

*Healing Childhood Wounds:
Talking Back to a Critical Inner Parent*

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A critical “inner” parent can make you depressed and anxious. You can learn to replace it with a supportive one.

Childhood wounds come from many sources—physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse from constant yelling, scolding, and criticism or from a cold or unpredictable parent. If the source of your wound is hard to pinpoint, it is still just as real.

If you are like many of my clients, you may find it hard to stand up for yourself, or you may have destructive outbursts of anger. Your relationships may be stormy and painful, or they may just be unsatisfying. You may be depressed or anxious without really knowing why, or you may just not feel very good about yourself in general.

An important step in overcoming childhood wounds is developing a nurturing inner parent. An important step toward this is learning to talk back to angry, critical inner voices.

Many of my clients tell me that they are constantly criticizing themselves in a very mean and hurtful way. They talk to themselves in a way that they would never dream of talking to another person. You may do this so much that you don't even notice it happening. Have you ever said things to yourself like "You're hopeless. You messed up again. You never do anything right."?

Take a moment to say those words to yourself and see if they sound familiar.

Now take some time to notice how you feel inside as you say them.

The next time you feel that way, notice if you've been saying those things to yourself. In fact, any time you quite suddenly start to feel bad and don't know why, see if you can find what you said or thought to yourself just before you started to feel that way. Most likely it was some critical or discouraging statement.

Sometimes there are no clear words but just a sense of a critical presence, usually behind you or hanging over your shoulder. If this is the case, insist that the "presence" talk to you face to face and tell you exactly what it thinks you have done wrong. When I helped one of my friends do this, she got a surprised look on her face and said, "It couldn't think of anything to say!"

What if you can hear definite criticisms? First, imagine you heard someone talking that way to a child. How would you feel? Probably you would be outraged. Now imagine that your critical voice is a real person standing in front of you. Make that person back up to a respectful distance. Now you are going to begin to talk back. If this is uncomfortable, imagine an authority figure like a teacher or even a policeman talking back to the critical person.

Tell them that it is not acceptable to talk to anyone that way and that you will not allow it. If they persist, you will have them physically removed.

Now notice if you feel better. If not, you may have been thinking that the criticism was accurate. The important thing to remember is that even if there is a grain of truth to the criticism, no one has the right to speak to you in that tone.

Repeat that to yourself until you start to feel it.

Our inner critic is sneaky and often disguises itself as giving helpful advice. The giveaway is the tone of voice and the way it makes you feel. Someone who wants to help does not say, "There you go being lazy again." They say, "I know you've been wanting to exercise more to feel healthier. Maybe I can help you figure out a better way to work it into your schedule".

Now you are ready to respond, if you want. Ask the person to state their criticism in a calm, objective way, such as "You didn't finish all your errands today," or "You made a mistake on that report." Now answer in the same objective way. Don't try to deny or excuse the facts; you will only feel worse.

Instead, say: "That's right. I didn't finish the errands, but I accomplished quite a lot," or "I did make a mistake, and I will correct it." If necessary, add: "Do not talk to me in that tone of voice," or "Your criticism is not making anything better." You can experiment with what words work best for you.

If you practice responding to your critical voices like this several times a day, you may find yourself starting to feel stronger and happier.

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