

**Getting Smart About the Inner Critic**

Do you often hear a voice warning you about the worst-case scenario, telling you that you aren't good enough, or arguing that your aspirations are totally impossible?

Congratulations! You are human. All of us have a self-sabotaging inner voice that holds us back.

In various schools of thought, this voice is called the ego, the saboteur, limiting beliefs, or the monkey mind. It has many additional names. I call this voice the inner critic, as that's the most resonant term to me. As you learn more about this voice, feel free to adopt the term for it that best captures it for you.

Anything that involves venturing into the unknown – out of our comfort zones – wakes up the inner critic. Think of the inner critic as a guard or gatekeeper, attempting to keep you inside the small zone of the known and the familiar. His or her job is to focus entirely on avoiding risk – with no real attention to potential reward. As long as you don't try to venture forth out of that zone, the inner critic can pretty much leave you alone. He or she will then be like a gatekeeper that often naps.

But when you approach the gate, when you begin to leave the status quo, test old beliefs, expand your comfort zone, or contemplate change, you wake the sleeping guard. The inner critic will begin to use its tactics to get you to turn around and go right back to where you were.

In one sense, then, there is always good news when the inner critic shows up: you are approaching real change and movement! The more strongly the inner critic shows up, the louder and meaner and more hysterical its voice, the closer you are to a breakthrough or important step in your life.

Your inner critic will try to scare you with lines like these: "It's too risky because...It will lead to disastrous consequences because..." Your inner critic may try to guilt you: "This is unfair to others because...You don't deserve to because..." He or she may try to get you off your game: "Great idea, but unfortunately, honey, you don't have what it takes."

When the inner critic steps up its game, you need to step up your game as well, so that it doesn't get in your way. All of us need a set of tools and skills to manage our inner critics.

## What is the Inner Critic?

What is the inner critic? Various spiritual traditions and schools of psychology answer this question differently, but most find common ground in the idea that there is an inherent voice within all human minds that runs an ongoing narrative of fearful, worrying, negative thoughts and stories. Most share the idea that this voice distracts, harms and weakens us, and that inner work and spiritual development involves learning how to work with it, manage it, get smart about it.

Most also agree this voice connects intimately to fear. One way to look at the inner critic is simply as the voice of fear. Brain science is now able to show how our brains have evolved to be very attuned to, even over-reactive to, any possible risk. Our brains have also evolved to focus far more on avoiding negative experiences than on seeking positive ones.

This biology made sense for a time when our physical existence was threatened day to day. Today, it puts us all in the odd dilemma of living with a brain that doesn't quite make sense for our time and circumstances. Small, safe risks –speaking up in a difficult situation, making a bold change to our careers or lifestyles--often feel, physiologically, like life-threatening ones.

In the face of fear, the inner critic generates stories, theories, and conclusions to bring order and control to any situation. But what it makes up just isn't true. Accuracy isn't its aim; risk-aversion is. For example, if we don't want to do something that feels emotionally vulnerable (start that business, follow a dream, ask her out on a date, etc), we make up a very compelling story about why that would not be a good thing to do or why now is not the right time to do it.

This chapter is about that process of getting smart about the inner critic—differentiating its voice from our own true thinking. If we don't do that, we walk through life lead by its stories, conflating its narratives with our own thinking.

The antidote isn't to kill or remove the inner critic – it is a part of each of us. Throughout this chapter, I never use the term “*fight* your inner critic” or “*defeat* your inner critic” because I don't think fighting a part of ourselves—especially a part based in fear—works very well. Instead, we can *bypass* the inner critic, *work with* the inner critic, *manage* the inner critic. What really matters in the end is not that we “win” or “defeat” it, but simply that the inner critic does not stop us from living a fully rich, thrilling, authentic life.

## Claire's Critic

Claire is a client of mine who dreamt of being an entrepreneur. For over two decades she worked in various retail companies, knowing that her passion lay with a vision to start her own.

Her inner critic regularly chattered in her head about how she didn't have what it took to be successful, and that pursuing the dream would be financially irresponsible toward her family. Her musings about this possibility had, for many years, sounded like this:

"I would love to start a retail business, I would love the independence and challenge. I feel like it's what I am meant to do. ....But I don't have what that takes. People who start businesses need much more experience, and a broader skill set. I don't have the access to capital either. And doing this would be irresponsible to my family. I would be putting them in great financial risk."

Of course, Claire didn't know this voice was the inner critic. She thought she was just doing good, realistic thinking about the situation. Over time, she adopted the inner critic's narrative as a belief, a personal truth: "I don't have what it takes."

