

WHAT TO DO IF YOU'RE VERY SELF-CRITICAL

A friend of mine told me that she often found herself ruminating about the mistakes she feels she made parenting her children when they were young, even though she thinks her adult children are wonderful people. The fact that she's proud of them now, that she's apologized to her children for what she considers her mistakes, and that they love her didn't stop her self-criticism or alleviate the guilt she felt.

Like my friend, I have a very vocal inner self-critic that, if I allow it to, will magnify the negatives, minimize the positives, and often see future possibilities through a filter of pessimism, which tends to temporarily blind me to all that is truly possible.

I want to clarify: by inner self-critic, I'm not talking about mindfully realizing that we've done or said something inappropriate or harmful, taking responsibility for it, apologizing, and making amends; I'm talking about having an inner self-critic that continually dwells on what it judges to be our faults, beats ourselves up for them, and creates in us a state of low self-esteem.

I've done a lot of work over the years to temper my inner self-critic—through a process of mindfully looking at what

this inner critic has to say and learning to disempower it. I've found that the first step to disempowering our inner self-critic is to understand what created it.

HOW OUR INNER CRITIC IS FORMED

Our inner critic is always past based—it uses our past experiences and the reactions and interpretations we had of them to create the programming for the self-critical commentary we hear as adults. We received most of those initial negative learning experiences as children, usually from our parents, other caretakers, or siblings.

When we received criticism, we internalized it, and it still lives as a voice in our head, which will continue to echo the same judgments every time a new event appears that the mind associates with a past event. For example, if as kids we were regularly told that we were wrong or not good enough by our parents, siblings, or caretakers, then, as adults, if we aren't mindful, we will allow our inner self-critic to operate on automatic pilot and repeat the same kinds of critical messages when we are unsure about ourselves.

A child's inner self-critic can be vicious. Consider, for instance, how common it is for a child to mistakenly blame himself or herself for a parent's death or a divorce even though the child bears no responsibility for it.

Children who experience feeling that it's their fault that their parents divorced, for example, may grow into adults who perpetually feel that they're not good enough—very often blaming themselves when something goes wrong. This phenomenon is similar to how abused children continue to feel

unworthy because on some level they blame themselves for their abuse rather than holding the perpetrator accountable.

This pattern of self-blame will perpetuate into adulthood where, when we're on automatic pilot, we unconsciously allow our inner self-critic to attach those old, false feelings of unworthiness to current situations in which we also feel unworthy and responsible.

DISEMPOWERING OUR INNER SELF-CRITIC

Once we understand how our inner self-critic is created and perpetuated, we need to disempower it by mindfully voicing to ourselves this simple truth: *my inner self-critic is not me; it's not an appropriate, productive part of my thought process; it's just old pain, developed in childhood, causing a false sense of unworthiness in the present.*

By using this mindful approach, I am able to hear the self-criticism and simply tell myself, "It's just my old programming," and let the thoughts pass by like clouds floating through the sky rather than holding on to the criticism as if it were the truth. The result for me is less pain and a greater ability to live in the present where good things are possible and I can feel good about myself.

Several months ago, I shared this with my friend. A few weeks later she told me that, reflecting mindfully on what caused her to be so self-critical, she realized that her vocal self-critic was formed in childhood when her judgmental mother constantly criticized her. By mindfully reminding herself that her self-criticism is part of this old programming, she is able to stop ruminating, let go of that habit of magnifying her flaws

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as a parent, and instead of barraging herself with criticism, experience her children's love and appreciation of her.

EMBRACE YOUR DARK SIDE

Have you ever spent time with someone and come away feeling upset, thinking she was conceited, arrogant, or aggressive or behaving in some other way you judged to be wrong? Has another person ever asked you why you were so angry and you denied that you were—only to have that person show you how angry your words and tone of voice were? What do these experiences have in common? They're both hidden gifts with the power to introduce you to aspects of your dark side.

Your reaction of being upset by another person's behavior and your blindness to your own anger have their roots in the part of your unconscious mind that psychoanalyst Carl Jung called your *dark side* or *personal unconscious*.

Your conscious mind—what you think of as *I* or *me*—contains all the parts of yourself—including your actions, words, thoughts, memories, and feelings, that you're aware of. Your dark side contains the specific parts of yourself that your conscious mind finds intolerable because they clash with your pictures of yourself and judges them as unacceptable or bad. In other words, what your conscious mind cannot own is banished to your dark side.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR DARK SIDE

Although your conscious mind represses the emotions, thoughts, and memories it judges as bad or finds too difficult or painful to accept, these feelings, thoughts, and memories do not go away; they live in the dark side and create self-defeating patterns of behavior—unconscious ways of acting that work against your conscious goals. *Traits that remain hidden in your dark side still sabotage your life.*

CLUES TO THE TRAITS IN YOUR DARK SIDE

When another person's actions upset you, it may be because you are reacting to something in your dark side that you're unaware of and that your conscious mind considers unacceptable.

For example, if your conscious mind equates expressing pride in your accomplishments with being boastful and vain, you may be upset when another person talks with pride about his accomplishments and brand him as conceited and arrogant. This doesn't necessarily mean he is conceited and arrogant; it just means an old message in your conscious mind says it's bad to express pride in yourself. In this case, you judge the other person because of your own issues about showing pride. In fact, you may be so self-critical when it comes to expressing pride that you cannot allow yourself to express any pride in your accomplishments!

If you have negative judgments about asking for what you want, you might be upset when someone else asks for what she wants and judge her negatively as aggressive. Again, this is due to old messages in your programming. The other person may

simply be freer than you in expressing herself, and that's what is upsetting you. Your conscious mind doesn't believe that you should have permission to express yourself as freely.

