

# What is the Critical Inner Voice?

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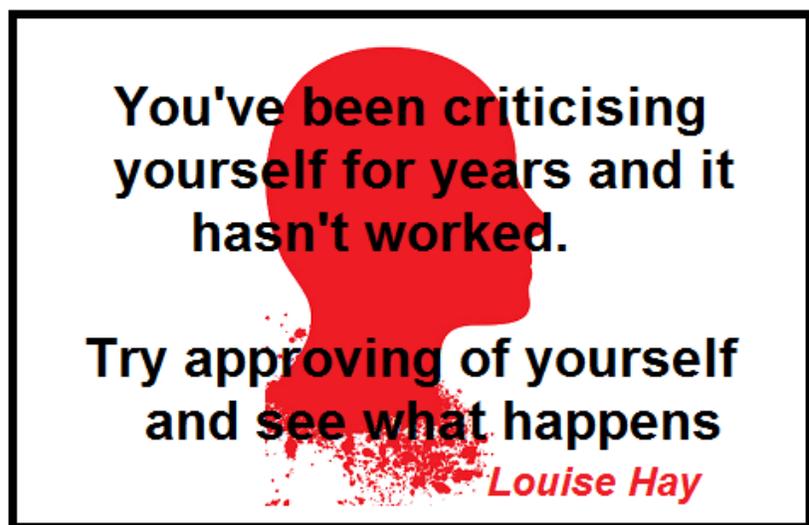
We are all aware of those nagging thoughts and doubts that increase our nervousness and interfere with our performance at various times. However, most of us are unaware that these sneering, belittling self-criticisms are only the tip of an iceberg. They are merely the more obvious fragments of a larger, well-hidden enemy within each of us that influences our actions, interferes with the pursuit of our personal and career goals, and has an overall negative impact on our lives.

The critical inner voice can be thought of as the language of the defensive process. It has been defined as an integrated system of thoughts and attitudes, antithetical toward self and hostile toward others that is at the core of an individual's maladaptive behavior. The concept of the "voice" is not restricted to cognitive processes but is generally associated with varying degrees of anger and sadness.

The term "voice" is used to describe a form of intrapsychic communication that represents a split within the individual between forces that are life-affirming and those that are antagonistic to the self. "Listening" to the voice, that is, believing its prescriptions and prohibitions leads to self-limiting behavior and negative consequences. In other words, people often make their actions correspond to their self-attacks.

The Critical Inner Voice is the part of us that is turned against ourselves. It is the defended, negative side of our personality that is opposed to our ongoing development. The voice consists of the negative thoughts, beliefs and attitudes that oppose our best interests and diminish our self-esteem. It encourages and strongly influences self-defeating and self-destructive behavior. This hostile, judgmental advisor also warns us about other people, promoting angry and cynical attitudes toward others and creating a negative, pessimistic picture of the world.

The critical inner voice exists to varying degrees in every person. It undermines our ability to interpret events realistically; it triggers negative moods and sabotages our pursuit of satisfaction and meaning in life. These destructive internalized thoughts lead to a sense of alienation—a feeling of being removed from ourselves and distant from those we love. The critical inner voice is not an auditory hallucination; it is experienced as thoughts within your head. If we "listen" to its destructive point of view and believe



what it is telling us, we will fail to challenge it and instead we will act on it. This process has a seriously negative consequence on our lives.

Although most of us are conscious of some aspects of this inner voice, many of our negative thoughts exist on an unconscious level. At times, we may recognize what our critical inner voice is telling us, while at other times, we may be unclear about our negative thinking and simply accept it as being true. We are often unaware of the destructive impact that these thoughts are having on our emotions, actions, and the overall quality of our lives.

The critical inner voice is a well-integrated pattern of destructive thoughts toward ourselves and others. The nagging “voices,” or thoughts, that make up this internalized dialogue are at the root of much of our self-destructive and maladaptive behavior.

