

The Inner Critic

Vanessa Preston

The inner critic is the internal judge and jury—the critical inner voice. The inner mean one that tells us:

I am not good enough.

I'm a failure.

I should give up.

I should be over this by now.

I'm fat and ugly.

No one likes me.

I'll never succeed.

I'm useless.

I'm weak.

I'm crazy.

I'm damaged.

No one could love me.

Every time I find myself explaining the “inner critic” concept to a client, I am met with an all-knowing head nod as if to say, “Yes, I know that voice well.” Some of my adolescent clients respond more poetically with, “Oh yea, that part is a total drag.”

The inner critic can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety, depression and can at times feel debilitating. Our inner critic is shaped by our experiences throughout our lives and especially by our primary attachment figures (care givers and parents). Were you bullied

throughout school? Was your mother or father especially harsh or perhaps neglectful? Did you attend a school where the culture focused on perfectionism and achievement? Have you experienced a trauma in your life? The legacy of these experiences and the voices of these people throughout our childhood and throughout our lives can sneakily become huge influences of our inner dialogue.

As Eric Morris explains, “The inner critic is there, because you have a mind that likes problem-solving and judging everything, including you. The trick is to consider this as just your mind doing its thing, and that you don’t have to follow it.” Viewing the inner critic in this way means we maintain some curiosity and understanding of our critic, but we don’t have to believe it, nor do we have to work to “get rid of it.” It is at times just along for the ride!

There are healthy ways to cope with our inner critics and I have provided some tips below. As we are all unique and different, I encourage you to experiment with these and see for yourself what works best.

1. Practice becoming aware of the inner critical voice.

This might sound simplistic but it does take practice. People often say to me, “I know I shouldn’t feel this way but” or “I know it’s so stupid but...” These simple statements are signs that our inner critic is making a judgment about ourselves, our experiences or our emotions. So, step one is to develop your awareness of this inner dialogue and eventually reach a place of being able to simply observe these thoughts. *Awareness is key to change.*

2. Practice self-compassion.

This is the antidote to the cruel inner voice. Rather than saying, “I’m so stupid that I can’t just get over it,” a different statement might be, “Hey

this is really challenging for me and I'm trying my best." The first is critical and the latter is compassionate. A great way to "check" your inner critic really quickly is to ask yourself "Would I speak to my best friend this way?" Think about that for a second. Would you follow your best friend around all day saying, "you suck, why try, lose some weight fatty, no one likes you, you're useless"? Of course, you wouldn't! That's because we often show compassion to our friends that we aren't showing to ourselves.

When I first speak about self-compassion, many people feel this is the same as self-pity. People will say things like, "I don't want to sit around feeling sorry for myself." Dr Kristin Neff has done beautiful work in this area and has helped to create a simple distinction between self-compassion and self-pity. Self-compassion is being kind to yourself about your struggles while holding that other people are going through struggles too. Self-pity is not holding the realization that other people are struggling. It is the "I have it worse than everyone else" sort of mentality. Developing a sense of self-compassion does take time but it's worth practicing. Susan Peabody calls it "appropriate self-concern."

3. Gently challenge it.

I recommend approaching your inner critic with curiosity and holding the understanding that our brains judge everything (it's part of our survival if you think about it). Keeping this in mind, it can be helpful to gently challenge your inner critic. For example, if I am preparing for a job interview, my inner critic might be "on steroids"loud, intrusive and difficult to ignore. Cognitions such as:

You're going to humiliate yourself.

No one wants to hire you.

You don't have the experience or skill.

You'll say something stupid.

I might challenge this by writing down more adaptive thoughts such as:

I have done well in past interviews.

I have 5 years experience in this area.

I have been offered jobs before.

The worse that will happen is I do not get hired.

It's normal to feel nervous or scared before an interview.

I find that tangible adaptive thoughts are more effective. Rather than saying "I am smart," it can be more effective to say, "I've been hired 10 times before." Our minds can argue easier with the first statement when we are feeling particularly down, whereas if it is a tangible fact, it's harder for our inner critic "to disagree" with it. This is a classic Cognitive Behavioral Therapy exercise. Write down the event, the emotion and your cognitions/thoughts. When you see your inner critic's cognitions on paper, it can be easier to write challenges to this.

4. Do not become or stay immobilized in shame.

Without taking some action, we are at risk of becoming immobilized in our own shame—disconnection, isolation, overeating, anger, yelling and more. Brene Brown, a shame and vulnerability researcher and author, defines shame as, "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection." She moves on to discuss the difference between shame and guilt and has this to say about guilt, "guilt is adaptive and helpful—it's holding something we've done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort." Simply put, shame is labeling our character and guilt is labeling our behavior. This distinction goes far beyond semantics and is important to pay close attention to.

5. Take action

Not falling into a shame spiral involves taking action. When we have moved to a place of shame, there are key actions that can make a massive difference.

–Talk to a trusted friend, family member or therapist: Shame begins to lose its powerful grasp the moment we share it with someone else and serves as a reminder that we are not alone in our experience. So many times, when I have shared my shameful experiences with others, I am met with a “me too.”

– Exercise or move your body: Once you get your body moving, your nervous system becomes more regulated and you can more easily access healthier thought patterns. Exercise promotes the production of neurohormones such as norepinephrine that are associated with improved cognitive functioning and boosting mood. To put it simply, moving your body and exercising helps you think more clearly. This doesn't have to mean a boot camp style class, just put your shoes on, get outside and take a walk. This can also mean changing your body posture. If you're in a business meeting or talking on the phone to your mother who can be quite critical, stand up, lift your chin, put both feet on the floor and take a deep breath.

–Use a positive affirmation: When you notice your inner critic is standing on a table with a megaphone, have a pre-chosen affirmation ready. Affirmations such as, “I am enough” or “My worth is not negotiable” or “I am trying my best today.” Reset and repeat your affirmation as many times as you need.

–Name your inner critic: This is an Acceptance and Commitment Therapy strategy and I find, the more humor you can use the better! Naming it means you can identify it quickly and using humor can help

shift the shame. Brene Brown refers to hers as “gremlins.” Others I have heard have included the nag, the terminator, the wicked witch of the west and the lizard. This can also shift the way you relate to the inner critic. I can almost start viewing “the nag” for example as a caring but overzealous old friend.

Summary:

So to sum all this up:

Develop awareness of your inner critic. A quiet mind can distinguish more effectively between your inner critic and your inner guidance.

Respond with self-compassion—would I speak this way to my best friend?

Gently challenge with curiosity and understanding.

Take action.

Talk to a trusted family member, friend or therapist.

Exercise or move your body—fresh air if possible.

Use a positive affirmation.

Name your inner critic.