



ADVANCED LEVEL RITUAL: BEFRIEND THE INNER CRITIC

We all have an inner critic. Essentially, this is the part of us that has internalized the false messages or introjects mentioned earlier. To reinforce your healthy mantras, you can establish a different kind of relationship with your inner critic—one that swaps out the false beliefs your inner critic says to you with healthy ones.

Doing this helps differentiate the inner critic from you. Because the inner critic is *not you*. It's a little introject gremlin that tries to convince you that all the unhealthy, limiting beliefs about you are true. Silly thing!

People generally form an inner critic by the age of five, especially children who live with a demeaning, demanding or abusive parent. In childhood, the voice of the inner critic generally consists of messages that we've overheard from our parents, conversations we've heard from peers or ideas we've adopted from our social networks or the media—just like all the other false beliefs we've internalized!

A young girl may say to herself, *I'm fat*, for example. But where did she first get that idea? Human beings have an evolutionary bias toward negativity that's directly linked to our bias toward threat. We're always looking to see, *where's the threat?* So, if I'm afraid of being fat, I may say to myself, *What's the worst thing that could happen to a person who's fat?* Well, if you really string that thought out all the way to its max, the fear is, *I'm going to be isolated. People will reject me. I'm unlovable and I'm alone. I'll disappear, be ostracized, or wither away and die.* The inner critic is the voice we take on when we don't feel safe in the world and its voice often has a catastrophic resonance to it.

To change this, we can forge a new relationship with the inner critic. Asking it to be quiet, beating it up or asking it to go away doesn't often work for people. Rather than trying to do away with the inner critic, we can meet it with kindness and play. The inner critic is afraid; it needs to experience more safety, more levity, more humor. So, befriend it!

Reassure your inner critic that you have better ways to handle life now as an adult. Their only job is to play and to laugh and to enjoy themselves. Play is what this hyper-vigilant inner critic wants more than anything else. Play equates to safety: *If I can play, then I'm safe. There's nothing lurking behind me ready to pounce. There isn't anything that I must do to protect myself. I can let down my defenses. I can relax and enjoy life.* Check it out—can you notice in your body how it just felt to read these words? Try again—you should feel a settling inside. If you felt something, it's already working.

One of my clients drew a picture of her inner critic and named the grumpy lady Complete the ritual by answering “What’s different?” As you go, look for changes in your mood, body sensations and behavior. As with all the rituals you’ll learn in this book, keep track of where it’s beginning to show up in your life in the next two to four weeks. You may be surprised to notice the subtle change or even the absence of the old feeling you had about yourself!

“Miss Esther.” I encouraged the client to have a conversation with Miss Esther. With eyes closed, one hand on her heart space and one hand on her belly, the client called Miss Esther forward and spoke to her with loving kindness. In her mind’s eye, the client said words to the effect of, *“You know what, Miss Esther, my sweetheart? Thank you so much for trying to keep me safe. I have better ways to handle these kinds of issues now. I’d love it if you and I just play together. Let’s dance.”*

What can you do to relate to your version of Miss Esther with more kindness and play? Maybe tickle your own Miss Esther. Imagine that you are the only one who can make your inner critic laugh. Then, any time you hear your inner critic’s voice, you can say, *“Oh, we’re fine. Don’t sweat it. Keep playing, dancing, and laughing. We’re safe. I’ve got you, no matter what.”*

Over time, the relationship between you and your inner critic will change. You’ll no longer be tempted to try to silence, punish or correct the inner critic. Instead, she becomes a supportive companion—your inner buddy and best cheerleader.

Now you know that the childhood messages you’ve internalized are perceived fears, not real ones. As such, they can be handled with a lighter, sweeter touch.

Here we go!

- a) Draw a picture of your inner critic. It doesn’t even have to be a person. It can be an entity. It could be a little gremlin, a funny monster, or a swirl of colors. For this exercise, it’s not somebody you know and it’s not yourself. Otherwise, whatever you want it to be is great. No need to over-think it. This isn’t art class! You can always change it later if you want.
- b) Name it something funny that you’ll remember, so that your mind and body begin to see it as something separate from you. Don’t over-think it. Again, you can change it later if you want.
- c) Interoception: Close your eyes, place a hand on your heart space and a hand on your belly. Begin long, deep, slow breathing, keeping your attention in your chest and/or belly. Call your inner critic (out loud) by name. Imagine it. See how it’s feeling in this moment. Is it worried? Angry? Irritated? Crabby? Now, speak to your inner critic (ideally, out loud—even if it’s just at whisper volume) with kindness, knowing that the in-

ner critic's intention is to keep you safe. Tell your inner critic something like, "*I know you're trying to keep us safe, but I have better ways to handle these issues now. All you need to do is be supportive by playing, laughing, and enjoying life with me. I've got you, no matter what happens!*"

- d) Imagine doing something with the inner critic to start him on that path. Use your wildest imagination—dance with the critic, tickle him until he laughs, tell him something to bring more levity to his life. Stay with him until you notice your body loosening or settling and your inner critic becomes a playful, supportive, loving ally.
- e) You can repeat this ritual any time you find yourself experiencing internal conflict. If you ever find it difficult to change the inner critic's mood or words, it's possible you need to get your body more engaged. Try *actually* dancing to music or moving your body in some playful way, as you imagine the critic's transformation. Closing your eyes or casting the eyes downward while you do this may help, too.

Most of all, your inner critic wants to feel safe. If nothing else, use words of reassurance to help him settle, like *I've got you. You are safe. I will protect you. You can rest.*