

The Inner Critic

UNDERSTANDING THE VOICE THAT JUDGES

The inner critic is the internal voice that judges, evaluates and finds fault — often before we've even had a chance to try. It can feel like an enemy, but it usually began as an attempt to keep us safe, accepted, or in control.

What It Sounds Like Common patterns of inner-critic language

All-or-Nothing

"If it's not perfect, it's worthless."
"You either succeed completely or you've failed."

Comparison

"Everyone else has it together." "Why can't you be more like them?"

Prediction of Failure

"You're going to mess this up." "Don't even try — you'll just embarrass yourself."

WHAT IT SAYS

- "You're not good enough."
- "You should have known better."
- "Don't get your hopes up."
- "People will judge you for this."

VS

WHAT IT'S OFTEN PROTECTING AGAINST

- The pain of being caught off guard by failure
- The risk of repeating an old, painful mistake
- The disappointment of hoping and not receiving
- The fear of rejection, shame, or not belonging

Where It Often Comes From The critic is learned, not innate

EARLY CAREGIVERS

Internalised voices of critical, anxious, or highly demanding parents.

PAST SETBACKS

A painful experience the mind is trying hard to prevent from repeating.

CULTURAL STANDARDS

Messages about productivity, appearance, or success absorbed over time.

COMPARISON ENVIRONMENTS

School, work, or family settings that rewarded constant self-measurement.

ATTEMPTS AT MOTIVATION

A belief that harsh self-talk is what keeps us disciplined or "on track."

The Cost of Listening Too Closely

Left unchecked, the inner critic is linked to increased anxiety, low mood, procrastination, and a persistent sense of never being enough — often the opposite of the motivation it was trying to create.

Working With It, Not Against It

Fighting the critic head-on often makes it louder. Noticing it, naming it, and gently asking what it's afraid of tends to soften its grip more than arguing back.

The inner critic is not the enemy. It's a part trying to help, using the only strategy it ever learned.

A guiding principle for working with self-criticism

SOURCES

Gilbert, P. (2009). *The Compassionate Mind*. Constable.
Neff, K. (2011). *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*. William Morrow.