How do we know this is her inner critic talking? Clearly, everyone doesn't have the skills to start a successful retail business – and there *is* such a thing as rationally evaluating our deficits and capacity. But we can recognize the inner critic in Claire by a few clues:

- It is making a definite pronouncement, with very little evidence to back it up. It's interested in "the way things are" (this is always a red flag!).
- It's undertaking a pre-mature evaluation of the question "Is it possible, or not?" rather than wondering, "What could be possible?" or, even better? "How can I make this possible?"
- It's stuck, repetitive. No real action is inspired by it. Real thinking always inspires some kind of forward movement.
- The energy behind the mental chatter is one of self- critique rather than self-care.
- The intention is shutting down a line of thinking, rather than opening up problem solving.

Here's how thinking on the same topic could go, without the inner critic:

"I would love to start a retail business, I would love the independence and challenge. I feel like it's what I am meant to do. ....I don't know if I have what is needed. I wonder how I could find out what is needed and see how that fits with where I am. I wonder how I could start acquiring what I need. I'll do x to learn more about that this week.... feels exciting! And, I'm really committed to supporting my family financially. I wonder how I can do this and maintain that support. That's important to me and I really don't want to give it up."

You can hear the different feeling-sense in the second example. Isn't it interesting how the second line of thought is actually much more rational? **There is an interest in real information gathering. There is a focus on the topic itself- not on ego stuff about one's own worth or merit.** The

second way of thinking rapidly leads to action, because no mental junk is standing in the way of the path forward.

### Recognizing The Inner Critic

We begin working with the inner critic simply by doing with ourselves what we just did with Claire: noticing when and how it shows up. We get wise about how the inner critic sounds and how it shows up in our lives. This is good news story #2. You don't have to *do* all that much with your inner critic. Just recognizing the inner critic goes a long way to diffusing its power and mitigating its effects.

In a culture that is all about doing, this is a counter-intuitive truth, so I want to state it again. Just *recognizing* that the inner critic is operating in your head reduces its power and impact significantly. We usually think we have to recognize something and then *do something* about it. (It's the doing that matters, we assume; the recognition was just the precursor to allow us to do something. I notice a problem and then fix it. I notice an opportunity and then seize it.) Inner critic work is different: simply noticing has power.

Why? Liberating yourself from the traps of the inner critic occurs with the recognition of a very simple insight. "You" are not that critical voice. You are the person aware of the critical voice. You are the person feeling perplexed by it or bummed out by it or believing it or otherwise feeling its effects. You are the person trying to understand it and work with it and get rid of it. You are the entity that is hearing the voice. You are not the voice itself.

Most of us are uninformed about the inner critic and untrained in differentiating our core selves from the various voices that play out in our minds. We identify with every voice in our heads and think they are all —us|| in the same way. We don't know any better but to think that the inner critic's opinions are as valid as those coming from our own thinking, our hearts, our intuition or our souls.

Particularly since the inner critic is happy to wildly contradict itself to get its job (risk-avoidance) done, this can really throw you into confusion. By identifying equally with all of the conflicting voices in our heads, we enter into conflict with ourselves.

The solution is to recognize the inner critic when it shows up, name it, and separate your core self from it. Separate your thoughts from its chatter.

## Inner Critic Clues

There are some very common characteristics of inner critic voices which you can look out for:

1. This **voice critiques us harshly**. If you hear a voice saying things you would never say to another person, it's the inner critic.
2. If you **feel out of control of this voice, more like you hear it than you create it**, like it invades your thinking rather than reflecting your real thoughts, it's the inner critic.
3. The **inner critic repeats itself**. If you are plagued by the same thoughts over and over, not really thinking but rather hearing a broken record, it's the inner critic.
4. If you hear a thought you *know* is irrational or untrue, but the thought won't leave you, it's the inner critic.
5. The inner critic also **attacks us for hosting the thoughts it just put in our heads!** After it criticizes, or plays out the worst case scenario, it follows up with lines like these "Get a grip, get some perspective." Or "Don't be so insecure, other people are confident and relaxed...just look over at Joe...."
6. Though the inner critic seeks to sabotage you, **it makes arguments about what's in your best interest – what is realistic, effective**, what will protect you from harm, what will ensure the best outcome. The inner critic tricks us by framing its argument in terms of what's best for us.
7. The inner critic **may take inspiration from people in your life who played the role of outer critic**. It adapts and expands on their behavior and often exists as a version of their voices inside your head. Listen for echoes of a parent, a sibling, a boss, or the voice of societal institutions or major cultural forces such as your religion, company, or country.

As you start noticing your inner critic and how it shows up for you, you may find that your inner critic doesn't feel like one voice, but like a few different voices, for example: one that sounds like a former critical painting teacher and shows up around your art, one that is really worried about disappointing people, and one that gets really cynical and nasty about the world and just gives up on things abruptly. You can untangle the braid of "inner critic" into several different strands. That's great. More on that in the exercises below.

## Step 2: Recognizing Your Critic When It Shows Up

Now that you know what the inner critic is, and what it sounds like, you can identify it when you hear it. That is the next important step. This means simply saying, “Disastra has showed up” or “I’m hearing the voice of Perfectionista. Hello perfectionista!”

