

# Muse

## How to tame your inner critic

By Cindy Trevitt, RPC



“If you want to reach a state of bliss, then go beyond your ego and the internal dialogue. Make a decision to relinquish the need to control, the need to be approved, and the need to judge. Those are the three things the ego is doing all the time. It's very important to be aware of them every time they come up.”

– Deepak Chopra



### Our inner critic.

Who among us doesn't have this unyielding voice inside them? Relentlessly chewing on our egos. Wiping its feet on our self worth. And often it seems as if the cause or source is a complete mystery!

What are these voices, where do they come from and why won't they go away?

This critic is the works of our ego and is a component of ourselves that was, in fact, built by our families, society, teachers, peers, members of our spiritual groups - the people who brought us up, the people who influenced us in our formative years and by the messages they

gave us about our worth or abilities. We were taught about how we should or shouldn't see the world. What works and what doesn't work. What we should or shouldn't be doing in the world "to be a good person". Some of us get the message "every man for himself" or "the world owes me". Some of us get the message that we should never, ever speak up, ask for what we want or say how we feel - because somehow that is selfish or even an imposition! The messages aren't always spelled out. Some of the most powerful messages are tacit, subtle, and subliminal. Once the messages are planted,

however; they become deeply rooted. Often we're not even aware they exist. We just experience this dull internal nagging sensation causing us to feel inexplicably dreadful. Sometimes paralyzed. And for many, it's been going on for so long, they barely notice - it seems 'normal'. In the book, *Embracing your Inner Critic*, by Hal Stone, PhD and Sidra Stone, PhD, they:

"... have likened this voice to a radio station that has been playing within one's head since early childhood, a voice so familiar that it is no longer noticed".

In beginning, understand that these critical expressions are *not you*. They were, in es-

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sence, planted there in your mind. You were born relatively without bias but gradually, through the years, as your little personality was developing, your wee monster was also growing and being nurtured and directed by the world around you. Your most loving voice is filled to the brim with appreciation and compassion. Meanwhile, back at the

"I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,  
And what can be the use of [her] is more than I can see."  
- Robert Louis Stevenson

bat cave, your wicked witch is demanding to know why a wretched waif like you thinks you can go to school, get a better job, or have a happy relationship.

Many of the messages we received were important – about how to take care of our appearances, dress, interact with others, be polite, help out, etc. in order for us to succeed in the world. But an overly fearful, fretful, or critical parent will unintentionally go too far and start giving messages that we aren't good enough. Too many 'helpful suggestions' or critical comments or comparisons to others will begin to teach the child that they aren't enough – that they need to change themselves in order for people to like them. Some formative figures may just simply look at us with worry or anger or disdain and this is enough to implement a powerful negative message about our self-worth.

The inner critic has different variations depending on culture as well. For example, here in North America, our inner critic often believes that we are not special enough if we don't stand out whereas in other parts of the world, it may be common to believe that we shouldn't stand out or draw any special attention to ourselves.

The inner critic has a very difficult time accepting compliments, thinking "if only she knew what you were really like" or "they're just saying that".

The voices of our youth will be internalized and sometimes even increasing in an effort to protect ourselves from pain by criticizing ourselves first – hence the term, "being too hard on ourselves". Some internal checks are important – to weigh the pros and cons of our actions, to consider our next step with care and to behave in a conscientious way. Unfortunately, this inner critic often doesn't know when to stop and may sometimes grow to undermine us or even cause damage. It will do anything to avoid being rejected or 'found out'. It spends a lot of time worrying about what others think of you and is often at the mercy of judgements and opinions of those around you as if you have no rights or needs of your own. Ironically, even though we are trying to save ourselves from the

judgement of others, it in fact has the reverse effect and practically attracts the judgment of others at times. Intimate relationships become very difficult as the critic may shame and ridicule us preventing us from relating properly to others.

The anguish we experience contributes to low self-esteem and often prevents us from growing or changing. It often contributes to anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, addictions, and many self-destructive behaviours.

The thing is that we need to learn to first recognize the existence of that internal critic, what it is saying to us and when, and then we can begin to tame that critic. Often, if you begin to look at it, some of the messages become clearly absurd. For example, perhaps the inner critic is telling you that you're selfish and don't care enough about others. If you were



to 'talk' to the inner critic and ask it what would happen if you put more effort into your relationships, the inner critic would most likely respond by saying that you are too needy or 'a suck'. There will be no pleasing the inner critic.

Some common inner critic's messages:

- ◆ You're selfish.
- ◆ You're stupid.
- ◆ You're unattractive.
- ◆ You're never going to amount

to anything.

- ◆ You can't get it together.
- ◆ You're broken.
- ◆ Everybody is better, prettier, and wealthier than you.
- ◆ You're dirty.
- ◆ Nobody wants you.
- ◆ Nobody loves you.
- ◆ You're not love-able.
- ◆ You're not doing enough.
- ◆ No point in trying, you can't do it.
- ◆ You're a bad dresser.
- ◆ You deserve to be replaced by someone better.
- ◆ You don't belong.



