

## Going Into Me (ii): Making an ally of the inner-critic in us

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It is in every one of us, the inner or self-critic. It's a voice in our head. It can be harsh and critical. It points out our flaws, mistakes, and creates self-doubt in us. It is the internal judge who evaluates everything we do. "See, see, you can't even do a simple thing like this well!" "This is beyond you. You are not up to it!" Sometimes, it is more subtle and manipulative. "You'll fail. Why bother?", it suggests. "It's not your fault. It's because of someone else." "Look at how successful others are. You are falling behind!"

Whatever form it takes, whether a judge, abuser, manipulator or fear-inducing advisor, the effects on us are the same. It paralyzes us and holds us back from pursuing what we want. It is the self-saboteur that causes us to resort to perfectionism and striving. If we are doing well, it makes us feel we are imposters. We are not who people think we are. We fear being exposed someday. It causes anxiety and depression. It entraps us in cycles of feeling inadequate and worthless. It makes us engage in unhealthy comparison with others, perpetuate our self-loathing, self-rejection, fears and negative self-talk. In short, it stops us from becoming who we are meant to be.

If you have not recognised the inner-critic in you, you belong to the majority. The inner critic in us is so familiar that it becomes unnoticeable and automatic. It is so ingrained; it is part of us.

How did this voice in our head get there? It is an external voice that has become internalised. Someone may have said to us, or implied this of us, "Who do you think you are to want to attempt that?". Over time, we hear enough of it to begin to believe it. At some point we become one with it. It evolves and takes on a life of its own.

The inner-critic also grew out of our need to self-protect. We would have experienced some unpleasantness, failure or even trauma... like when we failed to score that critical goal when the ball hit the goal post at that football tournament... like when we tried to cozy up to our stressed and highly-strung mother and got pushed away by her. Our vulnerable fearful selves rose up in defence to protect us from further shame, abuse, disappointment and pain. This coping behaviour of self-protection evolved at a time when our understanding was immature, when we were overwhelmed by fears and insecurities. Hence it is flawed and unreliable. As a result, it does not serve us well in adulthood. There is now a need to renounce that unhealthy coping behaviour, revise and update our unhealthy perspectives and move towards growth. It is time to shift the way we look at our inner-critic, change our relationship with it. Move from seeing it as our enemy to treating it as an ally.

## Connect-Point

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*You don't have to be someone else, but you do need to be fully you.*  
(Unknown)

People who become aware of that critical voice in their heads usually do not know what to do with it. They either wish it away or fight it. But because it cannot be ignored, they beat themselves up or beat up the inner-critic. Banish the critic, some would say. Can we? The fact is, the more we resist, the more it persists. It persists because it has evolved from within us. It is a loyal, well-meaning friend with a mission to protect us and it would not let go.

What we need to banish is not the inner-critic in us. Instead, we need to engage with it gently, kindly and with self-compassion. Know that the inner-critic takes its cues from the beliefs we hold. What we need to banish and sever the inner-critic's ties with are the unhelpful perspectives and outdated beliefs. This can be done through 'renouncing' (announcing to self that you are rejecting the unhealthy and distorted beliefs that are not helping) and 'reframing'. (replacing those beliefs that you have renounced to more realistic, healthy and helpful ones).

Here is an illustration of how it works. Say, for instance, you found out that you have not been included in an after-office party. Your belief that you are not good enough is immediately triggered. Your inner-critic says to you, "See, you are rejected again because you are not good enough."

Your loyal friend is on a mission again to protect you. Its intention this time is to make you decide not to grow closer to others so that you will not have expectations of being included and therefore be protected from disappointment of being excluded again. It's self-sabotage at work.

Attend to your inner-critic as you would a friend. Stop and have a loving, constructive inner-dialogue with it, the way you would with someone you deeply love. You have to sometimes speak to it in the 2nd person 'You'. At other times, you want to include it acknowledge and embrace the inner-critic as part of your being using the pronoun 'We'.

Thank it for always watching out for you. Announce to your self-critic your shift in your perspective of 'self-worth'. Say to it, "I appreciate you. You are so vigilant and loyal." Practise self-empathy. "I\* am disappointed that I am not included." Acknowledge and soothe that disappointment. "But this has nothing to do with my self-worth. It is not because I am not good enough. I renounce my old way of associating my worth with external validation - how others treat me, what they think of me etc. My self-worth is an unchanging intrinsic quality." People have their reasons to not include me. It is their right. I can indicate my interest to be included (if it applies) but if it happens often, I need to evaluate my own attitude and behaviour. I will not change the way I relate with others because of this." \*You can use 'I' or 'we' for this segment. There is no hard and fast rule about it, especially with 'I' or 'We'. Do what is natural to you. With practice, this comes easily.

Changing your relationship with self and the inner-critic begins with recognising its existence. This involves cultivating increased awareness of your inner thoughts and patterns and self-talk. When you are able to catch it doing its thing, stop and check. First say, "Thank you for protecting me all this time." Then check what is the source of your inner-critic's messages. What was that external voice or voices that you have internalised? Understand its intentions. What is your inner-critic trying to protect you from?

Most important of all, changing the inner-critic from a foe to ally requires us to develop self-compassion (next article). The world outside is not always kind. We have no control over what happens to us. We can take control of how we navigate the challenges in this world by changing our relationship with ourselves, with our inner-critic and by showing ourselves kindness and grace.

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