

The Antidote to Being Bombarded by Self-Criticism

By Melissa Ludzack, LMFT

It's a constricting feeling. Knowing that things need to change and finding the stamina to maintain the uphill slow and steady pace can be exhausting.

It's true that the person we talk to the most is ourselves, and sometimes the loudest voice is that dear old "inner critic". At the end of the day, no matter how many healthy things you do, that inner critic comes back to say, "but why?". Why even set up healthy boundaries if you feel so defeated? Why even reach out to those friends for support? Why even go to therapy if you can't see the "big changes" that you're looking for? Why even try? These statements show us that fear has moved in where trust should be, and lack of trust is a vulnerable and scary emotional state.

Often, our inner critics tell us a narrative that is damaging to our growth. It entangles us because we may know we aren't where we want to be in life or our relationships, and therefore that somehow means we have failed. Rather than giving ourselves compassion to say "I'm not where I want to be, but I'm farther along", we scream at ourselves that we need to "get it together".

Engaging with your inner critic can be like turning up or down a car radio. The louder and louder it gets, the more difficult it is to hear anything else besides it. Eventually, if your inner critic is the only voice you hear, it's going to feel like you are watching other people live life while you continue to resent and judge yourself. Maybe your inner critic challenges your relationship, and gives you grief over the time that you have lost in your marriage. Maybe your inner critic tells you that your child is unbearable and somehow reflects your own downfalls as a parent. Maybe your inner critic tells you that you should just be skinnier and then people at school would chill out and like you more. Maybe your inner critic says you will always be an addict. Whatever it is, your inner critic is constantly informing you that you're either too much or not enough. It's like trying to run a marathon with someone constantly shouting at you "You can't do this!". What a terrible place to be!

Yet, this is not the place to stay. These negative statements tell us where we are, yes, but they also tell us where we need to move from and where to move towards. We need to begin by being in the reality of how our car radios have been tuned into our inner critics. We need to acknowledge that our inner critic keeps us trapped where we are, and attempts to confirm its criticisms through the outside world and our relationships. This makes it difficult to find any redeeming qualities within ourselves. We need to recognize that our inner critic gives us amnesia to the fact that we are resilient.

Robert Kegan, a developmental psychologist and author of *The Evolving Self*, says that we will inhibit our personal growth in order to avoid unrecoverable loss (Kegan, 1982). Stated more frankly: we may hold onto our inner critic's voice to avoid confrontation with our losses, but we may also hold onto our inner critic because we haven't learned any

other way to survive. Rather than criticizing your inner critic, there is an opportunity to acknowledge that it has helped you survive all this time. However, it's high time to give your inner a critic a rest, say thank you for the work it has attempted to accomplish, and give it a new role!

The antidote to all this? Advocacy. Be mindful that you can't advocate for something or someone that you are not passionate about, and do not care for. You have to see yourself rightly—not inflated, but not deflated either! This is where others who know us well and can speak kindly to our areas of growth can help; a great example of this could be a trusted friend—or even a therapist. Advocacy for yourself begins by choosing words of compassion and asking what emotional needs may need to be met in order to combat the negative statements that are occurring.

This can take many forms. Advocacy can look like boundary making within yourself and other relationships, intentionally participating in self-care or community-care, regulating your emotions (but not squashing them!), or (my favorite part) celebrating your victories.

Regardless of how you attempt and accomplish self-advocacy, there will always be more room for practice and compassion. When you begin to get tired, remind yourself that this is part of the process we call life. Remember there is always room to practice turning down that car radio, even if it is just one notch!

Please see below for some tools to practice self-advocacy when dealing with your inner critic. Onwards, resilient advocates!

“If we are going to keep on growing, we must keep on risking failure throughout our lives” —Brennan Manning

Melissa sees clients out of the St. Charles office

Practical Application:

Our inner critic can speak to us in a variety of stages of life. Here are some examples of how yours may be communicating to you:

- “I should have never got married in the first place! What a waste of time”.
- “My teenage daughter is unbearable; now everyone is going to think I’m a horrible parent”
- “If I was only a bit more skinny, then guys at school would notice me”
- “Maybe if I was better at soccer, my parents would yell at me less.

Here are some examples of Advocating for Yourself:

1. "I should have never got married in the first place! What a waste of time".
 - Statements to practice instead: "Time spent in relationship is never wasted. I have learned more about myself and how I interact in relationships through this experience. I can always make choices for myself to move deeper in this relationship or to get out, if need be"
 - Activity of Advocacy: Community-care to recognize changes within yourself
2. "My teenage daughter is unbearable; now everyone is going to think I'm a horrible parent"
 - Statement to practice instead: "Teenagers are in a difficult stage of life. Of course it would be difficult to be a parent of a teenager—who's life is constantly changing. I am doing the best that I know how, and I am open to learning more"
 - Activity of Advocacy: Practicing healthy boundaries with your teenage daughter, and setting healthy limits/realistic expectations
3. "If I was only a bit more skinny, then guys at school would notice me"
 - Statement to practice instead: "Someone else's judgment of me does not need to determine who I am. Practicing intuitive eating will give my body the stamina and health I need to get to the places in life I want to be."
 - Activity of Advocacy: Self-care
4. "Maybe if I was better at soccer, my parents would yell at me less"
 - Statement to practice instead: "I may not be the best at soccer, and I enjoy playing. My performance does not determine who I am"
 - Activity of Advocacy: Boundary making on words spoken to self from self and others