

# Disarming the Critic

By now you should be getting better acquainted with your critic. Hopefully you've improved at separating the critic's voice from the continuous stream of self-talk that goes on throughout the day. This task is a little bit like tapping the family phone of a suspected Mafioso. You have to sift through a lot of innocuous conversation in order to hear him betray himself. You can't stop listening, because at any moment he could say something incriminating.

Before you can disarm the critic, you have to know him. Secrecy is his greatest strength. So if you can get really good at hearing and identifying his voice, you will have won a major victory. Remember that every time the critic attacks he is doing you real psychological harm. He is further wounding your sense of worth and making it harder to feel competent and happy in the world. You can't afford what he is doing to you. It's costing you too much.

Since it's not really possible to stay on total alert every moment of your waking life, you need to know when you should be especially vigilant. In the last chapter, you were given a list of problematic situations—times when you have made a mistake, been criticized, or dealt with people who might be disapproving. But there's another time when you need to watch for the critic. That's when you are feeling depressed or down on yourself. These emotions are usually triggered by the critic, and their presence indicates that he is at work. In order to catch the critic in the act of making you depressed, you need to do four things:

1. Close your eyes and take some deep breaths. Draw the air deep into your abdomen so that your diaphragm can stretch and relax.
2. Relax your body. Notice and eliminate any tension in your legs and arms, your face, jaw, neck, and shoulders.
3. Notice where you feel depression in your body. Focus on that place and really get to know the feeling there.
4. Listen to the thoughts that go with the feeling in that part of your body. Notice everything that you're saying to yourself. Now try to remember how the feeling began and what the critic was saying then.

If you follow these four steps each time you feel depressed or down on yourself, you'll become much clearer about the specific content of the critic's attacks.

If you did the exercises in the last chapter, you are now more aware of the basic themes of your critical voice. As you analyze your critical thoughts, determining what they help you feel or help you avoid feeling, you'll begin to see a pattern to the attacks. One person may find that his critic's primary function is to help him atone for guilt. Someone else may experience a critic whose main effort is to provide achievement motivation. Another person's critic may help desensitize her to the fear of rejection. Or a critic may harangue you to stay on the straight and narrow path. When you become aware of the theme or themes your critic uses, you are ready to fight back.

Disarming the critic involves three steps: (1) unmasking his purpose, (2) talking back, and (3) making him useless.

## Unmasking His Purpose

There are few things more effective for winning arguments than to suddenly unmask your opponent's ulterior motives. A classic example is tobacco company "research" that finds no link between cigarette smoking and heart disease. Since the ulterior motives of the tobacco industry are clear, few people take their arguments seriously.

When you unmask the critic, you expose his true purpose and functions. Here are some examples of ways you might unmask your critic:

- You're kicking me right now to force me to live by the rules I grew up with.
- You're comparing me to everyone so that once in a while I'll find someone lower on the totem pole than me.

- You're slapping me around like my parents used to do, and I believe you because I believed them.
- You're beating me so that I'll achieve more and more and maybe feel better about myself.
- You're insisting that I be perfect because if I did everything exactly right, I might finally feel OK about myself.
- You're saying I can't do it so that I won't bother trying and won't have to worry about screwing up.
- You're telling me they won't like me so that I won't be so hurt if I'm rejected.
- You're saying she's disgusted by me so that no matter what the truth is, I'll be prepared for the worst.
- You're telling me to be perfect so that I'll stupidly think that maybe I could be perfect and for a few minutes feel better about myself.
- You're kicking me around so that I can atone for divorcing Jill.

Getting clear about the critic's function makes everything he says less believable. You know his ulterior motive. No matter how he rants and raves, you've exposed his secret agenda and therefore feel less vulnerable to him. Remember that the critic attacks you because his voice is in some way being reinforced. When you are able to identify the role your critic plays in your psychological life, when you are able to call his game, you are beginning seriously to undermine the credibility of his message.

