

# The Pathological Critic

*The pathological critic* is a term coined by psychologist Eugene Sagan to describe the negative inner voice that attacks and judges you. Everyone has a critical inner voice. But people with low self-esteem tend to have a more vicious and vocal pathological critic.

The critic blames you for things that go wrong. The critic compares you to others—to their achievements and abilities—and finds you wanting. The critic sets impossible standards of perfection and then beats you up for the smallest mistake. The critic keeps an album of your failures, but never once reminds you of your strengths or accomplishments. The critic has a script describing how you ought to live and screams that you are wrong and bad if your needs drive you to violate his rules. The critic tells you to be the best—and if you're not the best, you're nothing. He calls you names—stupid, incompetent, ugly, selfish, weak—and makes you believe that all of them are true. The critic reads your friends' minds and convinces you that they are bored, turned off, disappointed, or disgusted by you. The critic exaggerates your weaknesses by insisting that you "*always* say stupid things," or "*always* screw up a relationship," or "*never* finish anything on time."

The pathological critic is busy undermining your self-worth every day of your life. Yet his voice is so insidious, so woven into the fabric of your thought that you never notice its devastating effect. The self-attacks always seem reasonable and justified. The carping, judging inner voice seems natural, a familiar part of you. In truth, the

critic is a kind of psychological jackal who, with every attack, weakens and breaks down any good feelings you have about yourself.

Although we refer to the critic as "he" for convenience, your critic's voice may sound female. Your critic's voice may sound like your mother, your father, or your own speaking voice.

The first and most important thing you need to know about your critic is that no matter how distorted and false his attacks may be, he is almost always believed. When your critic says, "God, I'm dumb," this judgment seems just as true to you as the awareness that you're fired this morning, or that you have brown eyes, or that you don't understand word processors. It feels normal to judge yourself because you are so intimately aware of what you feel and do. But the attacks of the critic aren't part of the normal process of noticing what you feel and do. For example, when you examine how you felt on a first date, the critic drowns out any normal, reasonable reflections by shouting through a bull horn that you were a callow bore, a fumbler, a nervous phony, and that your date won't ever want to see you again. The critic takes your self-esteem and puts it through a Cuisinart.

A loud, voluble critic is enormously toxic. He is more poisonous to your psychological health than almost any trauma or loss. That's because grief and pain wash away with time. But the critic is always with you—judging, blaming, finding fault. You have no defense against him. "There you go again," he says, "being an idiot." And you automatically feel wrong and bad, like a child who's been slapped for saying something naughty.

Consider the case of a 29-year-old entomologist, recently graduated with a Ph.D., who was applying for a faculty position. During interviews he would observe the dress and manner of the interview committee and make guesses about the sort of people they were and how they were responding to him. He would handle questions by weighing the best possible answer, given what the committee seemed to expect. And while he was doing all that, he was also listening to a continuous monologue in which his critic said, "You're a fraud, you don't know anything. You won't fool these people. Wait till they read that mediocre piece of hogwash you call your dissertation . . . That was a stupid answer. Can't you crack a joke? Do something! They'll see how boring you are. Even if you get the job, you'll only lose it when your incompetence starts to show. You're not fooling anybody."

The entomologist believed every word. It all seemed to make sense. Because he'd heard it for years, the steady stream of poison felt normal, reasonable, and true. During the interview he became more

and more stiff, his answers more vague. His voice slipped into a monotone while he perspired and developed a little stammer. He was listening to the critic, and the critic was turning him into the very thing he feared.

Another important thing you need to know about the critic is that he speaks in a kind of shorthand. He might only scream the word "lazy." But those two syllables contain the memory of the hundreds of times your father complained about laziness, attacked your laziness, said how he hated laziness. It's all there, and you feel the entire weight of his disgust as the critic says the word.

Sometimes the critic uses images or pictures from the past to undermine your sense of worth. He shows a rerun of some awkward moment on a date; he pulls out snapshots of a dressing-down you got from your boss, images of a failed relationship, and scenes of the times you blew up at your kids.

