

Extract from the CBTandFeelingGood.com workbook:– Silencing our ‘Inner Critic’



We all have an ‘inner critic’. And it’s voice is louder and ever present and insistent when we fall into anxiety or depression. You know, that voice inside our heads that constantly buzzes negative self statements, buried deceptively amongst the thousands of thoughts we think everyday. The one we use when we criticize and judge ourselves negatively. The one that encourages us to use avoidance behaviour instead of living our lives and doing the things we want. The one that keeps us feeling bad.

It whispers things like:

- “God I’m useless”
- “no wonder I’m not the centre of attention at parties, I’m dull and boring”
- “oh my God, why did she pick me to do the presentation? I can’t. It’ll be awful, and everyone will see I’m a fraud”
- “I’m fat and lazy, I wish I was like him”
- “she’s a selfish horrible nasty person, but he likes her more than me”
- “nobody likes me, I’m not nice”
- “I’ll never have somebody to love me”
- “let’s face it, I’m too unattractive to have a happy life”
- “no wonder my wife isn’t attracted to me any more, I’m a mess”

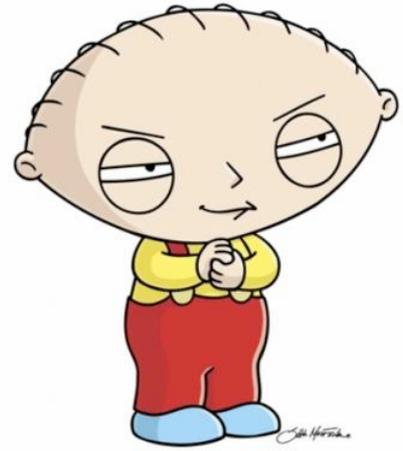
.. and on and on, buzz buzz buzz – you get the picture? Let’s look at how to ‘silence’ it...

First things first: as shown in the previous exercises, in CBT we work to examine and understand our way of thinking, to find out if we’ve developed unhealthy automatic negative styles. We uncover our patterns of upsettiness that are followed by self sabotaging behaviour, and we track the kind of thinking that causes it, in order to see if it is rational and evidence based – but often we discover our thinking is distorted, and that we need to challenge it, replacing it methodically and deliberately with the facts. Then our upsettiness and behaviours are neutralised.

Where did it come from? During this process we develop theories of how we came to think this way. What happened to cause us to truly believe and embrace the things we do? Where did our inner critic come from? It can be a mix of learned behaviour and beliefs from carers and authority figures, peers, relationships, traumatic events, media saturation... all sorts. These contribute to the rules for living and moral boundaries we set ourselves, the rigid and inflexible ‘should and must and ought’ demands we apply to ourselves and others and the world. The resulting inner critical voice can give us a hard time and takeover to affect our quality of living and potential happiness in a big way.

Why should we silence it? Our self esteem and self image are developed by how we talk to ourselves, how we think of ourselves. The inner critic actually thinks it’s helping us, protecting us from surprise hurts or disappointments for instance – it’s part of our ‘ego defence mechanism’ set. But it’s not rational, and it is not constructive. It costs us too much. Everytime it ‘attacks’ it keeps our self worth low and stops us living a rich life. It becomes the boss of us. But we can change that... It is never too late to fix unhealthy thinking, and it’s entirely possible to SILENCE THE INNER CRITIC!

