

How to Manage Your Inner Critic

8:40 AM Monday January 4, 2010

by Susan David | [Comments \(33\)](#)



Do you spend hours worrying that you aren't good enough to succeed? That you're just not capable or that you aren't smart enough? You're not alone.

A client — I'll call her Sonya — is typical of many top-level executives who struggle with an over-eager inner critic. Despite numerous accomplishments, including a graduate degree from a prestigious business school and a partnership at a leading accounting firm, Sonya always feels like an underachiever. Every day she sees herself as a new graduate — tongue-tied, fumbling, and trying to prove herself for the very first time. Sonya is convinced that soon someone will find out the awful truth — that her incompetence will become clear and that she'll lose her responsibilities, her partnership, and eventually her job. Even though Sonya has never received a negative performance appraisal, she feels stressed, unhappy, and unfulfilled. Sonya is successful — and completely miserable.

Sonya suffers from the "impostor phenomenon," a psychological syndrome identified in the late 1970s by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes and expanded upon by Manfred Kets de Vries in [a 2005 HBR article](#). It describes frequent feelings of incompetence despite all of the evidence to the contrary.

The impostor syndrome is common — and it can be hard to overcome. Quieting your inner critic takes a series of specific steps.

First, it is important to recognize that the most commonly used strategy — trying to ignore or suppress your inner critic — simply doesn't work. In fact, ignoring unpleasant thoughts and emotions leads to a rebound effect, [increasing their intensity and frequency](#).

Rather than suppress your emotions, acknowledge that they are real, whether justifiable or not. Wrong or right, Sonya really does feel unworthy, ashamed, and anxious. When she tries to push these feelings away or rationalize them (by saying, "I shouldn't be feeling this way") they only get amplified. It is this response to her emotions that gets her into trouble. Psychologists call this response a "meta-emotion." When we worry about being worried, we're creating a whole new problem.

I asked Sonya how long she'd been dealing with her inner critic. "Ten years," she said. I then asked how long she'd been trying to ignore her unreasonable self-criticisms. "Ten years." I pointed out that her standard strategy didn't seem to be working. It didn't take long for her to realize that anxiously trying to avoid or ignore her emotions was actually contributing to the problem.

The trick to dealing with your inner critic is to develop a balanced relationship with it: to not ignore or avoid it and the emotions it raises, but to also not allow yourself to be bullied by it.

Easier said than done? Try the following steps:

Examine your inner critic. Ask it: "Where do you come from?" This might feel awkward at first, but speaking internally with your critic is a valid psychological technique that encourages you to think objectively. In Sonya's case, we traced her inner critic back to her childhood, to parents who were harsh and difficult to please. But not all inner critics come from our childhoods. We're influenced by many factors, including competition with our peers, the media, our relationships with our spouses, and our own attitudes about winning and losing. Once you understand the places your inner critic comes from, you'll be able to recognize when it's telling the truth and when to disregard what it says.

Understand that your inner critic can actually help you. Your inner critic has evolved to help you set and meet high expectations. If you're open to it (which is not the same as believing everything it tells you) then you can learn from it. Like a good coach, your inner critic reminds you that knowledge and capability are important. Ask it: "How will you help me achieve success in the task ahead?"

Act in spite of your inner critic. You can learn from your inner critic, but be careful to not give it too much power. Find and maintain the right distance — keep it close enough to be useful, but not so close that it gets in your way. As soon as you hear your inner critic complaining, acknowledge the information — but always ask: is my inner critic helping me or hurting me? If what it's telling you saps your confidence, then ask it to step aside and continue on your way.

Sonya used to feel tongue-tied in important meetings, worried that other people might think her comments inane. Now, instead of surrendering to anxious, negative thoughts, she thanks her inner critic for its opinion and speaks up anyway. By taking action that's consistent with her goal of becoming a better leader she manages to dispel her anxiety and add wisdom to the conversation.

In the end, it's helpful to remember that as loud as your inner critic can be, it's just a part of you and not the whole. Don't let it stop you from continuing to learn and grow.

Susan David is co-director of the Harvard/McLean Institute of Coaching, a member of Harvard faculty, and a Yale research affiliate. She is the founding director of Evidence Based Psychology, a leadership development organization and management consultancy that focuses on developing business leaders to foster positive and sustainable outcomes in themselves and their organizations. You can email her at [sdavid \[at\] mclean.harvard.edu](mailto:sdavid@mclean.harvard.edu).