

# Conquer Your Inner Critic

Patrick rushed out the door to work after quickly kissing his kids and wife good bye. He was in a fluster. He was certain that he would be late for an important breakfast meeting with a new client. The traffic was heavy. As he sat stuck in traffic, he began feeling more anxious. He began to think about how stupid he was for not leaving home earlier. His inner critic told him how disorganized he was. He should plan better. His inner critic told him that he was always so inept and inconsiderate of others. His inner critic reminded him of all the other times he had been late. He remembered how he was told by his boss that being late was a sure sign of disrespect. He remembered that as a child how upset his father was when anyone was late for him. Patrick was feeling really horrible now, almost in a panic. He figured that he would lose the business from his new client who would see how inept and disorganized he was. He believed that he would have an unsuccessful discussion at his meeting and then be reprimanded by his boss again.

We all have an inner critic. Perhaps yours is less harsh than Patrick's. The inner critic is the name given to the "voice" we all hear in our head from time to time. It is that critical internal monologue that reminds us of our weaknesses and failings. It may remind you of a voice of one of your parents or some other significant person in your life. It may consist of isolated words, brief mental images or long diatribes. In any case, it is this inner critic who destroys self-esteem. While we all have one of these inner critics, people with high self esteem are more successful in silencing the inner critic than those with low self esteem.

## Steps to Quiet or Refute Your Inner Critic

The good news is that there are a number of ways in which all of us can identify our inner critic's messages, silence or refute them and create an alternative, healthy, self-affirming voice of advocacy within ourselves. In *The Self Esteem Companion* by Matthew McKay, Patrick Fanning, Carole Honeychurch, and Catherine Sutker, recommend the following steps.

1. **The first step is to identify the critic's messages.** Think about the one negative truth about yourself. What is it you are most critical about yourself. Are you too fat, too quiet, too unaccomplished, too self conscious? Try to notice how often in a day this thought comes across your mind.
2. **The second step is to unmask the inner critic.** The inner critic masquerades as the reminder of facts, as the voice of reason and

pretends to have your best interests at heart. This is not true. The critic lies. Here are some of the ulterior motives of the inner critic:

- My critic tries to enforce the rules I grew up with
- My critic compares me to others because once in a great while I get to feel superior
- My critic is believable because it sounds like my parents
- My critic expects perfection because if I could do everything right, I might feel okay about myself
- My critic says I am incompetent which prevents me from trying so I don't feel bad when I fail
- My critic tells me people won't like me so I won't be so surprised and hurt when they reject me
- My critic predicts the worst so I'll be prepared for it

3. **The third step is to talk back to your inner critic and stop its destructive messages with mantras.** When your inner critic says: "That was stupid" or "Nobody likes you" imagine silently shouting, "Shut up!" A blocking mantra is a short forceful phrase that will drown out your critic's voice. Here are some examples: "This is poison! Stop it!" "You are wrong!" "Get off my back!"
4. **The fourth step is to remind the critic of the cost.** Low self esteem is very destructive and can have dire consequences. It can keep one from successful accomplishments in career or personal life, strain relationships and prevent curiosity and taking risks. For example, Patrick in the scenario above could say to himself, "I am not going to let my inner critic keep me from making a positive impression with my new client, or lose the account because I am late. I will call now to warn him I will be late, apologize and put my best foot forward when we meet. I will make the most of my knowledge of how our company can benefit him."
5. **The fifth step is talking back by affirming your self-worth.** Here are some examples which have helped others. "I am doing the best I can to survive. There is no need to beat myself up." "I love, I suffer, and I struggle like anyone else." "I am as good as anybody. We are all just trying to get by."
6. **The sixth step is to imagine a good friend's voice of love and support.** Imagine walking into an important business event or party. You look around and feel like you are dressed far too casually. Your critic starts the negative comparison of yourself to others and tells you how embarrassed you should be for choosing the outfit you have on. Instead of listening to the inner critic, imagine what your best friend, a parent or a mentor might say or advise. "There are some people who

are more formally dressed here and some more casual. Make a positive impression in conversation so your attire will not be as noticed."

7. **The seventh step is to counter negative comparisons to others by honouring what you do well.** If you tend to compare yourself negatively to others, keep track of how often you do this for a day. Look at the list you have created. Beside each one write something you do better than that person. Review your lists and remember how you felt when you wrote the negative comparison and how you feel now after remembering all the things you do well. Try to practice this each time you find yourself making a negative comparison.
8. **The eighth step is to write three letters to your critical parent and yourself.** If you recognize the inner critic sounds a lot like one of your parents, perhaps you have feelings of anger and disappointment that you could never adequately express to your parent. (Usually it is a parental voice but it could possibly be another parental figure from childhood like an older sibling) The first letter you write, but never send, is to your critical parent. Tell them what you needed and how it felt to not get it. In the second letter write it as if you were your parent and how you feel they would realistically respond. Try as hard as you can to put yourself in their shoes. In the third letter you will write in the voice of your ideal parent, the one you wished you had. Here are the letters that Patrick wrote.

**Letter 1: Patrick to his father:** "I need to tell you that you did not give me the confidence and support I needed from you. It hurt when you cared more about appearances than showing that you loved me. It left me unsure about whether you felt I had real talent in anything. You seemed to want me to be a clone of you and when I wasn't, I felt that I disappointed you. "

**Letter 2: Patrick as if his father was responding:** "I always wanted the best for you. Life is hard and to survive you cannot always do whatever you like. Look at how hard I worked to give you and your sister a nice life. I tried to teach you how to survive and to toughen you up. I did not want you to be a clone of me but I did want you to be successful. "

**Letter 3: Patrick's ideal parent wrote:** "I am truly sorry that I did not give you what would have helped you succeed the most – the confidence in yourself and your abilities. I know that we have very different talents and strengths. I should have seen this when you were younger and given you more support for your individuality. I love you and I am very proud of you now. I think you have grown into an exceptional adult and great father."