Try making a list of your own – to make it more concrete and easily recognizable and consequently, more easily addressed. Challenge the negatives for concrete evidence. Some of them may fall apart immediately. For each one, ask yourself what you would lose out on if you started loving and accepting yourself the way you are? Choose to replace negative messages with more affirming, reality-based statements. For areas you would like to change, make a separate list of specific goals you would like to work on. Keep in mind that choosing personal growth is quite acceptable but *out of choice* – not in response to the critic.

Secondly, understand and watch for the critic trying to sabotage your efforts. It's important to rec-

ognize what this inner critic is about before changing it. For example, if your inner critic 'type' is a responsible parent, then your critic would criticize anything you do that isn't responsible and will label you as selfish or irresponsible. If you hate your job and are considering finding a change, your inner critic may rage that quitting is completely irresponsible or you're weak and need to stick to it. As if quitting is *never* a responsible thing to do.

Thirdly, challenge the *value system* of your critic. Take a concrete look at it compared to what *you personally* value. Do you value your happiness and think that sometimes, once you've carefully weighed the pros and cons, that the most caring thing you can do for yourself is find a more rewarding job? Remind yourself that you have a value system separate from your inner critic and don't mix the two. Make a list of your values, here's a few to start:

I value:

Personal acceptance – physically, mentally and emotionally (including my inner critic!).

Compassion for my feelings and those of others.

Living a healthy balanced life.

Being a positive role model for others.

Being assertive, valuing my needs and respecting others.

Be careful to watch for a confusion of the critic and your values

– sometimes we can seem to have the same thing on both lists. For example, if we break up with someone because we've exhausted all avenues and this simply isn't a healthy or fulfilling relationship for us, this may trigger the inner critic and feel like it's going against our values: "You're an awful person! You've hurt someone!" Take solace in the fact that you carefully considered your decision, and while painful and difficult, it appeared to be the best thing to do. The fact that you feel guilty is possibly a good thing – it tells you that you're a caring human being who doesn't revel in others' pain. No need to feel guilty – at least, not for very long!

Never confuse your self-worth

"One may understand the cosmos, but never the ego; the self is more distant than any star." – G.K. Chesterton

with your behaviour or your possessions or your job or your mate or anything else on the outside of you. Never value yourself based on the behaviour of others towards you. For example, "I made a mistake at work. I'm useless." Change that to, "I made a mistake at work – I need to find out what happened, learn from my mistakes and resolve not to repeat it." Or, "She doesn't like me. It's because I'm a loser." Change that to, "She doesn't like me [and I know this because she actually said those words to me]. That's

her decision, and while I don't like it, I'm still important. It doesn't change my value." If you dislike how you behave socially, you can work at changing that but don't confuse it with your self-worth. Your artistic, mechanical, athletic, musical, or other abilities (or lack thereof) are mostly the result of choices and should not be mixed in with your self-worth.

This can be challenging as we live in a world that is filled with evaluations of how we *should* be, or look or behave or even what we possess (there are folks making billions of dollars off of these very concepts). In your youth,

you may have been told, "You're a bad boy [or girl]" – as if a single behaviour defines you as a person. And it's normal to hang on to these "bad" labels for life as if they cannot be changed and are engraved



in stone. Your identity and worth, however, should not be the result of a specific behaviour or opinion. Think about some of those messages you were given when you were young. What messages about your worth did you get?

Even the 'unspoken' ones. Now tell yourself, "I was just a child and exploring the world and learning. That behaviour doesn't define me. I have many wonderful attributes, a good value system and an acceptance of myself and others." Is your self-image still based on others' perceptions?

Try drawing a picture (or cut one

out of a magazine) of something that you feel depicts the gross, foul-breathed demon that tromps about your fragile worth. The more graphic the better. You want this image to truly depict the misery you experience with this voice. Pin it up somewhere you can see it frequently throughout the day. Look at that negative side of your list again – see how this prickly pear is the only one saying these things. When these voices occur again, you can begin to associate them with the monster you've depicted – something *outside of you* – rather than something inside of you. Address

this little monster by (in your imagination) dealing it a disastrous blow such as throwing it off a cliff, shooting it, locking it in a closet until it has something nice to say, or another

nasty conclusion of your choice. Have fun with it! You may have to do this a thousand times but in time, it will relent and shrivel. Warning: Do not get into debates with it! Years of practice will allow it to win. Simply *get rid of it!*

Not a fan of art projects or visualization? Try a little **cognitive restructuring**. Here are a few **common examples of distorted thinking** and what you can do about it:

### 1. Personalizing/blaming:

When you blame yourself entirely as the cause of something, or blame others as the sole reason

something has happened. "It is my fault" "It is his fault".