How do we silence it? We are going to 'personalise and externalise' it. We're going to see it as a living entity that is a separate thing to our actual fabulous self. Create a visual image for your own nagging nattering unhelpful stupid inner critic. Make it small, make it ridiculous, give it a silly voice, hell, give it a name if you like. Make it look and sound as silly as it is. Remember the inner critic thinks it's helping you, making you avoid or recognise things so as to keep you from shocks and hurts and disappointments – so it's not an evil toxic monster, rather it's a pretty stupid (as in silly, confused, irrational, distorted) unhelpful bossy pest. Most importantly, remember that it's not actually YOU!



~~~ Now, we have to learn to recognise his arrival and spot him chattering his destructive nonsense at us, and decide whether to 'obey', 'argue', 'ignore' or 'laugh at' it, (not ourselves, IT!). ~~~

**Note:** Examples: he often attacks when: you're feeling down - in response to negative stressful events - when meeting new people - when meeting people you find sexually attractive - when you make a mistake - when you are being criticised - when you're dealing with challenging people (who may have their own issues) - during conversations where your fight or flight turns on and you get flustered... And of course when you're negatively mind reading how you think other people are perceiving you and your behaviour ('he thinks I'm thick'), and when you're negatively fortune telling an event that hasn't even happened yet ('it's going to be awful, I look like crap, I'm not able for it right now...' etc.).

As you can see from the above examples, whenever we're feeling an emotional disturbance, the idiot inner critic is bound to be around, clouding our rational brain, popping up to 'help' and 'analyse' and 'problem solve' the situation for us in his own peculiar ugly negative way. We can learn to 'turn him off' and neutralise him, we can learn to take away his power over us, the power that causes us upsetness and unhelpful behaviours – and we can replace him with our own new learned voice of calm evidence based rational thinking (refer back to early CBT thinking exercises for best outcomes).



**Thought Stopping:** when we recognise the Inner Critic in action we need to 'thought stop' – and then to literally speak to him. Create your own mantra to stop him in his tracks. Something like: "You again! No! That makes no sense. How much do you cost me? Have you been helpful in my life so far? No, you're a poison, go away and let me think clearly and positively about this situation...". And then to go and do exactly that, instead of automatically complying with it's nonsense.

**THE RUBBER BAND TRICK:** A widely used trick is to wear a loose rubber band around our wrist, and to snap it slightly each time we notice the inner critic, this can create a great psychological association for routine and rejecting the thoughts.



**More mantra examples:** let's say a person finds themselves thinking '*Oh God, this is awful, I'll never be able to manage it, I'm hopeless*' or some such thought – when they notice / recognise this is the 'critic', they can confront it directly by stating their mantra, perhaps something aggressive, like '*hey you, SHUT IT, that's not true, you're not helpful or constructive – you cost me too much – I'm shutting you out and thinking calmly and rationally, so get lost – NOW*' ... or maybe something short and snappy like '*Stop this nonsense*' or '*This is poison, stop it*'. Whatever works for you, whatever allows you to take control.

**EXTRA TIP** – (especially for angry exploding heads) - **create an inner carer:**

If your critic is aggressive and causes you to be very angry at yourself when you do something 'wrong', perhaps causing aggressive behaviour (taking it out on the people around you and yourself), then you might use the strategy of developing a soothing self talk voice/persona that kicks in immediately when you recognise the inner critics arrival . E.g. if you spill a glass of red wine on a white tablecloth, instead of calling yourself a stupid \*\*\*\*\*!, and reacting with a panicked kind of rage, you can instead decide to immediately shove away the inner critic idiot and takeover as the self talking voice with something like a deliberately calming 'whoops, aw don't worry [insert affectionate name for yourself], you haven't done anything wrong, it's only a little mistake, these things happen, it's only inconvenient, not a huge disaster... don't worry I'm here to take care of it, relax, it'll be okay, it's okay...'. Practice has shown that this kind of self talk and the



visualisation of minding/taking care of yourself (or your own 'inner child self' if you like) kindly and compassionately in an unconditionally accepting way - in the same way you would treat a child that you loved - gives great results in feeling good and having healthier behaviours until you develop new coping skills. It's even more powerful when you add the visualisation of your adult self putting your arms around your child self that needs to be taken care of at that moment in time, addressing yourself affectionately, and using gentle language.



**What's that?** These strategies seem ridiculous? Like therapy methods that would be used with a child? Hey, the only thing that matters is that they WORK spectacularly well – even with adults, ‘emotional learning’ works in a much better way than cold academic thesis, and visualisation and personalisation is extremely effective. And you don't have to tell anybody, it's nobodies business but yours. Just try it. You've got nothing to lose.

**The Inner Critic Technique does a number of things:**

- It separates internalised core voices and beliefs you might have learned from others from your own true persona
- In a short space of time, you learn a lot about how and when you attack yourself, and the consequences
- It allows you to interrupt and challenge irrational automatic negative thoughts and beliefs
- It takes the bullets out of the inner critics gun, giving you rational responses and control over your moods and behaviours
- By using humour, the normal emotions of fear, depression, or anxiety are challenged – humour and negative emotion cannot co-exist so it halts the usual inappropriate strong emotions long enough to allow you to ‘think differently’ based on rationale and evidence and what is most helpful to you in the situation - to ‘make your own choices’.
- It helps to clarify blame / responsibility for negative automatic thoughts away from the 'self', so relieving guilt and shame.

**In practice, even the most straight-laced and logical people, once they give this a go, have fun with it, and more importantly find it hugely effective. Perhaps it's effective because of its child-like simplicity? –Who cares?! It works! Please try it. Good luck!**

**Task: externalise your internal critic – describe him/her/it - and compose a ‘whacking’ mantra...**

Design it, name it, recognise it, stop it...