A legal secretary found that her critic often used the word "screw-up." When she thought about it, she realized that "screw-up" stood for a list of negative qualities. It meant someone who was incompetent, disliked, a taker of foolish risks, a person (like her father) who would run away from problems. When the critic said "screw-up," she firmly believed that she was all of these things.

One of the strange things about the critic is that he often seems to have more control of your mind than you do. He will suddenly start to sound off, launching one attack after another or dragging you over and over through a painful scene. Through a process called *chaining*, he may show you a past failure, which reminds you of another and another in a long string of painful associations. And though you try to turn him off, you keep being reminded of yet another mistake, another rejection, another embarrassment.

Although the critic seems to have a will of his own, his independence is really an illusion. The truth is that you are so used to listening to him, so used to believing him, that you have not yet learned how to turn him off. With practice, however, you can learn to analyze and refute what the critic says. You can tune him out *before* he has a chance to poison your feelings of self-worth.

## An Arsenal of Shoulds

The critic has many weapons. Among the most effective are the values and rules of living you grew up with. The critic has a way of turning your "shoulds" against you. He compares the way you are with the way you ought to be and judges you inadequate or wrong.

He calls you stupid if the A you should have had slips to a B. He says, "A marriage should last forever," and calls you a failure after your divorce. He says, "A real man supports his family," and calls you a loser when you're laid off from work. He says, "The kids come first," and calls you selfish when you crave some nights off.

A 35-year-old bartender described how his critic used old "shoulds" he'd learned as a child. "My father was a lawyer, so the critic says that I should be a professional and that anything else is a waste. I feel like I should have forced myself to go to school. I feel like I should read real books instead of the sports page. I feel like I should be *doing* something in the world instead of mixing drinks and heading over to my girlfriend's house." This man's self-esteem was severely damaged by a critic who insisted that he be something other than himself. The fact was that he liked the comradery of the bar and wasn't the least bit intellectual. But he continually rejected himself for not living up to his family's expectations.

## The Origin of the Critic

The critic is born during your earliest experience of socialization by your parents. All through childhood, your parents are teaching you which behaviors are acceptable, which are dangerous, which are morally wrong, which are lovable, and which are annoying. They do this by hugging and praising you for appropriate behavior and punishing you for dangerous, wrong, or annoying behavior. It's impossible to grow up without having experienced a great number of punishing events. Personality theorist Harry Stack Sullivan called these punishing events *forbidding gestures*.

By design, forbidding gestures are frightening and rejecting. A child who is spanked or scolded feels the withdrawal of parental approval very acutely. He or she is, for a while, a bad person. Either consciously or unconsciously, a child knows that his or her parents are the source of all physical and emotional nourishment. If he or she were to be rejected, cast out by the family, he or she would die. So parental approval is a matter of life or death to a child. The experience of being bad can be very deeply felt, because being bad carries with it the terrible risk of losing all support.

All children grow up with emotional residues from the forbidding gestures. They retain conscious and unconscious memories of all those times when they felt wrong or bad. These are the unavoidable scars that growing up inflicts on your self-esteem. This experience is also where the critic gets his start, feeding on these early "not-OK"

feelings. There is still a part of you willing to believe you're bad just as soon as someone gets angry at you, or you make a mistake, or you fall short of a goal. That early feeling of being not-OK is why the critic's attacks seem to fit in so well with what you already believe about yourself. His voice is the voice of a disapproving parent, the punishing, forbidding voice that shaped your behavior as a child.

The volume and viciousness of a critic's attacks are directly related to the strength of your not-OK feelings. If the early forbidding gestures were relatively mild, the adult critic may only rarely attack. But if you were given very strong messages about your wrongness or badness as a child, then the adult critic will come gunning for you every chance he gets.