**Strategy:** Don't look for blame.

"Before I built a wall I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out.—Robert Frost

Find other causes. List other possibilities. Seek solutions instead of blame. Blaming can make you feel helpless or that you have no responsibility. People always choose the action that seems most likely to meet their needs—the apparent good. Can we blame anyone for choosing what seems to be the best available option? Try thinking, "I'm not helpless—I can take care of myself in this situation."

### 2. All or nothing/Black & white thinking:

When you use extreme terms - "all", "never", "none", "everybody", and "no one". Also watch out for "can't."

**Strategy:** Look for gray areas; modify the language by substituting less extreme terms such as "some", "often", or "most" for "all." Stay with realistic negatives. No need to make things bigger than they are.

### 3. Magnifying/ catastrophizing:

When you think about things making them bigger or worse than they actually are. When you use words like "awful", "disgusting", "terrible", "can't stand it", "sickening" and so on.

**Strategy:** Expect more probable outcomes and possibilities. Describe each situation accurately

and specifically. The dinner that was "horrible and totally overpriced" can be talked about more accurately: "The entrée was \$16 and the fish tasted bland." "It's not the end of the world. It's just frustrating."

**4. Demanding / commanding/ shoulding:** When you refer to (or rely on) your list of inflexible rules of acceptable behavior and believe you're guilty or unworthy if you violate the rules. Or, when you get angry with others if they break the (your) rules. This results in "always having to be right," or being "super human or perfect."

**Strategy:** Change your language: "I should/must" to "I'd prefer or I'd rather." Allow yourself to be human, and see that no one way works in every situation. "This is disappointing, and I would prefer things to be different. But I can cope and make the best of it."

**5. Overgeneralizing:** When you make an overall assessment based on one example or incident. You draw broad, general conclusions that go well beyond the details of specific events. You use words such as "always", "all", "every", "never", and "everybody". This makes the problem feel bigger.

**Strategy:** See that no one situation can exactly predict future outcomes. Look for individuality in each



case. Remember that possibilities may exist that have not existed before by recognizing that you have the ability to change and that things keep changing. Instead of saying, "You're always late", say, "You were late twice this week".

**6. Fallacy of fairness:** When you expect things to work out based on some unseen system of "karma", balance, morality, payback, justice, or what "should be fair."

**Strategy:** Change expectations. There is no system of fairness. Things happen for some other or no apparent reasons.

**7. Labeling/name calling:** When you attach powerful words or labels to yourself or others as if those words described you, or them, or the situation completely. "This day is terrible!" "I'm stupid".

**Strategy:** Define the term, see if it is accurate. Use accurate terms. Avoid intense labeling and name-calling. Use less weighted, destructive or inflammatory words. Are you using a double standard? Are you judging yourself more harshly than others would judge you, or than you would judge others? "He or she is not an ass, just a person with whom I have a disagreement."

**8. Emotional reasoning:** When you use your emotions or feelings as proof of how things are.

"I feel so sad; things must be hopeless."

**Strategy:** Evaluate the evidence objectively. Feelings are not proof of how things are or will be. Recognize that emotions change. Get other's feedback.

**9. Mind reading:** When you know what others are thinking and why they act the way they do. Particularly, you "know" how people think and feel about you.

**"Life is either a daring adventure or nothing. To keep our faces toward change and behave like free spirits in the presence of fate is strength undefeatable." - Helen Keller**

**Strategy:** Seek other explanations for why people behave the way they do. Don't assume! Check it out. Ask for their thoughts, opinions, and feedback. Remind yourself that, "I don't know what they are thinking." "Where's my evidence that this is the only reason?"

**10. Disqualifying the positive:** when you devalue anything "good" in the situation in light of the "bad."

**Strategy:** Make an accurate assessment. See that "negatives" or "shortcomings" don't erase strengths and assets, but that these can coexist. Both can count.

**11. Comparing:** When you measure yourself against others, focusing on their accomplish-

ments, attributes or appearances. Or, when you compare yourself to your ideal.

ture. Sometimes, we are most vulnerable at certain times such as when we are tired, overwhelmed or in unfamiliar situations. These are times when you may most need compassion and caring for yourself. It's okay and important to feel what you're feeling: insecure, scared, doubtful, angry, etc. - you can get through it. You are human. We all experience these things - you're not alone.



Too often we... enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.  
~John F. Kennedy

**Strategy:** One can't compare apples and oranges. We're all different, with different qualities. We can usually find somebody who may be "better" in some way. So what? That doesn't help. Focus on your own inherent worth and aspirations instead.

Lastly, remember strategies for dealing with the critic in the fu-




When we start to accept ourselves as we are, we soften the critic inside at the same time. When we do this we can reach a place of greater kindness within ourselves.

**Recommended reading:**


This month, for my book of the month, I'm recommending an oldie but goodie:  
Dr. Wayne W. Dyer, "Your Erroneous Zones":  
Step-by-Step Advice for Escaping the Trap of Negative Thinking and Taking Control of Your Life.

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