGING PARTS OF YOURSELF THAT YOU'VE DISOWNED

Inner critics have a tendency to feed on the very aspects of ourselves that we are most uncomfortable with, deny, and disown. For example, if you are uncomfortable with your anger and your critical judgments of other people, tell yourself that you don't feel angry when you do, and think that you are not being mean when you are, your inner critic will rake you over the coals and call you a cruel bitch! If you acknowledge your anger and the reality that sometimes you do think or speak critically of other people, your inner critic has nothing to hit you with.

How we feel about our bodies, or parts of our bodies, can be harder. If you have an inner critic that tells you that you are "fat", you likely don't accept your body as it is and would prefer that you weighed less or looked differently. While it may be hard to accept your body the way it is, you can try acknowledging to yourself that this is your body and this is the way you look with as little judgment as possible.

Some people find it helpful to acknowledge that indeed they do have fat on their body, and so what. For more help with this issue, see my article called, [Changing Our Body Image](#).

Becoming aware of and acknowledging all aspects of yourself, including the parts you are not comfortable with, softens the inner critic's power.

Some ways to get to know different aspects of yourself that you disown include:

☑ Think of somebody whom you really dislike, somebody who pushes your emotional buttons, and leaves you feeling self-righteous and superior. Don't pick someone who has abused you. What is it about this person that you judge? Once you figure that out, you've found a disowned aspect of yourself. For example, say you dislike someone because she is needy and wants others to take care of her. You would never want to be like that! That is your disowned self – the needy child who wants others to take care of her/him.

☑ Think about someone you overvalue. This is someone who you not only admire, but someone with whom you feel bad about yourself in comparison. Again you will have found a disowned self. Perhaps, you admire a friend's ability to be rational and in control. You, in contrast, always seem to be emotional and confused. You wish you could be calm, cool, and collected like she is. In fact, around her you may get even more confused and emotional, and have great difficulty pulling your thoughts together. She is showing you a disowned self. You have disowned your own rational, controlled part. (Stone and Stone, 1993)

One of the inner critic's jobs is to criticize your disowned parts, so by acknowledging all of you who you are, you reduce the power of the inner critic.

DIALOGING WITH THE INNER CRITIC

Dialoguing with an inner critic can be helpful too. The traditional approach to dealing with inner critics is to try and talk them out of what they think, but this can soon become a no-win situation. Even if you manage to prove to an inner critic the error of its ways, it will simply move on to another thing about you to criticize.

Gently countering the inner critic's views can help. But, sometimes it helps more to view the inner critic as another part of yourself who has something of value to say and deserves to be heard and respected. Dialoguing with the inner critic (for example, writing out a conversation between the inner critic and another part of yourself) where you simply listen, ask clarifying questions, understand the inner critic's deeper concerns, offer feedback as you would in any conversation, and negotiate agreements if that fits often softens the inner critic more and has longer lasting results.

The next time you hear a voice inside of you putting you down, take a deep breath, remind yourself it's your inner critic speaking, take a step back, and observe it in action. That may be all you need to do to reduce the impact of the inner critic. You may want to listen for potential disowned parts as well that you can try to acknowledge. For the more we acknowledge all of who we are, and how we can behave, the less powerful the inner critic is, and that is such a relief!

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