There are five main factors that determine the strength of your early not-OK feelings:

1. *The degree to which issues of taste, personal needs, safety, or good judgment were mislabeled as moral imperatives.* In some families, when dad wants things quiet, a child is made to feel morally wrong if he or she is noisy. Other families make a low grade into a sin. Some children are made to feel wrong for needing time with friends or for having sexual feelings. Some children are *bad* if they forget their chores, *bad* if they prefer a certain haircut, or *bad* if they ride their skateboard in the street. When the issue is really a matter of taste, failure to perform tasks, or poor judgment, but parents make a child feel morally wrong, they are laying the foundation for low self-esteem. It's important to recognize that certain words and phrases carry heavy moral messages. If a child hears that he or she is lazy, or selfish, or looks like a bum, or acts like a screwball, the specific situations are very soon forgotten. But he or she is left with an enduring sense of wrongness.

2. *The degree to which parents failed to differentiate between behavior and identity.* A child who hears a stern warning about the dangers of running in the street will have better self-esteem than a child who only hears that he's a "bad boy" when he runs into the street. The child who's a "bad boy" is getting the message that he and his behavior are not OK. He doesn't learn the difference between what he does and what he is. As an adult, his critic will attack both his behavior and his worth. Parents who carefully distinguish between *inappropriate behavior* and the basic *goodness of the child* raise children who feel better about themselves and have a far gentler inner critic.

3. *The frequency of the forbidding gestures.* The frequency of negative messages from parents has an impact on early feelings of worth. Hitler's minister of propaganda once observed that the secret to having any lie believed was merely to repeat it often enough. The lie that

you are not OK wasn't learned with your parents' first rebuke. It was learned through repeated criticism. You have to hear "What's the matter with you?" and "Stop screwing around" a good many times before the message sinks in. But after a while you get the point—you're not OK.

4. *The consistency of the forbidding gestures.* Suppose your parents didn't like you to use the word "shit." You may have thought that prohibition rather stuffy, but if they were consistent, you managed to get along without that admittedly versatile word. Suppose, however, that they let you say "shit" sometimes and blew up when you said it at other times. And suppose they were equally inconsistent about other rules. At first you would be confused, but the randomness of the attacks would eventually lead you to a very painful conclusion. It wasn't what you did—sometimes that was OK, sometimes it wasn't—it was you. There was something wrong with you. Children who have experienced inconsistent parenting often feel an ineffable feeling of guilt. They feel as if they've done something wrong, but because they can never get the rules straight, they have no idea what.

5. *The frequency with which forbidding gestures were tied to parental anger or withdrawal.* Children can tolerate a fair amount of criticism without experiencing much damage to their sense of worth. But if the criticism is accompanied by parental anger or withdrawal (threatened or actual), it has enormous potency. Anger and withdrawal give an unmistakable message: "You're bad, and I'm rejecting you." Since this is the most terrifying thing that a child can hear, he or she is very certain to remember it. Long after the incident has blown over, the child retains the strong impression of his or her wrongness. And the critic will use that sense of wrongness to psychologically beat and kick you as an adult.

## Why You Listen to the Critic

You listen to the critic because it is very rewarding to do so. Incredible as it seems, the critic helps you to meet certain basic needs, and listening to his vicious attacks can be reinforcing. But how can so much pain be reinforcing? How can attacking yourself be the least bit pleasurable or help to satisfy your needs?

The first step to understanding the function of your critic is to recognize that everyone has certain basic needs. Everyone needs to

1. Secure and unafraid
2. Effective and competent in the world

3. Accepted by parents and significant others
4. A sense of worth and OK-ness in most situations

People with adequate self-esteem tend to have very different strategies for meeting these needs than people with low self-esteem. If you have adequate self-esteem, you also have a degree of confidence in yourself. You keep yourself secure by confronting or eliminating things that frighten you. You solve problems instead of worrying about them, and you find ways to make people respond positively to you. You cope directly with interpersonal conflicts rather than wait for them to pass. Conversely, low self-esteem robs you of confidence. You don't feel as able to cope with anxiety, interpersonal problems, or challenging risks. Life is more painful because you don't feel as effective, and it's hard to face the anxiety involved in making things change.

