



Switch from Victim to Partner: Engaging Your Inner Critic in a New Relationship

Carol Putnam, PhD

Author Richard Wright said, “The Artist must bow to the monster of his own imagination.” How many of us bow or genuflect to our own monster, the Inner Critic? You know, that critical voice inside your head that critiques your thoughts, actions, behaviors and conversations. How often do you replay conversations in your mind, second guessing yourself? What you should have said, what you did not say. How often do you procrastinate on a project? Perhaps you can clearly visualize it or have a sense of how it should be developed, yet you can not get yourself to start. Is it because that Inner Critic is reminding you again that you are not good enough or do not know enough, and therefore the project will be a disaster? Or, perhaps you bow to the ultimate critical diatribe: “you are not smart enough,” “you are not creative enough,” “...good enough,” “...disciplined enough,” etc. (Feel free to insert what your personal Inner Critic says to you here.)

Women (more than men) typically struggle with Inner Critics who criticize their looks: “...too fat,” “...too short,” “...too plain,” “...fattest thighs in the world” or some other negative assessment of their physical appearance. Theodore Roosevelt said that “comparison is the thief of joy.” Unfortunately, this is one of the Inner Critic’s tactics, especially for women. It could be a comparison of their parenting, their cooking, their clothing, their job titles or their last promotion. Psychologists tell us that Inner Critics are created

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when we are small children, before our brains are fully developed, while we are sponges soaking up everything in our environment. As children we watch and listen to all the stimuli available to us: sounds, language, images and sensations. Unfortunately, because our child brains are not developed enough to discriminate between the supportive and critical comments or behaviors of others, we absorb them all. Psychologist Jay Earley describes this as internalization. “Critic parts often model themselves after what your parent did when you were a child, but they have their own motivations in your current life.”¹

Most people don’t realize that the ultimate purpose of an Inner Critic is to protect us from our child-brain fears and internalized messages. An offhand comment from a parent or other important adult, e.g. “why can’t you learn not to spill your milk?” (“...to put away your dirty clothes,” again fill in the blank with your own experience) may become “you are not smart enough.” These experiences become the beginnings of our Inner Critics.

As adults we do not talk about our Inner Critics. How do you admit to others that you have a voice (or voices) in your head that criticize your behavior? You might be mistakenly categorized as the next Son of Sam. Most of us do not have the language for or the understanding of the Inner Critic. So we suffer in silence as we bow to the Monster.



However, you can change the relationship you have with your Inner Critic. After all, it is a part of your psyche. First, recognize and remember that Inner Critics cannot take action. Second, recognize your Inner Critic was developed to protect you from something (typically getting hurt either physically or emotionally).

Some articles suggest ignoring your Inner Critic or yelling at it to stop (either internally or expressing “Stop” out loud). Others suggest using affirmations to counteract the negative messages of the Inner Critic. And finally, some writers propose that you argue with your Inner Critic (IC). Here is how that conversation might go: IC: “You are not smart enough.” You: “I am too. I am just as smart as others.” IC: “No, you are not. You are not as smart as _____.” You: “I am too.” And on it goes with the cadence of playground taunts.

Take hope, there is a better way to give up bowing to your Inner Critic! It takes intention, finding a time and place when you will not be disturbed and a willingness to initiate a conversation with your Inner Critic. This may sound strange, initiating a conversation with your Inner Critic, but are you not already in a daily conversation?

As I described earlier, your Inner Critic was developed to protect you. So why not ask what it is trying to protect you from? If you are a journal writer, pull out your journal. If you have never written in a journal, find some paper (swipe some three-ring notebook paper from your child) or any paper you can find around the house that’s large enough on which to write a conversation.

Sit comfortably in a chair, feet on the ground, back straight, hands on thighs, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Concentrate on your breath, the in-

hale and exhale. Sometimes it helps to use a systematic breath technique like four-square breathing. Inhale slowly to the count of four, hold your breath for the count of four, exhale slowly to the count of four and remain empty to a count of four. Do this process for three rounds.

Pick up your pen or pencil (yes, I am suggesting actual handwriting, not using your laptop or tablet) and ask your Inner Critic if it is willing to talk with you. Write quickly whatever comes to your mind. Do not focus on penmanship, grammar or spelling. Do not edit and do not re-read while you write. The object is to write as quickly as possible and concentrate on getting everything down on paper.

Ask your Inner Critic what it is trying to protect you from. As you continue the journal dialogue, ask questions, explore different options and look for common ground. Perhaps ask your Inner Critic if it likes its job or if it feels overwhelming at times. It is important that you are inquisitive and curious, not blaming or accusatory. Engage in the process with an attitude of respect. After all, you are dialoguing with a part of your psyche, something you generated as a child.

There may be moments when the conversation lulls, just like in a conversation with a friend. Be patient and wait for the next statement. You will also know when the conversation is coming to a close. Thank your Inner Critic for engaging with you in a new type of dialogue and ask if you can visit with it again. (You may find that you need to have more than one conversation to create a change that you desire.)

Here is an excerpt of a dialogue with one of my Inner Critics (yes, I have more than one—it takes a lot of supervision to keep me in line!).

IC: “That article deadline is rapidly approaching and you have done nothing but fritter away your time on mindless activities. You have not set aside time, you will continue to procrastinate and then freak out.”

Me: “Yes, I have been procrastinating. I have been

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letting ideas percolate in my head.”

IC: “Oh, that is an interesting way to describe it!”

Me: “Okay, I get it. You are afraid the article will not be any good and I will fail.”

IC: “Duh! How many teachers told you that your writing is only ‘C-worthy’?”


Me: “Well, I know two good writers (my husband and a friend). I can ask them to read my draft and give me feedback. Will that make you feel more comfortable?”

IC: “Yes, they are better writers than you. But you had better get started if you want feedback before your deadline.”

Me: “You are right. I am on it!”

I have become very familiar with my Inner Critics through journal dialogues and now I can engage in a quick conversation as soon as one of them starts in on the job of criticizing. The above conversation took a minute or two while I was brushing my teeth one morning.

I highly recommend you establish a new type of relationship with your Inner Critic. You will be surprised how much energy and creativity you will have available when you are no longer being battered by your Inner Critic or trying to defend yourself against your Inner Critic. And just maybe you can become a partner with your Inner Critic, rather than a victim.

** This article has been reviewed and approved by Ms. Perfect, one of my lovely Inner Critics. 



Author Carol Putnam can be found at www.WonderBoundLLC.com.

Reference

1. Earley, Jay and Weiss, Bonnie. *Freedom from your Inner Critic: A Self-Therapy Approach*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2013.