## Talking Back

The idea of talking back to your own critical voice may seem strange to you. But in truth much of this book is about talking back: learning to refute and reject the old negative programming you received as a child. While growing up, Wanda received literally thousands of devaluing messages—first from her father, and then from her own critical voice. Whenever her father was angry, he would call her stupid. In particular, he ridiculed her for doing things "the hard way" and for getting only C's in high school. All of her life, Wanda has believed her father's judgment. These days, her critic constantly berates her for doing things "the stupid way." Wanda's self-esteem can't improve until she stops these messages by learning to talk back

to the critic. She needs a psychological cannon to blow the critic away so that he finally shuts up.

What follows are three methods for talking back. Properly delivered, they will render the critic speechless for a few minutes. Experiment with each of them; try them singly and in combination. Find out which ones work best for you.

**The Howitzer Mantras.** These are selected words and phrases that are designed to hit the critic like a cannon blast. Here are some examples:

This is poison. Stop it!

These are lies.

These are lies my father told me.

Stop this shit!

No more put-downs.

Shut up!

Screw you, asshole.

To hell with these put-downs!

Get off my back!

Stop this garbage!

Choose a mantra that helps you feel angry. It's good to get mad. Profanity is a perfectly healthy response to the critic. When using the Howitzer Mantras, shout them inside. Mentally scream at the critic so that you can drown him out with your anger and indignation.

If the critic continues his assault despite your telling him to "shut up" or "stop this nonsense," it's time for stronger measures. Put a rubber band around your wrist and snap it while subvocalizing your mantra. Let's say, for example, that the critic is kicking you about some aspect of your appearance. One of your mantras is "Stop this shit!" You scream it internally and simultaneously snap the rubber band. By snapping the rubber band, you are emphasizing your "stop" commands and making successful thought-interruption more likely. The sharp stinging sensation breaks the chain of negative cognitions and acts as a punisher so that the critic is less likely to attack in the near future. The important thing is to catch the critic just as he starts, before he is allowed to do much damage. If you snap the rubber band and internally scream your mantra whenever you hear the critic's voice, the frequency of his attacks will greatly diminish.

**Asking the price.** One of the best ways to disarm the critic is to think about the price you pay for his attacks. What does listening to the critic cost you? A 32-year-old sales representative for a printing firm made the following list as he evaluated the toll the critic took on his work, relationships, and level of well-being.

- Defensive with my wife around any criticism.

- Blow up at my daughter when she doesn't mind.
- Lost friendship with Al because I got hostile.
- Dump on my mother when I detect the slightest criticism.
- Afraid to be assertive with potential clients because they might reject me. (This probably costs me ten thousand a year in commissions.)
- Tend to be cold and distant with bosses and authorities because I am afraid of them.
- Feel anxious and on guard with people.
- Constantly thinking that people don't like me.
- Afraid to try new things for fear that I'll screw them up.

Poor self-esteem was costing the sales representative a great deal in every area of his life. When the critic attacked, he could now talk back by saying, "You make me defensive and afraid of people, you cut my income, you lose me friends, you make me harsh with my little girl."

It's time for you to evaluate the cost of your own critic. Make a list of ways in which your self-esteem has affected you in terms of your relationships, work, and level of well-being. When you've completed the list, combine the most important items into a summary statement that you can use when the critic attacks. Fight back by telling the critic, "I can't afford this, you've cost me . . ."

**Affirmation of worth.** This method is very hard to practice—especially if you have a deeply held belief that there is something wrong with you, that you are not OK. But you must learn to affirm yourself if you are to fully disarm the critic. The first two methods of talking back are important, but they aren't enough. You can't *permanently* turn off the critic's vitriol by calling him names, telling him to shut up, and insisting that he costs too much. That helps for a while. But you're creating a vacuum by silencing the critic without putting anything in his place. And soon enough his voice will be back, filling that vacuum with more attacks. When the critic has been silenced, you need to replace his voice with a positive awareness of your own worth.

Affirming your worth is no easy task. Right now you believe that your worth depends on your behavior. Metaphorically, you see yourself as an empty vessel that must be filled, drop by drop, with your achievements. You start out essentially worthless, a body that moves and talks. The critic would have you believe that there is no *intrinsic* value in a life, only a *potential* for doing something worthwhile, something important.

