

How to Silence Your Inner Critic

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Dear Dr. Sophia,

My friends tell me that I put myself down all the time. I have finally realized that, not only do I talk badly about myself to others, I also say mean things to myself in my head! I'm 36 years old and I've been doing this for probably 25 years. I want to stop being so self-critical but I don't even know where to start.

—HC

Dear HC,

It's absolutely possible to stop negative self-talk! We all have an inner voice but some of us have one that's more critical than kind. Not only can you learn to silence your inner critic, you can learn to say kind things to yourself (and believe them). What's challenging is that it's an ingrained habit. We get so used to our thoughts, we barely notice what we say to ourselves. It becomes background chatter, but even so, it has an enormously negative effect on us and our relationships, the jobs we choose, what we model to our children, how good of a friend we are—etc.

Quieting our inner critic isn't easy, but it is simple. Let's start with

these 3 steps:

Step 1: Tell

“No pain, no gain” is not true. A lot of us bought into this philosophy for years—the tougher we were on ourselves, the faster we would succeed. In actuality, tearing yourself down to build yourself up doesn't work! Start telling yourself a different story. Say to yourself that nurturing is the way to go—not beating yourself up.

Pick a phrase like “kindness is the key” or “nurture from now on.” Write it on sticky notes and put them in your home, your car, and at work. Whenever you see your notes, say the phrase out loud or to yourself.

At this point, you don't have to believe it, and you don't have to figure out how you're going to succeed at changing your mindset. Just tell yourself this new story, as often as possible.

Step 2: Ask

People who have a harsh inner critic rarely speak to *others* the way they do to *themselves*. When you find yourself listening to your critical thoughts, ask yourself if you would speak to a best friend that way. Then do Step 1 again and move on with your day.

Step 3: Replace

Choose a thought, memory or image that makes you feel good. Write it down and label it “replacement” or whatever word you like and put it everywhere. Then, whenever your inner critic says something unkind, immediately swap it with your replacement.

Don't fret that you aren't doing deep analytical work. Don't even wonder why you are being self-critical. It doesn't matter right now. Actually, it might not *ever* matter. The goal is to go from feeling bad to feeling good.

Looking at these 3 steps, you might say, “Oh that's so easy!” You're right! It is easy to do for one day or two days. But the trick is to make it a habit. Your inner critic is quite a habit that took time to develop. Invest whatever time it takes to learn these new and better habits.

One rule is to not beat yourself up for not doing them perfectly. Don't judge yourself negatively because you forgot to do them, or because your inner critic went to the gym and built up more muscle.

Just do it as often as you remember. If you forget, just start again the next day. If you keep doing these 3 steps for more days than not, you'll make them a part of your life. Then you will see real change. Be persistent.

If you truly want to change, it's possible, but no one can do it for you. You have to do this, HC. And you can! ■

DISCLAIMER: The responses to questions in this column are for information only. Never disregard professional advice or delay seeking it because of anything you read here. Working with a skilled professional is highly recommended.



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