This is where the critic comes in. People with low self-esteem often rely on the critic to help them cope with feelings of anxiety, helplessness, rejection, and inadequacy. Paradoxically, while the critic is beating you up, he is also making you feel better. This is why it's so hard to get rid of the critic. He can play a crucial role in making you more safe and comfortable in the world. Unfortunately, the price you pay for the critic's support is very high and further undermines your sense of worth. But you are reinforced to keep listening because every time the critic pipes up you feel a little less anxious, less incompetent, less powerless, or less vulnerable to others.

## The Role of Reinforcement

To understand how the critic's painful attacks can be reinforcing, it's necessary first to examine how reinforcement shapes your behavior and your thinking.

Positive reinforcement occurs when a rewarding event follows a particular behavior and results in an increase in the future likelihood of that behavior. If your wife gives you a warm hug and a thank you after you've cut the lawn, she is positively reinforcing your gardening activities. If the boss praises the clean, spare writing style in your last report, she is positively reinforcing the writing behavior she prefers. Because affection and praise are such powerful rewards, you are likely to repeat your gardening and writing behaviors in the future.

Just as with physical behavior, the frequency of cognitive behavior (thoughts) can also be increased through positive reinforcement. If you feel aroused following a particular sexual fantasy, you

are quite likely to conjure up that fantasy again. Thinking critically of others can be reinforced by increased feelings of worth. Daydreams of an upcoming vacation, if they are followed by a sense of excitement and anticipation, will be repeated. The increased feeling of worth that follows your memories of success and achievement makes you more likely to return to them. Obsessing about the misfortunes of someone you dislike can be reinforced by feelings of pleasure or vindication.

Negative reinforcement can only occur when you are in physical or psychological pain. Any behavior that succeeds in stopping the pain is reinforced, and is therefore more likely to occur when you feel similar pain in the future. For example, when students are preparing for final exams, they often find that the most boring, mundane activities have become irresistibly interesting. Activities like doodling or scoring baskets in the trash can are being reinforced because they provide relief from high-stress studying. As a general rule, anything that relieves stress and anxiety will be reinforced. Anger is often reinforced by the immediate drop in tension following a blowup. TV watching, eating, hot baths, withdrawal, complaining, hobbies, and sports activities may all at times be reinforced by tension or anxiety reduction. Blaming others relieves anxiety over your mistakes and can be reinforced until it becomes very high-frequency behavior. Macho behavior has the effect of relieving social anxiety for some men, and the decrease in anxiety is so rewarding that the macho style becomes a heavy armor in which they become trapped.

As with positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement shapes how you think. Any thought that relieves feelings of anxiety, guilt, hopelessness, or inadequacy will be reinforced. Suppose, for example, that you feel anxious every time you visit your crusty, judgmental father-in-law. Driving over to his house one day, you begin thinking about what a narrow bigot he really is, how few of his opinions are supported by anything resembling a fact, how tyrannical he is when crossed. Suddenly you feel more angry than anxious, and you experience a strange sense of relief. Since your critical thoughts are reinforced by reduced anxiety, you notice on subsequent visits an increasingly judgmental attitude toward the old man.

A person who feels anxious about mistakes at work may find that devaluing the job ("it's idiot's work") and the boss ("a nitpicking, anal type") reduced anxiety. It's likely that the devaluing thoughts will be entertained again if anxiety should once more increase. Feelings of hopelessness can sometimes be relieved by romantic fantasies, grandiose success fantasies, rescue or escape dreams, or simple problemsolving thoughts. In every case, the par-

ticular cognition that succeeds in reducing the sense of hopelessness will be remembered. When the same feelings recur, the same recognition has a high probability of being used again.

