Silencing the Inner Critic:
How to Start Feeling Good About Yourself

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SUMMARY: Having a judgmental inner critical voice is painful, frustrating, and a key part of what prevents you from living the life you were born to live. You can silence the inner critic forever with two secrets: One, that it’s actually worried rather than critical. Two, that you are larger than any part of you including the inner critic, and therefore you are able to be a compassionate listener to its worries. By turning with compassion toward the worries of a critical part, you can increase your sense of confidence and self-worth, and life will get moving again.

Do you want to feel good about yourself? Do wish you could wake up in the morning feeling happy about who you are, how your body feels, what you’re looking forward to accomplishing that day?

Instead do you wake up feeling dissatisfied, unworthy, with a dark cloud of low mood and bad feelings hanging over you? Do you hear a voice inside making predictions of doom, saying things like, “You never do things right,” or “You’re going to mess up today like always”?

Perhaps this inner critic has been with you as long as you can remember. You might call it a self-sabotaging voice, or it might sound like one of your parents has taken up residence in your head. You might even be feeling desperate or despairing because it seems like, even though you yearn for change, the truth is you will always feel this bad.

You might be like John, who feels he doesn’t have a right to have good things happen to him, he doesn’t deserve to feel better. You might be like Alice, who wants to move forward in her life and make positive changes, but feels like she gets stopped every time by negative self-talk, an inner voice that says, “You don’t have what it takes to do that.”

The inner critic is often harsh, relentlessly judgmental, nagging, pushing, unforgiving and unkind. It uses words like “never” and “always” – as in, “You’ll never get anywhere with your life,” and “You’ll always be a failure.” It’s also very fond of the word “should,” as in “You should go on a diet,” or “You shouldn't be such a slob.”
I used to have an inner critic like this. My life felt stuck, I wasn’t doing what I wanted and needed to do, especially writing the book I was longing to write. I was also overindulging in certain behaviors, and I felt bad about myself. My constant companion was that blaming, nagging inner voice: “You should get it together, you aren’t doing enough, you’re a failure, you’ll always be this way…” Sometimes it reminded me of ways my father spoke to me, but my inner critic was meaner than my father ever was.

But then I learned something that turned my life around. I changed my relationship with that inner critical voice, and in doing so, I also changed my life. I stopped procrastinating, finished my book, got it published – and today I have a thriving business, a wonderful partner, and a happy life. I wake up in the morning loving my life and looking forward to my day. Sound too good to be true? If I can do it, so can you.

I used to think I needed the inner critical voice to get me moving. I thought that without the nagging and the name-calling I would never get anything done. But it was the other way around. That inner criticism was exactly what was in my way. The inner criticizing brought out an inner rebellious part of me that didn’t want to do anything. The inner critic was a key part of what kept me stuck.

So what’s the secret to turning your life around? Two things. One, the inner critic is actually worried, and that’s why it’s talking that way. Two, the real you is bigger than the inner critic, bigger than the inner rebel – big enough to be compassionate to that very worried part of you that is criticizing because it’s so worried.

“It’s worried? Really? But it sounds so angry, so disdainful, so sure of itself.” Yes, and that’s how people sound when they are worried because something is urgent but they feel fairly powerless. Imagine what a mother might say to a teenage daughter who is leaving the house dressed in a way that worries her. “You’ll catch your death of cold” is the mildest. Or, “People will think you a slut.” These are expressions of worry. The parent is saying what he or she is worried will happen – in other words, what he or she doesn’t want to happen to the daughter. See how that works? Because the parent is so worried, the worry comes out like a statement of fact, a prediction of exactly what the parent doesn’t want.

Let’s try this out on the inner critic. It says, “You will fail.” It’s actually worried that you will fail. It says, “You don’t have what it takes.” It’s actually worried you don’t have what it takes. It’s says, “You’re going to mess up today.” It’s actually worried you’re going to mess up today.

What about when it says you “should” or “should not” do this or that? It’s worried what will happen to you if you don’t do or if you keep doing what it’s talking about. If it says, “You should quit smoking,” it’s worried what will happen to you if you don’t quit smoking. And so on.
And what about when it makes blanket statements of disdain like, “You’re nothing,” or “You’ll always fail just like you always have.” In these cases it’s worried that the truth about you is that you’re nothing or you’ll always fail. It doesn’t really want that to be true, it’s just worried that it is.

The inner critic actually doesn’t want the things it’s worried about to happen. This is tragic, because it sounds like it does. It sounds like it’s pronouncing the truth instead of expressing its worries. That’s because it feels desperate, out on a limb, and all alone in what it’s worried about.

That’s where my second secret comes in: that you are bigger than what’s bugging you. When we hear that inner critical voice in our heads, we often feel small, weak, low, ashamed, unworthy. That’s because we’re getting identified with a part of us that believes the criticism and sinks under it. But we don’t have to identify with a part. We can choose to identify instead with our larger self, the compassionate and fearless one who we really are.

How would you treat a worried, scared part of you if you were not afraid of it? With compassion and kindness, and also with curiosity because it might have something important to say.

Try this: When the critical voice appears, remember that you are larger than it is, larger in every way: big-hearted, generous, fearless, and able to see and understand a bigger picture. Then turn toward it, and say to it, “Sounds like you might be worried about something.” Just doing this much often creates a big shift in that inner criticizing part of you. You’ll probably start to feel its worry, and that’s a good thing, because what it’s worried about isn’t set in stone, it’s something you have the power to do something about.

Start by telling this worried part of you that you really hear how worried it is. Invite it to tell you what its deepest worry is, at the heart of everything. It will probably say it’s worried you won’t do well, that you’ll suffer too much, or that you won’t accomplish what you were born to do. See how it’s really on your side! In this process you will notice it start to sound kinder, more protective. At the same time you’ll feel your own confidence growing, confidence that you are larger than your worries and fears.

The good news is that even if you don’t feel large and compassionate toward the critical voice, you will become that way when you act as if you are.

Turn with compassion and curiosity toward the parts of you that feel critical, invite them to tell you what they’re worried about, and you’ll be amazed at how much better you start to feel, and how fast your life starts to get moving again.
What to know more? This article comes from Ann Weiser Cornell’s work with Inner Relationship Focusing. You can find out more right away by reading the free articles and listening to the free mp3 downloads at http://www.focusingresources.com