

# FREEDOM from your INNER CRITIC

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A Self-Therapy Approach

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# 1

## GETTING TO KNOW YOUR INNER CRITIC



The world is nothing but my perception of it. I see only through myself. I hear only through the filter of my story.

BYRON KATIE

**W**hen you feel ashamed, hopeless, inadequate, or just plain awful about yourself, it's because your Inner Critic is attacking you. The Inner Critic does this in a variety of ways, but most commonly, it works by hammering you with negative messages about your self-worth. It may criticize your looks, your work habits, your intelligence, the way you care for others, or any number of other things. It may:

- Evaluate and judge your feelings and behavior and sometimes your core self.
- Tell you what you should and shouldn't do.
- Criticize you for not meeting its expectations or the expectations of people who are important to you.
- Doubt you and tell you that you can't be successful.
- Shame you for who you are.
- Make you feel guilty about things you have done.

Most people have a number of self-judging Inner Critic parts. For example, you might have one Critic that attacks you for how you overeat and how much you weigh, and another Critic that tells you that you're lazy and should be working harder.

## THE SEVEN TYPES OF INNER CRITICS

We have identified seven specific types of Critics:

- The Perfectionist
- The Inner Controller
- The Taskmaster
- The Underminer
- The Destroyer
- The Guilt Tripper
- The Molder

Each type of Critic has a different motivation and strategy, and identifying which Critics are affecting you can be useful.

**The Perfectionist** tries to get you to do everything perfectly. It has very high standards for behavior, performance, and production. When you don't meet its standards, the Perfectionist attacks you by saying that your work or behavior isn't good enough, which makes it hard to finish projects. Sometimes the Perfectionist even makes it difficult to get started, as with writer's block. Our clients with Perfectionist Critics have pictured them in a variety of ways—a crab with pincers, a schoolmarm with super-high standards, a magnifying glass, and an inspector, especially *El Exigente*, “the demanding one,” from a 1970s coffee commercial.

**The Inner Controller** tries to control impulsive behavior, such as overeating, getting enraged, using drugs, or engaging in other indulgent behavior. It shames you after you binge, use, or react with rage. It is usually in a constant battle with an impulsive part of you. Our clients with Inner Controllers have viewed them as a bulldog, a lion tamer, an angry guard, and a shaming mother.

**The Taskmaster** tries to get you to work hard in order to be successful. It attempts to motivate you by telling you that you're lazy, stupid, or incompetent. It often gets into a battle with another part that procrastinates as a way of avoiding work. The Taskmaster might be envisioned as a demanding foreman, a vigilant watchdog, a boot in the center of your back, or someone constantly keeping a bunch of plates spinning.

**The Underminer** tries to undermine your self-confidence and self-esteem so you won't take risks that might end in failure. It tells you that you are worthless and inadequate and that you'll never amount to anything. It may also try to prevent you from getting too big, powerful, or visible in order to avoid the threat of attack and rejection. (Remember Jeannette, Bonnie's client described in the introduction? Her Inner Critic was an Underminer.) The experience of being undermined can feel like a rug has been pulled out from under you or like you're walking on a treadmill where you work and sweat but go nowhere. It can also feel like you have a rope tied to your middle so you can't go forward or like you've come up against a glass wall.

**The Destroyer** attacks your fundamental self-worth. It is deeply shaming and tells you that you shouldn't exist. You might experience the Destroyer as a crushing force that wipes out your vitality or a pervasive negative energy that stamps out any sign of creativity, spontaneity, or desire. It might look like Darth Vader, a giant spider, a leech on the back of the neck, or an elephant crushing you underfoot.

**The Guilt Tripper** attacks you for a specific action you took (or didn't take) in the past that was harmful to someone, especially someone you care about. This Critic might also attack you for violating a deeply held value. It constantly makes you feel bad and will never forgive you. It might also make you feel guilty for repeated behaviors that it considers unacceptable in an attempt to get you to stop. Images of the Guilt Tripper from our clients include a nun, a judge, a despot exiling someone, a black cloud descending, and a weight on the shoulders. It can make you feel oozy and icky, heavy in the chest, or as if you are being smashed with a huge hammer.

**The Molder** tries to get you to fit a certain societal mold or act in a certain way that is based on your family or cultural mores. This mold can be any kind: caring, aggressive, outgoing, intellectual, or polite. This Critic attacks you when you don't fit into that mold and praises you when you do. Images for the Molder include a prison guard, a cage, a straightjacket, and a large rulebook, like a holy text, that determines what you should do at every moment.

