

Critical Inner Voice



What is the Critical Inner Voice?

The critical inner voice is a well-integrated pattern of destructive thoughts toward ourselves and others. The nagging “voices,” or thoughts, that make up this internalized dialogue are at the root of much of our self-destructive and maladaptive behavior.

The critical inner voice is not an auditory hallucination; it is experienced as thoughts within your head. This stream of destructive thoughts forms an anti-self that discourages individuals from acting in their best interest.

How Does the Critical Inner Voice Affect Us?

The critical inner voice is an internal enemy that can affect every aspect of our lives, including our self-esteem and confidence, our personal and intimate relationships, and our performance and accomplishments at school and work. These negative thoughts affect us by undermining our positive feelings about ourselves and others and fostering self-criticism, inwardness, distrust, self-denial, addictions and a retreat from goal-directed activities.

What Are Some Examples of Common Critical Inner Voices?

Some common voices include thoughts like “You’re stupid,” “You’re not attractive,” or “You’re not like other people.”

Some people have voices about their career, like “You’ll never be successful,” “No one appreciates how hard you work,” or “You are under too much pressure, you can’t handle this stress.”

Many people experience voices about their relationship, such as “He doesn’t really care about you,” “You’re better off on your own,” or “Don’t be vulnerable, you’ll just get hurt.”

Where Do Critical Inner Voices Come From?

These inner voices usually come from early life experiences that are internalized and taken in as ways we think about ourselves. Often, many of these negative voices come from our parents or primary care takers, as children we pick up on the negative attitudes that parents not only have

towards their children but also toward themselves. Our voices can also come from interactions with peers and siblings, or influential adults.

How is the Critical Inner Voice Different Than a Conscience?

Many people think if they stop listening to their critical inner voice, they will lose touch with their conscience. However, the critical inner voice is not a trustworthy moral guide like a conscience. On the contrary, the critical inner voice is degrading and punishing and often leads us to make unhealthy decisions. These negative voices tend to increase our feelings of self-hatred without motivating us to change undesirable qualities or act in a constructive manner.

How Can I Conquer My Critical Inner Voice?

In order to take power over this destructive thought process, you must first become conscious of what your inner voice is telling you so you can stop it from ruining your life. To identify this, it is helpful to pay attention to when you suddenly slip into a bad mood or become upset, often these negative shifts in emotion are a result of a critical inner voice. Once you identify the thought process and pinpoint the negative actions it is advocating, you can take control over your inner voice by consciously deciding not to listen. Instead you can take the actions that are in your best interest.

We are all aware of those nagging thoughts and doubts that increase our nervousness and interfere with our performance at various times. However, most of us are unaware that these sneering, belittling self-criticisms are only the tip of an iceberg. They are merely the more obvious fragments of a larger, well-hidden enemy within each of us that influences our actions, interferes with the pursuit of our personal and career goals, and has an overall negative impact on our lives.

What is the Critical Inner Voice?

The critical inner voice can be thought of as the language of the defensive process. It has been defined as an integrated system of thoughts and attitudes, antithetical toward self and hostile toward others that is at the core of an individual's maladaptive behavior. The concept of the "voice" is not restricted to cognitive processes but is generally associated with varying degrees of anger and sadness. The term "voice" is used to describe a form of intrapsychic communication that represents a split within the individual between forces that are life-affirming and those that are antagonistic to the self. "Listening" to the voice, that is, believing its prescriptions and prohibitions leads to self-limiting behavior and negative consequences. In other words, people often make their actions correspond to their self-attacks.

Being for Yourself or Against Yourself

All of us are divided within ourselves. On the one hand, we have self-regard—we have traits and behaviors that we like or feel comfortable with. We have natural tendencies to grow and develop and to pursue our personal and vocational goals, as well as desires to be close in our relationships and to search for meaning in life. These qualities all make up who we really are; they reflect an undefended part of our personality and a friendly, compassionate view of our self.

The positive part of us consists of our unique characteristics—physical abilities and attributes, and emotional temperament, as well as positive traits that we naturally incorporated from our parents. It first develops and grows as a result of our parents' and other concerned adults' nurturing qualities and behaviors, and the love and care they direct toward us. Then it is further influenced by what we learn, what we enjoy, and the experiences that facilitate our personal growth.