The mourning process is a classic example of the power of negative reinforcement. What makes people keep dredging up painful memories of the lost person or object? Why keep thinking and thinking about those sweet days that can never come again? Paradoxically, these obsessive ruminations about the loss have the power of relieving pain. The awareness of a loss creates high levels of physical and emotional tension. The frustration and helplessness build until they must be discharged. Calling up specific images and memories of the lost person or object helps discharge that tension in the form of tears and then a brief sort of numbness. The stage in mourning of obsessive remembering is therefore reinforced by tension reduction and a few moments of relative peace.

In summary, negative reinforcement is basically a problem-solving process. You're in pain. You want to feel better. You keep searching for some action or thought that is analgesic. When you find a thought or behavior that works to decrease your pain, you file it away as a successful solution to a particular problem. When the problem recurs, you will return again and again to your proven coping strategy.

**The variable ratio reinforcement schedule.** So far, only continuous reinforcement schedules have been discussed. Continuous reinforcement means that a particular thought or behavior is always reinforced. Every time you engage in the behavior, you are rewarded by pleasure or relief. An important aspect of continuous reinforcement schedules is that they lead very quickly to extinction if the thought or behavior stops being reinforced. Shortly after you cease getting rewarded for a previously reinforced thought or behavior, you simply stop doing it.

The situation is very different with a variable ratio reinforcement schedule. Here reinforcement is not continuous. You may be rewarded after emitting the behavior 5 times, then after 20 times, then after 43 times, then 12 times, and so on. The schedule isn't predictable. Sometimes you might have to engage in the behavior hundreds or even thousands of times before being reinforced. The result of the unpredictability is that you will keep doing a previously reinforced behavior for a long time without reinforcement before extinction. It takes a long time to give up.

Slot machines operate on the variable ratio reinforcement schedule, which is why people become addicted and play them to the point-of-exhaustion. Sometimes it takes only one quarter for a jack-

pot, sometimes hundreds. People tend to play a long time before giving up because reinforcement could occur on any given quarter.

Here are two examples of how the variable ratio reinforcement schedule can have a powerful influence on your thoughts.

1. Obsessive worries are occasionally reinforced when the worry leads to a workable solution that reduces anxiety. This might happen once or twice a year, or even a few times in a lifetime. But the worrier keeps at it, moving from worry to worry, like the gambler who plays quarter after quarter, hoping this one or the next one will finally pay off.

2. The obsessive reliving of an awkward social exchange is sometimes reinforced by those wonderful moments when you suddenly see it differently and don't feel so rejected or incompetent after all. You remember something you did or said that seems, in memory, to save the situation. Your shame melts away, and you feel accepting of yourself again. The sad fact is that your obsessive reliving is hardly ever rewarded by such a reprieve. Usually you suffer, hour after hour, the mental videotapes of an embarrassing exchange, waiting to put in the quarter that makes you feel adequate once more.

## How the Critic Gets Reinforced

Your self-critical statements can be both positively and negatively reinforced. Ironically, while the critic is tearing you down, he is also helping you solve problems and meet, in limited ways, certain basic needs. The following are specific examples of how the critic helps meet some of your needs.

### Positive Reinforcement for the Critic

The need to do right. Everyone has a rather large inner list of rules and values that regulate behavior. These rules are often useful because they control dangerous impulses and provide a sense of structure and order in your life. The rules create an ethical framework by defining what is moral and immoral. They prescribe how to act with authority figures and friends, how to be sexual, how to handle money, and so on. When you violate these inner rules, life becomes chaotic and you lose your sense of worth. So the critic helps you follow the rules. He tells you how wrong and bad you are whenever you break a rule or feel tempted to break one. He harangues you so much that you try to "do right." As one man put it, "My critic gives me the backbone not to go around lying, cheating, and being lazy. I need that."

The need to feel right. Even while he's telling you that you're no good, the critic can paradoxically help you feel a greater sense of worth and acceptance. The catch is that it's only temporary.

1. *Self-worth.* There are two ways the critic helps you temporarily to feel more worth: by comparing you to others and by setting high, perfectionistic standards.