If you believe anger is an unacceptable emotion, your anger gets banished to your dark side, where it stays hidden and you can't consciously and appropriately express it. Unfortunately you're stuck—because your anger will still come out, but it will come out inappropriately. This is why, in the example I gave above, someone can act angrily and be completely unaware of it until someone points it out; the anger that explodes without the person being aware of it has come from the dark side.

HOW TO BECOME AWARE OF YOUR DARK SIDE—AND WHY IT'S VITAL TO DO SO

According to Jungian therapist Leana Melat, PhD, Jung observed that the less conscious you are of your dark side, the blacker and denser it becomes.¹ As the examples illustrate, this lack of awareness creates frustration, stress, and confusion. When you act unconsciously, others are likely to react to you—and you're likely to react to them—in ways you don't quite understand. As long as parts of yourself are hidden in your dark side, you will deprive yourself of self-knowledge, self-expression, and the ability to feel your appropriate feelings.

That's why it's so important to become aware of those parts of yourself that you've banished to your dark side and to embrace them. There are three major ways to accomplish this:

- Look mindfully at your interactions with others to see what they tell you about your behavior. If you habitually react negatively to people who act in a certain way that you deem to be wrong—for example, boastful or aggres-

Embrace Your Dark Side

sive—ask yourself if it's because you would like to act in that way yourself but have internalized the message that it's bad.

- Ask yourself if other people react to you in ways that surprise you—and that you're tempted to deny. What do these reactions tell you about how you're acting that you've been unaware of?
- Look at your dreams. Keep a dream journal. Dreams can tell you a lot about what you're hiding from yourself.

Embracing your dark side—integrating the traits that you've unconsciously banished there and beginning to work consciously and constructively with them—helps you live a happier, more fulfilling life. As Jung emphasized, it helps you become whole and authentic; it vitalizes your personality and allows your normal instincts, appropriate reactions, realistic insights, and creative impulses to take their natural place in your behavior. By embracing your dark side, Jung remarked, the carbon turns into a diamond.²

A LIFE LESSON THAT WORKS

A long time ago I learned that if you tell the truth and keep your agreements, life will turn out perfectly; the bad news is that *perfectly* may not fit your picture.

TELLING THE TRUTH AND KEEPING OUR AGREEMENTS

“Tell the truth” is easy to understand. It simply means to communicate honestly—about yourself, your feelings, your needs, whatever situation you’re discussing—without lies or even what we might think of as white lies or little fibs.

“Keep your agreements” is also easy to understand. It comes down to keeping your word, doing what you said you would do.

To use a minor example, if you agree to be at a certain place at a certain time and you’re there when you say you will be, you’re keeping your agreement. When you do this consistently, people know they can depend on your word. On the other hand, if you’re often late, you foster negative feelings, and people may feel that you’re not to be trusted, at least not in that area. At another level, if you’re in a monogamous relationship and you’re faithful, you’re keeping your word; whereas if you’re unfaithful, you’re not acting with integrity, which is going to cause problems.

Every time we break an agreement, we create upset for ourselves and others. The more we break our agreements with other people, the less they trust us. Internally it works the same way: if we break agreements with ourselves, we lose self-trust, turning our intentions into hollow words. Essentially, keeping our agreements is about having integrity. Remember, that means keeping our word to ourselves as well as to others.

WHAT CAN HAPPEN TO TELLING THE TRUTH WHEN WE'RE ON AUTOMATIC PILOT

I get into the most trouble about telling the truth when I'm acting on automatic pilot. When I speak without mindfulness, my response can lack integrity. One of my biggest traps lies in my reluctance to say no to people I care about out of fear that my declining will lead to their abandoning me.

If, for example, a friend asks, "Can I stay with you for a while?" and I know I don't want to give up my privacy for that long and that the visit would create a strain, it's important for me to tell the truth. If I allow my default programming to run me and I say yes because I don't have the guts to say no, I'm responding without integrity simply to avoid friction in the relationship.

When we lie, we are dishonoring ourselves and making it impossible to satisfy our desires and needs. Take our basic need for intimacy, for instance. If we're in a relationship and want more intimacy than our partner is offering and we don't tell the truth about it, our partner will think we're satisfied, and we run the risk of never having our desires and needs met.

We may rationalize that our need for intimacy and connection isn't really there, but it is. When we share our feelings with our partner, we are being true to ourselves, and we will get the perfect result. If the result is more connection with our partner, then it fits our picture of perfect. If the result is a breakup, it's perfect, too, even though it doesn't fit our picture because of the pain we feel losing the relationship as we desire it to be. It will be perfect, however, because we'll be free to get the nurturing we need from someone else. So, again, the result is perfect, even if it doesn't fit our picture.

WHAT DOES PERFECT MEAN?

I've come to understand that perfect simply means *as it is*. Indeed, the Merriam-Webster dictionary tells us that perfect means "satisfying all requirements: accurate."¹ Knowing that *what is* is simply *as it is* satisfies all requirements of the current circumstance; it is accurate.

When we repress our truth, we cannot possibly be fulfilled: whereas when we put our needs on the table and let go of fear, whatever happens is a response to who we really are, and that's perfect.

THE CHOICES WE HAVE FOR DEALING WITH ANY SITUATION

Once we know the reality of a situation, we always have three choices:

- Accept the situation fully (which I call Door 1).
- Change the situation (Door 2).
- Leave the situation (Door 3).

A Life Lesson That Works

When we tell the truth and keep our agreements, we are living mindfully instead of letting our default programming run us on automatic pilot. When we live this way, we are living with integrity and are open to new possibilities.