Consciously separate yourself from what it is saying. Instead of saying, “I get insecure” be more precise: “I hear Miss Manners in my head telling me I can’t do x, I’m different, flawed, etc.” This may feel goofy. This may be goofy. The thing is, it works.

See if you can make this a daily practice over the next two weeks.

Also, you may want to tell a partner or supportive friend about your inner critic, the character or name you gave it and its common refrains, so that they too can call it out when he or she shows up.

## Step 3: Working with Your Inner Critic

Recognizing and identifying the inner critic is more than half the battle. If all you do is use the tactics listed above, the power of your inner critic will lessen significantly. But there is more you can do to reduce its impact.

1. **Remove the critic from the scene.** A great tool from the Coaches Training Institute is to use a physical ritual to put the inner critic away –to stand up and move him or her into the closet, put her in the corner. It can also help to envision a nice place you are sending the inner critic, a place that will keep him or her busy for a while. Send your inner critic to the beach. Send her mountain climbing. You then have some time and space with a reprieve from the inner critic. If this sounds silly to you, rest assured it sounds very silly to me too. The thing is, it works.

2. **Compassionately see** the inner critic's misguided intentions: to keep you safe, protect the status quo, and ensure that you are not vulnerable to the kinds of attack and embarrassment it is afraid of. When the inner critic comes up, silently acknowledge its intent to keep you safe, and say, in some form, “Thank you but I don’t need you right now.”

3. **Write a sincere “thank you, but no thank you” note** to the inner critic. Here is an example:

Dear Perfectionista –

I feel your pain! Life can be so stressful, and I know you believe strongly that if we just work really hard, if we just do an excellent job, life will be safe, and people will like us. You have helped us get good results in lots of situations. And your work ethic is incredible! Right now, however, I am going to try another approach. I’m okay without you in this situation. Thanks so much for trying to protect me, as always. I’ll see you later.

Jeannie

3. **Laugh!** If your inner critic is like most, it is adorably panicky, unbelievably repetitive, persistent, and often irrational. What would it be like to take all its chatter lightly? Note it, laugh it off, refocus on your vision, and move on. Notice what is hilarious and absurd about your inner critic.

4. **Check it out.** When you hear your inner critic talking, question it with questions like these:

1. Is what this voice saying true?
2. Do I have any real evidence?
3. If so, is this the whole truth or just one small part of the truth?
4. If I check in with my heart (or my breath, or my gut or my body), what's the real truth?
5. Does listening to this voice serve my goals or make me happy?
6. If this voice and its ideas were absent from my mind, how would I see the situation? How would I act?

These questions expose that our inner critic's lies illusions cannot stand up to even a little examination.

**Step 4: Keep Evolving with Your Inner Critic**

The inner critic is very crafty, and intelligent. It's a flexible, rapidly evolving entity. Think of it as a brilliant actor – always a chameleon, wearing different costumes, playing different characters for different times in your life. This means that when you learn to recognize its usual lines, it will come up with new ones. It will come at you from a different angle. This is ongoing work – to notice new ways the inner critic is showing up as your life evolves– new lines, guest stars to the cast of inner critic characters, we might say.

You may want to create multiple characters, as new inner critic voices emerge. For example, my inner critic has four major characters who I have named, “Perfectionista” (the voice of perfectionism), “Disastra” (the worst case scenario obsessive), “Preparissa” (the fearful over-preparer who believes more preparing = more success), and “People Pleaser” – enough said!

You can give your inner critic fictional names, take characters from a book, film, or from your own life experience. You can use animals, mythical figures, or celebrities for inspiration. The inner critics of clients and colleagues include The Wicked Witch, Grumpy Pants, Miss Manners or The Skeptical Professor.

It can also be fun to think of this group of figures in a light-hearted way – the cast of a cabaret show, a sports team, a cast of characters from a comic book or soap opera. Get creative. As you do so, you put your inner critic into perspective and treat it with a light heart. Both take away its power.

The inner critic will disguise itself in whatever you value. For example, let's say your inner critic used to show up with lots of messages pressuring you to work long hours for example. You successfully became aware of its messages and are now reducing your hours and valuing your recreational time. You can expect to hear the inner critic show up with the opposite message – that you are not doing a good enough job reducing hour hours and valuing your recreational time! It will work itself into your new framework; it will use the currency of what you value at any given moment.

The inner critic will jump in and discuss topics of self-care, following your dreams, spirituality. My inner critic is amazing this way. For example, if I start doing yoga to relax (and get beyond my inner critic), it will start talking to me in yoga terms. Now its criticizing me for not taking good enough care of myself, not relaxing enough into the pose! Pretty sneaky.

Inner critic work is ongoing. It never ends. Set your expectations realistically. If you do this work, you'll likely find that your inner critic will not expire entirely, but will visit less frequently, speak more quietly and garner less of your mind space. When it does shows up, it won't stop you, because you will have a variety of tools for neutralizing its effects.