Here's how comparing works: The critic continually evaluates how you stack up in terms of intelligence, achievements, earning capacity, sexual attractiveness, likability, social competence, openness—virtually any trait or quality you value. Many times you find yourself less adequate than the other person in one or more dimensions, and your self-esteem takes a blow. But once in a while you decide that you are more attractive, smarter, or warmer, and you feel a moment's satisfaction at being higher on the totem pole. Though it comes only occasionally, that moment's satisfaction is reinforcing. The comparing your critic does is being reinforced on a variable ratio schedule. Most efforts to compare yourself to others leave you feeling less adequate, but those times when it pays off—when you look good by comparison—keep you caught in the comparing habit.

The second way the critic boosts your worth is by setting incredibly high standards for how you must perform at work, as a lover, as a parent, as a conversationalist, as a housekeeper, or as a first baseman on the softball team. Most of the time you will fail to live up to the critic's demands, and you'll feel inadequate. But once in a great while, everything comes together in a miraculous perfection. You achieve a milestone at work, you have a deep and lovely conversation with your son, you hit two home runs for your team, and tell six entertaining stories at the pizza parlor afterwards. And that's how you reinforce the critic—with a variable ratio schedule. Every so often you do live up to his lofty standards and, for a brief time, feel at peace with yourself. So the critic keeps insisting on perfection, because it feels so good when you are, for that little while, perfect.

2. *Feeling accepted by critical parents.* To meet this need, your own critic joins your parents in attacking you. If your parents disparaged you for selfishness, your critic will do likewise. If your parents rejected your sexual behavior, the inner critic will also call you immoral. If your parents labeled you stupid or fat or a failure, then your critic will join them by calling you the same names. Every time you use a critical self-statement that agrees with your parents' negative judgments, you are reinforced by feeling close to them. By identifying with their point of view, you may paradoxically feel safer, more accepted, more loved. You are seeing things their way, and in joining

them you experience a sense of belonging and emotional security that strongly reinforces your own critical voice.

**The need to achieve.** The critic helps you achieve goals by whipping you like an old dray horse. He drives you with vicious attacks on your worth. If you don't make three sales this week, you're lazy, you're incompetent, you're a lousy breadwinner. If you don't get a 3.5 average, you're stupid and talentless and will prove to everyone you aren't graduate school material. What reinforces the critic is that you do achieve things when driven. You do make sales, you do hit the books. And every time the critic drives you to complete a task, his caustic battering is reinforced.

### Negative Reinforcement for the Critic

**The need to control painful feelings.** When the critic helps you to diminish or entirely stop painful feelings, his voice is highly reinforced. Even though the long-term effect is to destroy your self-esteem, the short-term effect of critical self-talk may be a reduction in painful affect. Here are some examples of how the critic can help you feel less guilty, afraid, depressed, and angry.

1. *Feeling not OK or bad or valueless.* On a very deep level, everyone has doubts about his or her worth. But if you have low self-esteem, those doubts can be magnified so that a good part of your inner life is dominated by feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness. That sense of inadequacy is so incredibly painful that you'll do almost anything to escape it. Enter the critic. The critic helps you cope by creating impossible standards of perfection. You have to get promoted every six months, cook gourmet meals, spend three hours a night helping your kid with his homework, be a total turn-on to your mate, and make nonstop, spicy conversation straight from the pages of *The New York Times Book Review*. The standard is impossible, but while the critic is driving you to be perfect, you no longer feel so inadequate, so hopeless. You feel instead a kind of omnipotence—if you just worked hard enough, kicked yourself hard enough, fought hard enough to transform yourself, all things would be possible.

2. *Fear of failure.* A woman who was contemplating a job search for a more creative kind of work began feeling very nervous at the thought of leaving the safety of her old job. Her critic came to the rescue. The critic said, "You can't do it. You'll be fired. You haven't got enough artistic talent. They'll see right through you." Under this barrage of self-rejecting statements, she decided to wait for a year before doing anything. Immediately her anxiety level decreased. And the critic was reinforced because his attack led directly to a reduction in

her level of distress. The critic is very useful in protecting you against the anxiety inherent in change and risk taking. As soon as he undermines your confidence to the point where you abandon your plan for change, he's reinforced by your feeling of relief.