The truth is that your value is your consciousness, your ability to perceive and experience. The value of a human life is that it exists. You are a complex miracle of creation. You are a person who is trying to live, and that makes you as worthwhile as every other person who is doing the very same thing. Achievement has nothing to do with it. Whatever you do, whatever you contribute should come not from the need to prove your value, but from the natural flow of your aliveness. What you do should come from the drive to fully live, rather than the fight to justify yourself.

Whether you're a researcher unlocking the cure for cancer or a guy sweeping the street, you have known hope and fear, affection and loss, wanting and disappointment. You have looked out at the world and tried to make sense of it, you have coped with the unique set of problems you were born into, you have endured pain. Over the years you've tried many strategies to help you feel better in the face of pain. Some of your strategies have worked, some haven't. Some have worked short-term, but in the long run brought greater distress. It doesn't matter. You are just trying to live. And in spite of all that is hard in life, you are still trying. This is your worth, your humanness.

The following affirmations are examples of things you might say to yourself to keep the critic at bay.

- I am worthwhile because I breathe and feel and am aware.
- Why do I hurt myself? I am trying to survive, I do the best I can.
- I feel pain, I love, I try to survive. I am a good person.
- My pain, my hope, my struggle to survive links me to every other human being. We are all just trying to live and we are doing the best we can.

One of these may feel right to you. Or none of them. What's important is that you arrive at a statement that you do believe and that you can use to replace your critical voice.

Take time now to write your own affirmation. If you are having difficulty writing an affirmation that's true, chapters four, six, and eight on "Accurate Self-Assessment," "Compassion," and "Handling Mistakes" will help you generate affirmations you can believe.

Remember that you need positive affirmations to fill in for the critic's voice. Try to use an affirmation every time you have successfully shut down an attack from your critic.

## Making Your Critic Useless

The best way to disarm your critic is to render him useless. Take away his role and at last he will be silent. Understanding how the critic works isn't enough. You may now be aware that your critic's function is to push you to achieve or protect you from the fear of rejection or atone for your guilt. But knowing that function doesn't change much. Those same needs must be met in new and healthy ways before you will be willing to forgo the services of your critic. This book is about new, constructive ways of taking care of your needs without relying on the critic.

What follows is the list from the previous chapter of needs which the critic may typically help you meet. After each listing is a brief discussion outlining healthy alternative strategies for meeting the need that do not rely on the critic. You will also be directed to chapters in this book that can give specific help.

**The need to do right.** Your old strategy has been to rely on the critic to coerce you into walking the "straight and narrow." The healthier strategy is to reevaluate your list of shoulds and personal standards to see which ones realistically fit you and your current situation. Chapter seven on "Shoulds" provides a step-by-step method for evaluating the rules you live by. It also describes a healthy system for motivating yourself to live according to your values: basing decisions on a clear understanding of the short- and long-term consequences for each alternative.

**The need to feel right.** Your old strategy for temporarily feeling more worth has been to compare yourself to others or to set high, perfectionistic standards. The healthier strategy is to learn to see yourself more realistically (chapters four and five on "Accurate Self-Assessment" and "Cognitive Distortions") and with genuine acceptance (chapter six, "Compassion"). Chapters eleven, twelve, and thirteen will reinforce these new ways of viewing and talking to yourself through techniques of hypnosis and visualization and other methods. Much of this book, in fact, is focused on your need to feel right and on helping you develop an accurate and accepting self-evaluation.

**The need to achieve.** Your old strategy relies on the critic for motivation to achieve more. But you pay by feeling bad and worthless every time you miss a goal, every time you make an error, every time you lose momentum. The greatest problem, though, is that you believe the basic premise of the critic's barrage. You believe the lie that your worth depends on your behavior. The first step, then, toward meeting your need to achieve in healthy ways is to challenge your old belief that what you do is what you're worth (see the

with any failure is to recognize that each decision you've made was *the very best one available under the circumstances*.

