

## Silencing The Inner Critic by MindRazr

The most important relationship in our lives is that which we have with ourselves. Yet many of us struggle to treat ourselves with the same kindness and compassion we so effortlessly show our loved ones.

Instead, we beat ourselves up for the smallest mistakes and belittle our achievements. If we're not careful, this can lead us down a spiral of self-loathing. That persistent and punishing voice in our minds that insists we're not good enough is often called the *inner critic*. Untamed, it can wreak havoc on our happiness and risk crushing our spirit and self-esteem.

Fortunately, we can use awareness and self-compassion to turn this critical voice into one of kindness.

### What Is the Inner Critic?

Self-criticism is the opposite of self-compassion. When we fall prey to our inner critic, we experience punishing thoughts about our shortcomings and failure to meet our own and others' expectations.

There are four common ways to spot when your inner critic is up to its usual tricks. First, it may threaten you: *"If you mess up, you'll lose your job!"* Second, it will draw your attention to your weaknesses or mistakes: *"Of course you failed that exam; you're such an idiot."* Third, it commands you: *"Stop trying; you're embarrassing yourself!"* And finally, it judges you: *"You're such a lousy parent."*

In short, the inner critic is a mental bully. It tends to pay us visits in moments of greater vulnerability, such as when we're stressed, anxious, sleep-deprived, or simply struggling.

The danger is that this voice can fill us with humiliation and shame that hurts our confidence. Through our unconscious behaviours, this can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy that causes our inner critic's accusations to come true.

For example, many of us fear the thought of public speaking. If you need to deliver an important presentation at work, this fear can become a problem if your self-critic harnesses it to make you doubt your abilities: *"Why should anybody listen to you? You're going to make a fool of yourself!"*

Listening to the inner critic in this situation may cause you to lose confidence, affecting how you deliver your presentation. For instance, you may find it harder to focus, stumble over your talking points, or tremble in your voice or hands.

### How the Inner Critic Develops

The inner critic tends to be a learned protective mechanism. It's often a by-product of social expectations we failed to meet as a child. For instance, if your parents often expressed disappointment at your school report card, your inner critic may strike at your intelligence when you make small mistakes at work.

The amygdala and limbic system are the areas in the human brain where the inner critic resides. They're in charge of emotional responses and producing the stress hormone cortisol. These parts of the brain are critical for helping us make sense of the world during our earliest years.

For example, if a child is neglected, rejected, or abused by their primary caregiver, he or she might explain that mistreatment by blaming themselves for not being good enough. This belief is a form of self-protection, enabling the child to survive while they depend on their parents for their livelihood.<sup>[i]</sup>

## **How the Inner Critic Affects Your Life**

As we grow older, these sense-making processes can become complex narratives about ourselves that inform our inner critic's taunts. When we cope with these in unhelpful ways, they can risk having negative consequences for our careers, relationships, and even our health.

For example, some of us may overcompensate with perfectionism to try and appease the inner critic.<sup>[ii]</sup> In these instances, we lose sleep over our work and sacrifice time with loved ones as we obsess over life's minor details to keep the inner critic quiet.

For others, fearing our inner critic may cause us to avoid its triggers by procrastinating. Faced with a major school assignment or work report, unconsciously, we think, "I can't fail if I don't start." Of course, the inner critic's scolding will inevitably come as our deadlines draw nearer: *"You always leave things to the last minute; you're so lazy!"*

Left unchecked, the inner critic can even lead to mental health conditions, such as anxiety, depression, or addiction. In these instances, it's always best to reach out to a qualified professional to get some support.

## **3 Steps to Eliminate the Inner Critic**

The good news is that the inner critic isn't credible, and there's plenty we can do to reduce or silence its taunts.

### **1. Awareness is Key**

The first step to tackling the inner critic is to begin noticing each time it makes an appearance. A useful way to do this is to keep a small logbook and write down each self-critical thought that arises.

Simply pausing and naming the thoughts can be just as effective. For example, the next time your inner critic starts to bully you, you might say to yourself: "Right now, I'm having the thought that I should be ashamed of myself," or, "My inner critic is telling me that I'm not good enough."

By naming and giving context to self-critical thoughts in this way, you can not only become more aware of them but create distance between your self-esteem and their messages.

### **2. Cultivate Compassion**

Sometimes noticing and labelling the inner critic is not enough. Sometimes, the inner critic needs to be seen and understood for what it is—a failed attempt to protect us from danger. Because, as we now know, the inner critic is a survival mechanism that no longer serves us.

The next time the inner critic goes on one of its tirades, recognize its good intentions without fighting it. Instead, thank it for its efforts to protect you. Then,

gently and compassionately let it know that you choose to let go of these harmful beliefs. To do this, you might imagine each self-critical thought floating away on a balloon or down a flowing stream.

### 3. Fend off 'Fake News'

The inner critic has a significant weakness: its claims are not credible or backed by facts. They're just reflections of ourselves in distorted mirrors. For example, the inner critic may often bend the truth and make wild claims, such as, "*I will never find love,*" or, "*I am a complete failure.*"

Try approaching these thoughts with a journalistic attitude, ready to debunk any fake news. That is, consider whether you're catastrophizing, jumping to conclusions, or overgeneralizing. Can you really know these thoughts are true?

When you look closely, you'll soon find holes in the inner critic's logic. Spot these, and then see if you can choose an alternative thought that's a more realistic reflection of your situation.

\*\*\*

Here's a simple exercise to help put these principles into practice:

1. Write down the most common comments of your inner critic.
2. Then, rewrite them with additional context, such as: "I'm having the thought that..." or, "My inner critic is suggesting that..."
3. Imagine you're a journalist or a detective and assess the facts. Ask yourself: "Is this an accurate depiction of myself?" Look for counter-arguments that suggest your inner critic is wrong.
4. With the thought debunked, thank your inner critic for its efforts to protect you and let it know it can take a rest. Then, visualize the thought floating away.
5. Choose an alternative thought. Try to pick one that's not only realistic but also helpful. For example, if you made a mistake at work, rather than thinking, "*I always mess things up,*" try an alternative like, "I made a mistake this time, and I can learn from it to do better next time."

If our inner critic sabotages our wellbeing and demotivates us, we can choose thoughts that cultivate self-love and help us achieve our dreams. Try these simple tips to eliminate your inner critic, and watch as your spirit and self-esteem soar.