3. *Fear of rejection.* One way to control the fear of rejection is to constantly predict it so that you're never caught by surprise. The critic does a lot of mind reading: "She won't like you. He's bored to tears. They don't really want you on the committee. He doesn't like your work. Your lover's frown says he is losing interest." The mind reading helps to protect you against being caught by surprise. If you anticipate rejection, failure, or defeat, it won't hurt quite so badly when it comes. The critic's mind reading is reinforced on a variable ratio schedule. Once in a while, the critic does accurately predict some hurt or rejection. And since the anticipation helps desensitize you to the worst of the pain, the critic is reinforced to keep on mind reading.

Another way to cope with the fear of rejection is to reject yourself first. When the critic attacks you for all your flaws and shortcomings, no one else can say anything you haven't already heard. A 38-year-old loan officer described it this way: "After my divorce, I kept calling myself a loser. I think that saying that protected me. It felt like if I kept saying it, nobody else would. They wouldn't have to call me a loser because I was doing it already." A well-known poet described the same feeling: "I always had a sense that if I kept putting my work down it would magically keep other people from doing it." Attacking yourself is very reinforcing if it helps relieve your anxiety about being attacked by others.

4. *Anger.* Feelings of anger toward people you love can be very frightening. As the anger begins to enter awareness, you may feel a huge surge of anxiety. One way of coping is to turn the anger around and attack yourself. You're the one who's failed, who hasn't understood, whose mistakes caused the problem in the first place. As the critic goes on the attack, your anxiety decreases. Now you won't have to risk hurting someone. Or worse, getting them so angry that they hurt you.

5. *Guilt.* The critic obligingly helps you deal with guilt by providing punishment. You have sinned, and the critic will make you pay. As the critic attacks you over and over for your selfishness, your greed, or your insensitivity, you gradually feel a sense of atonement, sometimes even a sense of undoing, as if the sin never happened. While you sit in the critic's screening room reviewing again and again videos of your transgressions, the feeling of guilt dissipates. The critic is reinforced once more because the violence he does to

your sense of worth helps you to conquer for a while that awful feeling of wrongness.

6. *Frustration.* "I've nursed seven sick people all day, I've shopped, I've cooked, I've listened to some blaring lead guitar riffs from my son's room, I've got the bills spread out on the kitchen table. Those are the times I get down on myself. I think of all the stupid decisions I've made, and I get really angry. Like I'm the one who made this life, I lost the marriage, I'm the one who's so afraid I can't change anything. After a while I feel a little calmer and just go to bed." (36-year-old Intensive Care Unit nurse) Notice how the critic's attacks are reinforced by a drop in arousal levels. The self-directed anger has the effect of discharging tension from a tiring day, a noisy house, and anxiety over bills. When you use the critic to get angry at yourself, your covert goal may actually be an attempt to blow off high levels of frustration and negative arousal. The extent to which this strategy works and your tension is reduced is the extent to which the critic is reinforced for beating you up.

These examples of how the critic helps you meet basic needs are not exhaustive. They are designed to get you thinking about your critic and how his attacks get reinforced. It's extremely important that you learn to identify the function of your self-attacks, how they help as well as hurt you. Right now, go back over the list of positive and negative reinforcements for the critic. Put an asterisk by each one that applies to you. When you have determined which needs your critic is helping you to meet, and some of the ways his attacks get reinforced, you can go on to the next step: catching your critic.