The Critical Inner Voice

The Critical Inner Voice is the part of us that is turned against ourselves. It is the defended, negative side of our personality that is opposed to our ongoing development. The voice consists of the negative thoughts, beliefs and attitudes that oppose our best interests and diminish our self-esteem. It encourages and strongly influences self-defeating and self-destructive behavior. This hostile, judgmental advisor also warns us about other people, promoting angry and cynical attitudes toward others and creating a negative, pessimistic picture of the world. The critical inner voice exists to varying degrees in every person. It undermines our ability to interpret events realistically; it triggers negative moods and sabotages our pursuit of satisfaction and meaning in life. These destructive internalized thoughts lead to a sense of alienation—a feeling of being removed from ourselves and distant from those we love. The critical inner voice is not an auditory hallucination; it is experienced as thoughts within your head. If we “listen” to its destructive point of view and believe what it is telling us, we will fail to challenge it and instead we will act on it. This process has a seriously negative consequence on our lives.

Although most of us are conscious of some aspects of this inner voice, many of our negative thoughts exist on an unconscious level. At times, we may recognize what our critical inner voice is telling us, while at other times, we may be unclear about our negative thinking and simply accept it as being true. We are often unaware of the destructive impact that these thoughts are having on our emotions, actions, and the overall quality of our lives.

The Critical Inner Voice is Not a Conscience

The critical inner voice is not a conscience or a moral guide. What most distinguishes the inner voice from a conscience is its degrading, punishing quality. Its demeaning tone tends to increase our feelings of self-hatred instead of motivating us to change undesirable actions in a constructive manner.

Challenging your Critical Inner Voice

You can take power over your critical inner voice. When you become conscious of what it is telling you, you can stop it from running your life. The challenge is to identify and ‘flush out’ this internal covert operation. To do this, be on the lookout for when you slip into a bad mood or become upset. Investigate: what caused the shift? What happened and, most importantly, what did you start telling yourself after the event? The fact that your mood shifted from feeling optimistic or relaxed to feeling down or irritable is probably a sign that you are interpreting the event through your critical inner voice.

Now that you have identified that your critical inner voice is advising you, what is it trying to get you to do? When you pinpoint the actions that it is advocating, you can take control over

your critical inner voice. You can consciously decide to take action against its directives, thereby acting in your own interest.

Staying on the Right Side of Yourself and Not Listening to Your Critical Inner Voice

The balance between our two different sides is delicate and can be easily tipped. However, we don't need to be the victims of our moods as they tip back and forth between our positive and negative feelings about ourselves. By identifying the critical inner voice and the role it plays in supporting our negative self-image, we can take action against it and significantly change our lives. We can reject attitudes that oppose our best interests and diminish our self-esteem. We can stop self-defeating and self-destructive behavior. We cannot tolerate angry, cynical attitudes toward others that turn us against people.

As you emancipate yourself from your critical inner voice, you will be free to engage in your pursuit of satisfaction and meaning in life. You will feel at peace with yourself and close to those you love. You will enjoy a compassionate view of the world and an optimistic outlook on life.

From: <http://www.psychalive.org/critical-inner-voice/>

Steps to Overcoming Your Critical Inner Voice

Learn to separate and live free from imagined limitations

by Lisa Firestone Ph.D.

Most of us are all too familiar with those nagging thoughts that seem to surface every time we decide to push ourselves and try something new. Although the worry and self-doubt we experience when we take on a challenge, interview for a job, apply to a school or ask someone out can be met with relief once we've accomplished that specific task, it's never long before new worries set in: Will I be able to do the job? I'll never make it at this school, or I'm going to blow it on the first date.

While a certain amount of worry is to be expected in a transition, it is important to question how much of our concern and doubt is natural and how much it is the result of an internalized critic referred to as the critical inner voice. The critical inner voice represents an internal enemy and may be thought of as a threat to self-actualization and self-fulfillment. It tends to foster inwardness, distrust, self-criticism, self-denial and limitation, addictions, and a generalized retreat from one's goal-directed activity. Internalized voices attacks affect every aspect of a person's life: one's mood and psychological state of mind, attitudes and prejudices, personal relationships, mate selection, style of relating to others, choice of school or career, and work performance.

The critical inner voice is defined as a well-integrated pattern of negative thoughts toward one's self and others that is at the root of an individual's maladaptive behavior. It represents an overlay on the personality that is not natural or harmonious but learned or imposed from without. The critical inner voice is not an actual voice that speaks to us, rather it is experienced as those self-limiting thoughts and attitudes that exists in all of us and keep us from achieving our goals.

