

WELLNESS TIPS

QUIETING YOUR INNER CRITIC

Researchers at Queen's University in Canada (Tseng & Poppenk) developed a method for measuring thought worms - when one thought ends and another begins - and they used data extrapolation to estimate that an average person has approximately 6000 thoughts per day. While there are various estimates, some much higher than this, and specific thoughts can't be identified, that is a lot of thoughts!

It's no wonder that we have internal dialogues with ourselves that can sometimes sound like a chorus, with debates, different perspectives, arguments, and taking sides. At times internal dialogue can be dominated by negative, self-critical and self-judgmental thoughts, which some have labelled the Inner Critic. When the Inner Critic is prevalent and left unchecked, it can become toxic and take a toll, and beliefs in the negative messages become detrimental to one's well-being. Messages of "should", "always", "never", and self-blame contribute to feelings such as shame, guilt, inadequacy, and fear of failure. The Inner Critic overlooks and dismisses positive thoughts, events, or accomplishments.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

While there are various theories about its origins (Sometimes it reflects a parent's or teacher's past comments or someone's off-hand remarks.) and its presence is complex, there are steps you can take to challenge and quiet your Inner Critic and begin to shift to a more positive perspective and self-talk.

One beginning step that can be helpful is to "fake it until you make it." Even though you don't believe it, label specific Inner Critic thoughts as not true and treat them as such, by disregarding them, and replace them with encouraging and supportive thoughts. There is evidence that you can shift to a more positive outlook and perspective by focusing on several positive thoughts consistently every day. Norris notes research with Navy SEALs indicated positive self-talk was associated with higher passing rates in training. Positive thoughts could include identifying what you are grateful for.

We all know of situations in which it doesn't pay to argue with someone. A similar approach can be useful in responding to your Inner Critic. Acknowledge that the thought is there but don't become engaged in arguing with it. Identify a "go-to" response to use, such as "that's not accurate", "that's not the only opinion", or "that's not helpful". And then redirect your attention.

Limit the amount of time that you allow yourself to focus on self-critical thoughts.

Imagine your Inner Critic as a cartoon or other silly character.

It can be helpful to write out negative thoughts, then tear up the paper, and throw it away.

Find a physical response that redirects your thoughts back to the present. It could be humorous, such as sticking out your tongue or rolling your eyes.

Recognize that your Inner Critic is not helpful or necessary to have an edge for performing well. You don't need it berating you, and in fact, not allowing it so much space in your head will free you to have more energy and to concentrate more effectively on achieving your goals.

Ask yourself if your Inner Critic's negativity would be acceptable if it was directed at someone you care about. What would you say to someone who was being attacked with such negativity? Be supportive, kind, and compassionate towards yourself.

As you become more aware of your Inner Critic and begin to take steps to limit its impact, you can begin to challenge the fallacies in its logic. Is there a pattern of focusing on failures and minimizing/ignoring successes? Is there a pattern of all - or- nothing thinking that doesn't allow for other options/possibilities/explanations? Is there a pattern of catastrophizing and negative predicting about the future? Writing down responses to challenge these fallacies can be helpful; you can refer to them and add to them later when the Inner Critic resumes its harangue.

If your Inner Critic is entrenched, it can take time to successfully challenge it and working with a counselor can be helpful. The MSCC counselors would be happy to work with you to address concerns about your Inner Critic or provide referral information.

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