

A Surprising Way to Quiet Your Inner Critic

Self-criticism has many faces. It might be a subtle push toward producing better work, or it might be an aggressive or abusive assertion that you're wrong, bad or seriously flawed, says **Ali Miller**, MFT, a therapist in private practice in Berkeley and San Francisco, Calif., who specializes in helping adults live more authentic, empowered and connected lives.

Self-critical thoughts have two things in common, she says: They're very painful, and they're founded on the belief that you're not good enough. They may sound like: "I'll never amount to anything," "I'm so lazy," "I always ruin relationships," "I'm a lousy cook/mom/dad/friend/worker/person."

Some people don't want to stop criticizing themselves because they believe it's the only way to motivate change. Miller likens it to a critical parent believing they need to focus on what their child did wrong to boost the chances that they'll do things the right way in the future. Parents might call their kids lazy to motivate them to work harder, she says.

Others believe they need to banish their inner critic for good. "When people first become aware of their inner critic and see how much pain the inner critic is bringing about, it is common to want to get rid of the inner critic, and to do so by either ignoring it, telling it to shut up, or pushing it away somehow."

However, both of these beliefs are actually misconceptions. Self-criticism might work in the short term. But it "often leads to stress, burnout, depression, anxiety, and a perpetual feeling of never being 'good enough,' which wreaks havoc on our self-esteem and enjoyment of life," Miller points out.

People who want to eliminate their inner critic typically find it just keeps roaring. "All parts of ourselves want to be heard, including the inner critic, and that until we are heard, we continue to speak up, often getting louder and louder."

Miller views the inner critic as a part of us that tries to get our attention because it's concerned about our well-being. "It is attempting to care for us, but is doing so in a painful and unhelpful way." Instead of trying to get rid of your inner critic, consider acknowledging its good intentions. This doesn't condone its harsh approach. Rather, it's about exploring the feelings and needs it's trying to express.

"When we look more closely at the inner critic, we often discover a lot of fear underneath the bully façade. When we see this fear, and see how the inner critic is ultimately trying to help us, it loses its destructive power."

Miller shares specific ways to approach our inner critic without unknowingly feeding it.

Know your inner critic

"If it doesn't feel too threatening, I encourage people to get curious about their inner critic, to get to know their inner critic."

She suggests asking these questions: What does your inner critic say? When does it say these things? Does it always criticize you? Or does it show up in specific situations? What are these situations? Does it have a certain tone? What are its fears? What is important to it?

Explore your feelings

“Get to know how you feel when your inner critic is criticizing you.” Sometimes, it’s hard to identify the inner critic, but your feelings can serve as clues that the inner critic is present.

For instance, you might feel shame, sadness, self-doubt, fear, hopelessness, irritability, and frustration.

“It is important to acknowledge that it hurts to be criticized. You may want to say, ‘Ouch,’ next time you feel the effects of self-criticism, and be compassionate toward yourself in this moment of suffering.”

Talk to your inner critic

When you notice your inner critic is present, say aloud or to yourself “Hello, inner critic.” Ask your inner critic what message it’s trying to send, and why. (“Be careful, though, not to believe what it says at first.”)

As Miller says, beneath its biting words, there are good intentions. These may be support, safety, connection and kindness. Get curious about these intentions. Because this can be a tough activity, write down your dialogue.

She shares this example: Your inner critic says, “I want you to stop being such a selfish person.” You delve deeper, and ask why it wants this. “Is it scared that you will alienate others because being connected to others is important to it? Is it worried that others won’t be there to support you if you don’t support others?”

“You’ll know the inner critic feels heard when it quiets down,” Miller says. That’s when you can express how you feel and ask for compassion.

You might say: “When you’re worried about me losing connection with others, I’m wondering if you could tell me that you’re worried, rather than calling me names, because it’s very painful for me when I hear you call me

selfish, and I think I could hear you better if you talk to me with more kindness.”

Sometimes, your inner critic may be especially harsh, and this kind of communication feels dangerous. That’s when Miller recommends working with a counsellor or coach — “just like you might if you were in a relationship with someone who you didn’t feel safe talking with on your own.”

Miller calls this approach to self-criticism a nonviolent one, because it doesn’t criticize the inner critic or deem it the “bad guy.”

“It’s an approach that is rooted in the principle that everything we say or do is an attempt to meet needs, and that includes everything we say to ourselves, even our self-critical thoughts.”