## RECOGNIZING YOUR INNER CRITICS

Let's look at some common examples of the ways Inner Critic messages manifest in our lives. You may recognize yourself and your Inner Critic in some of the following scenarios.

Jill had an important date planned with someone she really liked. The night before the date, she started to feel nervous, ran to the fridge, and binged on

chocolate cake. Right after she wiped away the crumbs, she looked in the mirror and heard her Critic, an Inner Controller, say, “You look fat! No man will ever marry you!” She suddenly felt uglier than she ever had in her life. She worried furiously about how she was going to look on her date, even though it was still twenty-four hours away. When the time for the date finally arrived, she was so nervous and agitated that she could barely communicate. She was less like her authentic self and ended up sabotaging her chances of making a good impression.

Charlie was sitting in front of his computer, halfway through an important project, when his Inner Critic showed up. It told him that the work he’d done so far was garbage and then made him check and recheck it, wasting his precious time. Under this pressure, he couldn’t get the rest of the project done on time. If his Inner Critic, a Perfectionist, hadn’t derailed his work in this way, Charlie might have done a stellar job and gotten kudos from his boss.

Jennifer’s ten-year-old son, Sean, was not meeting academic standards, but Jennifer felt as though she herself was failing. She had a job outside of the house and believed that her inability to spend every afternoon with Sean was at the root of his problems at school. When he brought home his report card, Jennifer acted outwardly nurturing and caring, but on the inside she was crying, thinking it was her fault. Her Guilt Tripper Critic said, “It’s your fault! You haven’t helped him enough.”

## YOUR CRITICS ARE UNIQUE

Even though we are using these seven categories of Critics, each Inner Critic of yours is unique with its own particular characteristics. For example, your Perfectionist won’t be the same as anyone else’s, or you might have one Critic that has characteristics of both a Molder and Guilt Tripper. Don’t pigeonhole your Critics according to our descriptions of these categories. Discover your own Critics and their unique attributes.

Feel free to call your Critics by whatever names seem right; don’t feel as though you must use *the Taskmaster* or *the Underminer*. As you’ll see in chapter 5, one of our clients, George, called his Inner Critic *the Slave Driver*. One of Jay’s clients, Sarah, whom you’ll meet in the next chapter, called her Critic *the Attacker*.

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## EXERCISE WHICH CRITICS DO YOU HAVE?

Think of a way that one of your Critic parts attacks you. In your journal, answer the following questions.

- Under what circumstances does it attack you?
- What does it say to you?
- Which of the seven types of Critics do you think it is?

### Example

Here is how Jill might answer the questions for this exercise:

- Under what circumstances does one of your Critics attack you? *Whenever I eat too much.*
- What does it say to you? *You're a fat slob. No man will ever be interested in you. You should be ashamed of yourself for pigging out like that.*
- Which of these seven types of Critics do you think it is? *Inner Controller*

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### EXERCISE THE INNER CRITIC QUESTIONNAIRE

We have devised a questionnaire to help you determine which of the seven types of Critics are problems for you. It is short and easy, usually not taking more than five or six minutes.<sup>1</sup>

After reading each of the statements, write the number that corresponds to the following:

0 = Never    1 = Not often    2 = Occasionally    3 = Frequently    4 = Always

1. I feel like I am intrinsically flawed.
2. I set high standards for myself.
3. I feel terrible about myself when I get out of control.
4. I push myself to work very hard so I can achieve my goals.
5. When I think of trying something new and challenging, I give up before I begin.
6. I am ashamed of everything about myself.
7. I am troubled by something I have done that I cannot forgive myself for.
8. I know who I ought to be, and I'm hard on myself when I act differently.
9. I expend a great deal of effort trying to control my impulsive behavior.
10. My self-confidence is so low that I don't believe I can succeed at anything.
11. I attack myself when I make a mistake.
12. I have trouble holding onto a positive sense of myself.
13. I have a hard time feeling OK about myself when I'm not acting in accordance with my childhood programming.



14. There is no end to the things I have to do.
15. I do things to people that I feel terribly guilty for.
16. There are indulgent parts of me that take over and get me into trouble, and then I punish myself for it.
17. I believe that it is safer not to try than to fail.
18. I get anxious and self-critical when things don't come out just right.
19. I feel ashamed when I don't measure up to others' expectations.
20. I tell myself that, if I were a good person, I would take better care of people I care about.
21. At a deep level I feel like I don't have the right to exist.
22. I feel bad because I am too lazy to really make it in the world.
23. I feel really ashamed of some of my habits.
24. I spend much more time than is needed on a project in order to make it as good as possible.
25. I have a nagging feeling that I am bad.
26. I try really hard to overcome my tendency to avoid doing tasks.
27. I feel bad because I can't be what my family or culture expects of me.
28. I feel that I don't have what it takes to succeed.

