

Self-Talk

Some people find self-talk more helpful than journaling to work on their inner critic, especially when they find it difficult to write things down consistently. Taking a break to do the following self-talk exercise when your inner critic shows up can change how you relate to yourself in the long run.

1. **Notice when your inner critic shows up.** Like many of us, it might be that some of the things your inner critic says are so familiar to you and you believe them that you don't even notice what it's saying. Whenever you feel bad about something, think about what your inner critic just said. Try to be as accurate as possible, noting the words used. Are there key phrases or words that come up over and over again? What is the tone of your inner critic's voice? Is it harsh, cold, or angry? Does the voice remind you of anyone critical of you? You want to know your inner critic very well and become aware of when it shows up and what it says. For instance, if you've just made a mistake at work, does your inner critic say something like, "You're so stupid" or "You don't have what it takes."
2. **Give your inner critic a name.** Imagine your inner critic as a well-meaning yet overly cautious companion, always eager to offer you advice in critical moments. You may give it a name:
 - The Doubter is constantly second-guessing your decisions.
 - The Perfectionist demands everything be flawless.
 - The Worrier is always afraid of what might go wrong.
 - Judge Judy is quick to pass judgment and point out mistakes.
 - Negative Nancy is always focusing on the worst-case scenario.
 - The Safety Officer is overly cautious and risk-averse.
 - Mr. or Ms. "What If" questions every potential outcome.
 - The Saboteur undermines your confidence and efforts.
 - The Criticizer nitpicks every small imperfection.
 - Fearful Fred or Freida is driven by fear and anxiety.

This inner critic often speaks up because it's trying to protect you from failure, rejection, mistakes, or discomfort, believing these things are dangerous and will hurt you. However, like an overprotective friend, its advice can sometimes be unhelpful or overly harsh, causing unnecessary self-doubt or pain. You don't have to follow its every word. Instead, you can acknowledge its presence, appreciate its intention to keep you safe, and then choose whether to follow its advice or set it aside when it doesn't serve your values.

3. **Soften how you respond to your inner critic.** Make an effort to respond to your inner critic with compassion instead of judgment. For example, don't say, "You're such a bitch." Instead, say something like, "I know you're trying to keep me safe, and point out ways I can do better. Thank you. Your harsh words and advice now are unhelpful, so I'll let them go."
4. **Reframe the observations made by your inner critic in a friendly, positive way.** Suppose you're having trouble thinking of how to respond to your inner critic. You may imagine what a very compassionate friend would say in that case. If it feels natural to you, include a term of endearment that can strengthen expressed feelings of warmth and care. For example, you say, "Honey, I know you drank that six-pack because you're feeling down right now and thought it would cheer you up. But you feel even worse now. I want you to feel better, so why don't you do something that matters to you, like take a long walk?" While engaging in this supportive self-talk, you may gently stroke your arm or hold your face warmly and caringly in your hands. Physical gestures of warmth can activate the caregiving system when you're having trouble feeling kindness, releasing oxytocin to help change your body chemistry. The important thing is that you start acting kindly toward yourself, and feelings of warmth and caring will show up.

References

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