We can observe this voice at work in various areas of our lives; it tells us not to get too close in our relationships or go too far in our careers. These thoughts can be cruel and berating: *Who do you think you are? You'll never succeed. You're not like everyone else. No one will ever care about you.* These thoughts can also be deceptively calm and soothing: *You're just fine on your own. The only person you can rely on is yourself. You should reward yourself with one more piece of cake. Just have one last drink; it will make you feel better.*

Whether cruel or soothing, these thoughts often hold us back from going after what we want and lead to our acting in ways that hurt us. Giving in to the voice and acting on its advice only creates more attacks. The voice that told us to have that extra piece of cake is now tearing into us for having no self-control. So how do we conquer this critical inner voice?

For 30 years I have studied, along with my father, psychologist and author Robert Firestone, the roots of the critical inner voice. He developed "voice therapy" as a way for people to identify and separate from this inner critic by understanding the origins of the critical inner voice and then taking actions to go against it, actions that are goal directed and that represent a person's

true point of view. The steps involved in this therapy process are detailed in a book he wrote for mental health professionals, *Voice Therapy*, as well as in a book he and I co-authored for the general public, *Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice*. The steps include:

Step One: Identifying What Your Critical Inner Voice is Telling You

In order to challenge their negative attacks, people must first become aware of what their critical inner voice is telling them. They can do this by identifying an area of their lives where they are especially critical of themselves and then pay attention to what the criticisms are. As a person discovers what the self-attacks are, it is valuable to articulate them in the second person, as "you" statements. For example, instead of saying "I feel so lazy and useless," a person would say "You are so lazy. You're useless." When people utilize this format in voice therapy, they are encouraged to express their critical thoughts as they hear or experience them, and this often leads to them accessing the hostility that underlies this self-attacking system.

Step Two: Recognizing Where Your Voices Come From

After people verbalize their critical inner voices in this manner, they often feel deeply, and they have insight into the source of their voice attacks. They have unusual clarity, as they begin to recognize that the content and tone of their voice attacks is old and familiar; their voices are expressing attitudes that were directed toward them as children. They will often say things like, "That's what my father used to say" or "That's the feeling I got from my mother," or "That was the atmosphere in my home." Recognizing where their voices originated helps people develop compassion for themselves.

Step Three: Responding to Your Critical Inner Voice

In the third step of voice therapy, an individual answers back to the voice attacks. People who have thoughts like, "You're so stupid. No one wants to hear what you are thinking. Just sit in the background and keep your mouth shut!" may respond with statements like, "I am not stupid! What I have to say is valuable and worthwhile. A lot of people are interested in me and care about what I think." After responding, it is important for people to make rational statements about how they really are, how other people really are, and what is true about his or her social world. They may say something like, "The world isn't a place where everyone else is brilliant and I'm the only stupid person. I'm not in elementary school anymore; no one is grading us. The truth is that people aren't all that smart, and I'm not stupid. We are basically the same: interesting people who have interesting things to say about what they are thinking and experiencing."

Step Four: Understanding How Your Voices Influence Your Behavior

After expressing and responding to their voices, people are naturally curious and eager to understand how these patterns of self-defeating thoughts has influenced their past and impacts their present-day behaviors. For example, the person with the voice that he or she is stupid may recognize times when he or she acted less capable or confident as a result of having heard

that self-attack. Having this understanding of how the critical inner voice has affected their actions is helpful when people want to change specific self-limiting behaviors.

Step Five: Changing Your Self-Limiting Behaviors

Once people have identified the areas in which they limit themselves, they can begin to change themselves. They can do this by taking two actions: to not engage in the self-destructive behavior that is being encouraged by the critical inner voice and to increase the positive behaviors that go against the recommendations of the voice. For example, a person who is shy can stop avoiding social interactions and can make a point of striking up conversations with people.

Strange as it may sound, identifying and countering critical inner voices can be harder than it seems. With change comes anxiety, and getting rid of an inner critic is no exception. Often, when people begin to challenge their negative attacks and act against their directives, the attacks grow stronger and more intense. There are people who have gotten used to their critical thoughts and, although unpleasant, they are comfortable "living with" them. One woman even described them as keeping her company. When she stopped having as many self-attacks, she said she felt lonely and scared to be without them. Some people mistakenly believe that their critical inner voices are what keep them in line, so they fear that if they do not heed them, they will act badly. However, the more people act against their critical inner voice, the weaker its influence on their lives becomes. If they stick it out and follow the steps of voice therapy, people become more themselves and are able to achieve goals and live free from imagined limitations.

From: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/compassion-matters/201005/steps-overcoming-your-critical-inner-voice>