Now fill in your numerical answers from above in the blanks below and add up each line to get a total score for each group of four questions. This gives you a numerical score from 0 to 16 for each of the seven types of Critics.

- Questions 2 \_\_\_ + 11 \_\_\_ + 18 \_\_\_ + 24 \_\_\_ = \_\_\_ Perfectionist Score
- Questions 3 \_\_\_ + 9 \_\_\_ + 16 \_\_\_ + 23 \_\_\_ = \_\_\_ Inner Controller Score
- Questions 4 \_\_\_ + 14 \_\_\_ + 22 \_\_\_ + 26 \_\_\_ = \_\_\_ Taskmaster Score
- Questions 5 \_\_\_ + 10 \_\_\_ + 17 \_\_\_ + 28 \_\_\_ = \_\_\_ Underminer Score
- Questions 1 \_\_\_ + 6 \_\_\_ + 12 \_\_\_ + 21 \_\_\_ = \_\_\_ Destroyer Score
- Questions 7 \_\_\_ + 15 \_\_\_ + 20 \_\_\_ + 25 \_\_\_ = \_\_\_ Guilt Tripper Score
- Questions 8 \_\_\_ + 13 \_\_\_ + 19 \_\_\_ + 27 \_\_\_ = \_\_\_ Molder Score

If you scored 9 or higher for a Critic, there is a good chance that it is causing problems for you. Those for which you scored 7 or 8 might be problematic. Those with scores 7 or less are less likely to be troublesome.

# 2

## A NEW VIEW OF THE INNER CRITIC



As we tune into the Inner Critic, we begin to perceive it as an alarm system that signals a call for help. Someone is dialing 911. Someone is alerting us to the possibility of pain, shame or abandonment. It is as though the Inner Critic cries, “Look out! Please help me because I can’t handle the situation.”

HAL AND SIDRA STONE  
*Embracing Your Inner Critic*

**W**hen we become aware of how our Inner Critic is tearing us down and ruining our lives, we usually react to it in one of the following ways.

We might try to just ignore the Inner Critic’s attacks and think positive thoughts about ourselves. While this is much better than simply believing our Critic, it won’t solve the problem because we’re not really dealing with the Critic. This tactic may work at times, but then our Critic will override our attempts to ignore it and sneer at our positive thoughts. Or it may sneak up on us with subtle attacks that we don’t even notice.

Another strategy is to try to convince the Critic that it is wrong and that we are really worthwhile, competent, smart, and so on. This is better than ignoring the Critic, but we’re still giving away our power. The Critic may or may not be convinced. And even though we may win the argument at times, our Critic usually comes back with even more powerful attacks.

Another common strategy is to try to get rid of the Critic—to give it the old heave-ho. Unfortunately, this really isn't possible. We can't get rid of a part of our psyche any more than we can get rid of a part of our body. We won't be able to cast out or banish our Inner Critic forever. It might go underground for a while, but it will pop up later and cause us even more grief.

IFS offers a larger understanding that these strategies miss. It recognizes that our psyches are made up of different *parts*, sometimes called *subpersonalities*. You can think of them as little people inside you. Each has its own perspective, feelings, memories, goals, and motivations. And because they do, these parts are often in conflict with one another. For example, one part of you might be trying to lose weight, and another part might want to eat a lot. But *all* our parts, including the Inner Critic, are trying to help us. When we accept and work with all our parts, none are demonized, and all can contribute to our wholeness and highest potential.

### **YOUR CRITIC'S POSITIVE INTENT**

One of the most startling discoveries about our Inner Critics is that they are actually trying to help us. This is an amazing, powerful secret. In its own distorted, confused way, your Inner Critic is actually trying to help you. At first this may seem surprising, but once you get to know your Critic in a deeper way, you'll come to understand why it is attacking you. It may be negative and harsh, but it is doing so in a distorted attempt to protect you from pain. As strange as it may seem, we have found this to be true over and over with hundreds of clients, and so have other IFS therapists.

Your Inner Critic thinks that pushing and judging you will protect you from hurt and pain. It thinks that if it can get you to be a certain way—perfect, successful, cautious, nice, slim, outgoing, intellectual, macho, and so on—then you won't be shamed or rejected, and you might even get approval from people who are important to you. It tries to get you to fit in by prescribing rules and then attacking you if you violate them. Even though attacking you actually backfires and causes you more suffering, your Inner Critic is doing what it thinks is best for you.

