

## How to Overcome the Inner Critic

Most of us are familiar with those nagging thoughts that tell us we are not good enough, that cast doubt on our goals and undermine our accomplishments. These thoughts might be there to greet us first thing in the morning when we look in the mirror. The inner critic says things like.... I'm not good enough! I always screw everything up! I'm not smart enough!

We all possess an inner critic or "critical inner voice." We experience this "voice" as a negative internal commentary on who we are and how we behave. This inner critic might say things like, "You're not smart enough." "You never do anything right." "You never follow through with anything." "You are invisible." "You're not good enough." "You should just give up." The inner critic even critiques your closest relationships. "He/she doesn't really love you. No one could care about you. It will never last."

It is a cultural norm to believe that criticism or guilt-induced comments will motivate behavior. The thinking is that if you realize that your actions aren't good enough or ideal, you will be motivated to want to change. The inner critic also gives us a false sense of control. We often use judgmental or controlling thoughts with ourselves as a way of coping with fear, shame, and the unknown. Over time, these negative comments become internalized behavioral patterns that form our "inner critic," It is this persistent negative self-talk that keeps us stuck.

Unfortunately, this type of communication is anxiety-provoking and shaming, which is the opposite of motivation. It triggers us to avoid connection with ourselves and others to play it safe. Avoidance is not the same as motivation to change. Avoidance generally includes things such as procrastination, addictive behaviors, constantly checking your smartphone, or watching excessive TV; or even avoiding the source of the criticism or shame such as the person, activity, place, or even yourself i.e., staying busy to stay out of your own head.

If the messages are shaming, such as "what's wrong with you?" or "you're not good enough," we can become paralyzed. When we feel shame, we feel that something about us makes us so flawed that we don't deserve to be in connection with other people. Shame disconnects us from others and teaches us to feel alone. As humans, we are hardwired at a cellular level for connection. When we feel shame, these feelings physically make us want to go inside ourselves, withdraw, and can further trigger avoidance behaviors to stay in our comfort zone. The point is that shame and self-criticism keep us from doing the things we need to take care of ourselves and ultimately find comfort, connection and motivation.

Awareness is the first step to recognizing and letting go of your inner critic. Many of us don't even realize its presence. Catch yourself the next time you're aware of feeling anxious, distracted or numb. Identify the voice of the inner critic. Identify the situation that may have triggered the inner critic. What are your authentic feelings about this situation? Remember, the inner critic helps you to feel in control. Ask yourself, "what am I afraid of? What would it mean if that happened? And what would that mean?" Allow yourself space to dig deeper and find your most vulnerable feelings about the situation. This is what the inner critic is protecting you from feeling. Do you really need all that protection? Probably not. You can handle it!

Every person is divided: part of us is goal-directed and self-possessed (conscious-ego-based), while another part is self-critical, self-denying, and even self-destructive (unconscious-shadow). This "anti-self" or shadow self perpetuates a negative thought process.

Book Quote: 'Why We Suffer' by Peter Michelson

"It does feel like blasphemy to say that we like our suffering. It is outrageous to suggest that we're secretly interested in holding on to our negativity. Yet this is the paradox of this deadly flaw. It compels us to recycle our old hurts from our past, as it tricks us through our defenses into covering up our collusion in our own suffering. These hurts consist of unresolved negative emotions from our past involving deprivation, refusal, helplessness, criticism, rejection, betrayal and abandonment, and a sense of unworthiness" (pg. 15).

The critical inner voice is formed out of painful early life experiences in which we witnessed or experienced hurtful attitudes toward us, or those close to us. As we grow up, we unconsciously adopt and integrate this pattern of destructive thoughts toward others and ourselves. When we fail to identify and separate from this inner critic, we allow it to impact our behavior and shape the direction of our lives. It may sabotage our successes, our relationships, or prevent us from living the lives we want to lead and becoming the people we seek to be.

The private conversations you have with yourself can be either a powerful steppingstone or a major obstacle to reaching your goals. If your inner monologue repeats things like, "I'm going to embarrass myself," or "No one is going to talk to me," as you walk you into a cocktail party, you probably won't appear relaxed and approachable. Or, if you're thinking, "I'm never going to get this job," in the middle of an interview, you'll struggle to present yourself in a confident manner. Often, our fear manifests those negative predictions and they become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Your thoughts greatly influence how you feel and behave which can cause negative self-talk to become downright self-destructive. Telling yourself that you'll never be successful or that you aren't as good as other people, will reduce your feelings of self-worth and deter you from facing your fears.

If you tend to be overly critical of yourself, you're not alone. Most people experience self-doubt and harsh self-reflections. Fortunately, however, you don't have to be a victim of your own verbal abuse. Instead, take steps to proactively address your negative thoughts and develop a more productive dialog with yourself.

So how can we challenge this inner voice? How can we recognize its commentary and differentiate from its directives?

**1. Develop awareness of your thoughts.** We get so used to hearing our own narrations that it's easy to become oblivious to the messages that we're sending ourselves. Pay attention to what you are thinking about and recognize that just because you think something, doesn't mean it's true. Our thoughts are often exaggerated, biased, and disproportionate. Thoughts are not facts; they are just thoughts!

**2. Stop ruminating.** When you make a mistake or had a bad day, you may be tempted to re-play the events over and over in your head. But, repeatedly reminding yourself of that embarrassing thing you did, or that questionable thing you said only makes you feel worse. It doesn't solve the problem.

When you find yourself ruminating pivot or shift your focus toward a solution. Don't waste time telling yourself, "Don't think about that." The more you try to avoid thinking about something, the more you will focus on it. "What we resist will persist". Instead pivot or shift to a more positive scenario, go for a walk, organize your desk to stop the inner critic committee from spirally out of control.

**3. Ask yourself what advice you'd give to a friend.** If a friend expressed feelings of self-doubt, hopefully you wouldn't say, "You can't ever do anything right," or "You're so stupid. No one likes you." Yet, we're often quick to say those things to ourselves. Instead, you'd be more likely to offer a friend compassionate words of encouragement like, "You made a mistake, but it's not the end of the world." Take it a step further and ask, "What did you learn from the experience to prevent it from happening again." Treat yourself with the kindness you would treat a friend.

**4. Examine the evidence.** Learn to recognize when your critical thoughts are exaggeratedly negative and examine the evidence. Sometimes it's helpful to write it down. Draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper. On one side, list all the evidence that supports your thought. On other side, write down all the evidence to the contrary. Looking at evidence on both sides of the argument can help you view the situation more rationally and less emotionally.

**5. Replace overly critical thoughts with more accurate statements.** Convert an overly pessimistic thought to a more rational and realistic statement. When you find yourself thinking, "I never do anything right," replace it with a more truthful balanced statement like "Most of the time I get things right. Next time I will do better." Each time you find yourself thinking an exaggeratedly negative thought, respond with a more positive and often accurate statement.

**6. Stop catastrophizing.** Often it can be tempting to envision a mishap turning into a complete catastrophe. However, remember the worst-case scenario is never as bad as the fear we manifest in our head.

**7. Balance acceptance with self-improvement.** There's a difference between always telling yourself that you're not good enough and reminding yourself that you will do better next time. Accept the fact we all have character defects and strive to work on them. Remember we are all a work in progress.

We can overcome this inner critic by developing more awareness regarding what the inner critic says, why it repeats the same negative criticisms repeatedly, learning how to better manage and pivot or shift our response to more positive statements.