3. *Fear of rejection*. The critic helps you cope with rejection by predicting and thus desensitizing you to hurts. He also helps you cope by making you act in such a way that others are discouraged from any criticism. A healthier strategy for dealing with the fear of rejection is to (1) reframe social errors as the best available decision at the time (chapter eight on "Handling Mistakes"), (2) develop specific skills for coping with criticism (chapter nine on "Responding to Criticism"), and (3) learn to check out an assumed rejection rather than mindread (see the section on mind reading in chapter five). The first step requires that you talk differently to yourself. Social blunders are not an indication of your worth; they are merely decisions that you made that hindsight would lead you to make differently. The second step changes your behavior. You learn how to respond assertively to criticism rather than collapse into an orgy of self-blame. The third step requires a decision not to trust your assumptions about the thoughts and feelings of others. Instead, you develop the skill of checking out; asking specific questions that are designed to clarify suspected negative feelings in others.

4. *Anger*. The critic helps you deal with your fear of anger by deflecting it into an attack on yourself. A healthier strategy for dealing with your anger is to learn to say what you want and negotiate for change. Anger is so often a byproduct of helplessness because your needs are unexpressed or expressed ineffectually. You have a right to ask for what you want, even though you may not get it. Chapter ten on "Asking for What You Want" will help you to express your needs more effectively. Learning to be assertive will reduce feelings of anger both toward others and yourself.

5. *Guilt*. The critic helps control your guilt by punishing you. A better strategy is to determine if your guilt comes from the violation of a healthy or unhealthy value. Chapter seven on "Shoulds" will give you a framework for exploring your personal value system. You will determine whether the rule you broke and feel guilt over is sufficiently flexible to fit you as a person and apply to your unique situation. You will also find out if the violated rule is realistic, meaning that it is based on the likely consequences and outcomes of your behavior as opposed to absolute dichotomies of right and wrong.

If you find that your rule is an unhealthy one, you can fight your guilt by beginning to question your old value. This is easier said than done, but chapter seven will give you a step-by-step method for coping with unhealthy values. If, after examination, the rule you vio-

"Affirmations of Worth" section in this chapter and chapter six on "Compassion").

The second step involves learning to evaluate your goals to determine if they are appropriate for you. Is it you who wants to own this house, or is it your father or your spouse or some ideal of "the good provider"? Chapter seven, on "Shoulds," will once again provide help in evaluating your goals. You will explore your goals in terms of short- and long-range consequences to determine if they are right for you. An honest exploration will inevitably reveal that some goals simply cost too much.

The last step toward meeting your need to achieve in healthy ways is to find new motivators. Your old motivator was the critic, who attacked if you didn't work hard enough toward your goals. A healthier form of motivation is to visualize the positive consequences of success. When you see yourself reaping the benefits of an achieved goal, when you can imagine each detail of your success, when you can hear the approval of friends and feel the satisfaction, then you have created an extremely powerful motivational force. Chapter eleven, on "Visualization" provides detailed instructions for using imagery to motivate desired behavior.

**The need to control negative feelings.** In the last chapter you learned how the critic's attack can paradoxically help you control fear, guilt, anger, and other feelings. It's very much like digging your fingernails into your hand to block awareness of some painful injury.

1. *Feeling not OK or bad or valueless*. The critic helps you block this feeling by setting high standards of perfection. The implication is that hard work is all you require to become your ideal self. You can learn to control this feeling without the critic by following the steps outlined in "The Need To Feel Right" section above. Again, the strategy involves learning to see yourself accurately and with genuine acceptance.

2. *Fear of failure*. The critic solves your fear of failure by telling you that you "can't do it." As a result, you don't try and your fear recedes. The healthier strategy for controlling the fear of failure is to redefine the meaning of your mistakes. People with low self-esteem consider mistakes to be an indication of a general lack of worth. Each error reaffirms their underlying belief that something is terribly wrong with them. In chapter eight on "Handling Mistakes" you will explore one of the fundamental laws of human nature: that you *always choose actions that seem most likely to meet your needs based on current awareness*. You make the best decision you can at any point in time, given what you know and what you want. The secret to coping