The good news is that because the Inner Critic actually has positive intentions, you don't have to fight with it or overcome it. You don't have to win a battle; you don't have to get rid of it. Instead, you can discover what it thinks it's doing for you and make a positive connection with it. You can offer it appreciation for its efforts, and it can begin to trust you. Knowing that your Critic's heart is in the right place makes it possible to create a cooperative relationship with it

and transform it into a valuable resource. This relationship makes an enormous difference in your internal landscape and sets the stage for deeper healing.

### **DIFFERENT CRITICS, DIFFERENT MOTIVATIONS**

All Inner Critics are, in their own way, trying to help you, and the different types of Critics have different motivations and means.

#### **Protecting You from Judgment or Rejection**

For some Critics, the primary goal is to protect you from being judged, ridiculed, rejected, attacked, or abandoned by people. A Perfectionist Critic might be afraid that if you aren't perfect, you will be judged or dismissed, so it tries to get you to be perfect in everything you produce—even the way you look and operate in the world. It attacks you whenever you aren't top notch in every way. A Taskmaster Critic might try to get you to work hard so you will be really successful, because it believes that if you fail at anything or are even just mediocre, you will be attacked or rejected. It is a slave driver that judges you unmercifully whenever you aren't working to maximum effort.

A Molder Critic might be afraid you are stepping outside the mold of what is acceptable—for example, by gaining weight, being angry, being needy or vulnerable, or being strong and visible. It might also be afraid of your being sexual, feminine, artistic, introverted, or emotional. The definition of what isn't acceptable varies from one Critic to another, but they all believe that if you violate these standards, you will be ridiculed and excluded by your family, friends, or a group that is important to you. So they attack and shame you whenever you do anything that strays from the mold.

#### **Getting Approval**

Some Critics are primarily trying to get approval, attention, or admiration from people who are important to you. Perfectionists and Taskmasters believe that if you are perfect or very successful, you will gain the attention you have always wanted. Molders believe that if you fit the mold of just who your parents or culture expect you to be—outgoing, intellectual, caring, beautiful, dutiful, or whatever is most valued—then you will finally get the love you so desperately need. They may want you to get approval from your boss or your boyfriend, but their need for approval from these people actually stems from a need for approval from your parents or childhood friends.

These Critics push you to be a certain way, and they may even reward you when you succeed. But they certainly attack you when you don't succeed.

*Jay writes:* When I was struggling with my Critics, one of them judged me for being shy and introverted, which I was. Its judgments were accurate but not very helpful. When I would hang back at a party and avoid reaching out to women I was interested in, my Critic would tell me I was a loser who would never find love. If a woman rejected me, it attacked me even more strongly by telling me there was something wrong with me that made me unappealing to women. It was actually trying to motivate me to change—to become more outgoing, funny, confident, and so on—so I would attract women and find love. But its judgments had the opposite effect; they made me feel bad about myself and less likely to take social risks.

### **Preventing Damage**

Some Critics try to stop you from doing things that are harmful to yourself or others. An Inner Controller Critic might want to keep you from overeating or abusing drugs, or perhaps to stop you from flying into a rage or acting impulsively. A Guilt Tripper Critic might want to stop you from doing anything that causes another person pain, such as forgetting someone's birthday or inadvertently saying something hurtful. If you do something like this, it attacks and shames you to try to keep you from doing it again.

### **Keeping You Safe from Attack**

An Underminer Critic may be afraid that if you are powerful or confident, you might put yourself out in the world. You might take risks such as writing an article, asking a woman for a date, or speaking up at work. This Critic is afraid that taking these actions will put you in harm's way. So it criticizes you to keep you scared and small so you will be safe. It wants to make you submissive so you won't assert yourself and put yourself in danger. When someone attacks you, a Destroyer Critic might blame you for it in an attempt to get you to change yourself rather than standing up to the person and triggering more attacks. For example, if your supervisor at work dismisses your ideas, your Critic will say it was your fault rather than seeing that he was overloaded with work and not paying attention. This self-blame also allows you to stay attached to the person, your supervisor, so you won't be alone. Even though the focus may be on current life relationships, the Critic's motivation ultimately goes back to keeping you safe and connected to your parents.

### **Keeping You From Being Like a Parent**

If you had a parent who didn't take care of you very well, or seriously harmed you, your Critic may feel extremely judgmental of that parent. It will also judge