## Catching Your Critic

To gain control of the critic, you have to first be able to hear him. Every conscious moment of your life, you are engaging in an inner monologue. You are interpreting experience, problem solving, speculating about the future, reviewing past events. Most of this continuous self-talk is helpful, or at worst innocuous. But somewhere hidden in the monologue are your critic's indictments. Catching the critic in the act of putting you down requires a special vigilance. You have to keep listening in on the intercom of your inner monologue. You have to notice the critic when he says, "Stupid . . . another dumb mistake . . . you're weak . . . you'll never get a job because something's wrong with you . . . you're bad at conversation . . . you're turning her off." Sometimes the critic hits you with images of past mistakes or failures. Sometimes he doesn't use words or images. The thought

arrives as an awareness, a knowledge, an impression. The criticism is so lightning quick that it seems beyond the scope of language. A salesman put it this way: "There are times I just *know* I'm wasting my life. I can feel this sense of emptiness. It's like a heavy feeling in my stomach."

Catching the critic will take a real commitment. You'll need to be especially aware of your inner monologue in problematic situations:

- Meeting strangers
- Contact with people you find sexually attractive
- Situations in which you have made a mistake
- Situations in which you feel criticized and defensive
- Interactions with authority figures
- Situations in which you feel hurt or someone has been angry at you
- Situations in which you risk rejection or failure
- Conversations with parents or anyone who might be disappointing

## Exercise

Monitor your critic. For one day, stay as vigilant as possible for self-attacks. Count the number of critical statements you make to yourself. You may be surprised at how frequently your internal monologue turns to negative self-appraisal. On days two and three, take a further step. Instead of just counting the critic's attacks, keep a notebook handy and write them down. Here's a sample taken from the notebook of a 24-year-old first grade teacher:

Thought Number	Time	Critical Statement
1	8:15	The principal must be sick of my getting here late.
2	8:40	Skimpy lesson plan. God I'm lazy.
3	9:30	These kids are slow and I'm not helping them much.
4	9:45	Stupid to send Sheila with the lunch list, she'll fool around in the halls.
5	10:00	What kind of teacher are you? These kids are moving ahead so slow.
6	12:15	Stupid remark in the lunchroom.



- 9 Guilt at breaking my commitment to being more organized.  
Guilt at parking unsafely.
- 10 Motivated to pay more attention to how I park.  
Motivated to be more neat.

As she went over her work, she realized, as you will when you do this exercise, that there were certain basic themes. Many of the critic's attacks were reinforced because the attacks drove her to higher levels of achievement and self-improvement. When she thought about it, she realized that the critic was setting very high standards of performance for her. On the few occasions when she actually met those standards, she had a wonderful feeling of self-acceptance. This feeling was intoxicating, and she knew it reinforced her perfectionism. She also noticed themes of avoiding social anxiety and fear of being surprised by a rejection. Armed with this new knowledge, the teacher was ready for the most important step: disarming the critic.

Self-Esteem

- 7 Why am I so inane?  
12:20 It was a madhouse today. When will I learn to control the class?
- 8 Why don't I get some of the kids' drawings on the wall boards? I'm so disorganized.  
2:35 Parked like an idiot—look at the angle of the car.  
3:10 Look at the mess. Nice housekeeping.  
3:40

The more of these self-attacks you write down the better. Congratulate yourself if you catch at least ten of the critic's barbs each day. At night you will have one more task. On a piece of typing or binder paper, draw a line down the middle. On one side put the heading, *Helps Me Avoid Feeling*. On the other put the heading, *Helps Me Feel or Do*. Now for each critical thought in your notebook, write down the function of that thought—how it is reinforced either positively or negatively, how it either allows you to feel or do something good or avoid feeling something unpleasant. Here's what the school teacher wrote:

Thought Number	Helps Me Feel or Do	Helps Me Avoid Feeling
1	Motivated to be more careful with my work.	Surprised and hurt if she calls me on my tardiness.
2	Motivated to develop a more creative lesson plan, maybe get some consultation.	
3	Motivated to pay more attention to whom I send.	
4	Motivated to work harder at my lesson plan.	
5		Social anxiety. I already know I'm stupid so they can't hurt me.
6		Social anxiety.
7		Surprised and hurt if the principal criticizes me.
8	Motivated to consult with other teachers on discipline techniques.	