The critical inner voice is not an auditory hallucination; it is experienced as thoughts within your head. This stream of destructive thoughts forms an anti-self that discourages individuals from acting in their best interest.

## How Does the Critical Inner Voice Affect Us?

The critical inner voice is an internal enemy that can affect every aspect of our lives, including our self-esteem and confidence, our personal and intimate relationships, and our performance and accomplishments at school and work. These negative thoughts affect us by undermining our positive feelings about ourselves and others and fostering self-criticism, inwardness, distrust, self-denial, [addictions](#) and a retreat from goal-directed activities.

All of us are divided within ourselves. On the one hand, we have self-regard—we have traits and behaviors that we like or feel comfortable with. We have natural tendencies to grow and develop and to pursue our personal and vocational goals, as well as desires to be close in our relationships and to search for meaning in life. These qualities all make up who we really are; they reflect an undefended part of our personality and a friendly, compassionate view of our self.

The positive part of us consists of our unique characteristics—physical abilities and attributes, and emotional temperament, as well as positive traits that we naturally incorporated from our parents. It first develops and grows as a result of our parents’ and other concerned adults’ nurturing qualities and behaviors, and the love and care they direct toward us. Then it is further influenced by what we learn, what we enjoy, and the experiences that facilitate our personal growth.

## What Are Some Examples of Common Critical Inner Voices?

Some common voices include thoughts like “You’re stupid,” “You’re not attractive,” or “You’re not like other people.”

Some people have voices about their career, like “You’ll never be successful,” “No one appreciates how hard you work,” or “You are under too much pressure, you can’t handle this stress.”

Many people experience voices about their relationship, such as “He doesn’t really care about you,” “You’re better off on your own,” or “Don’t be vulnerable, you’ll just get hurt.”

## Where Do Critical Inner Voices Come From?

These inner voices usually come from early life experiences that are internalized and taken in as ways we think about ourselves. Often, many of these negative voices come from our parents or primary care takers, as children we pick up on the negative attitudes that parents not only have towards their children but also toward themselves. Our voices can also come from interactions with peers and siblings, or influential adults.

## How is the Critical Inner Voice Different Than a Conscience?

Many people think if they stop listening to their critical inner voice, they will lose touch with their conscience. However, the critical inner voice is not a trustworthy moral guide like a conscience. On the contrary, the critical inner voice is degrading and punishing and often leads us to make unhealthy decisions. These negative voices tend to increase our feelings of self-hatred without motivating us to change undesirable qualities or act in a constructive manner.

## How Can I Conquer My Critical Inner Voice?

In order to take power over this destructive thought process, you must first become conscious of what your inner voice is telling you so you can stop it from ruining your life. To identify this, it is helpful to pay attention to when you suddenly slip into a bad mood or become upset, often these negative shifts in emotion are a result of a critical inner voice. Once you identify the thought process and pinpoint the negative actions it is advocating, you can take control over your inner voice by consciously deciding not to listen. Instead you can do the actions that are in your best interest.

You can take power over your critical inner voice. When you become conscious of what it is telling you, you can stop it from running your life. The challenge is to identify and ‘flush out’ this internal covert operation. To do this, be on the lookout for when you slip into a bad mood or become upset.

Investigate: what caused the shift? What happened and, most importantly, what did you start telling yourself after the event? The fact that your mood shifted from feeling optimistic or relaxed to feeling down or irritable is probably a sign that you are interpreting the event through your critical inner voice.

Now that you have identified that your critical inner voice is advising you, what is it trying to get you to do? When you pinpoint the actions that it is advocating, you can take control over your critical inner voice. You can consciously decide to take action against its directives, thereby acting in your own interest.

## Staying on the Right Side of Yourself and Not Listening to Your Critical Inner Voice

The balance between our two different sides is delicate and can be easily tipped. However, we don’t need to be the victims of our moods as they tip back and forth between our positive and negative

feelings about ourselves. By identifying the critical inner voice and the role it plays in supporting our negative self-image, we can take action against it and significantly change our lives. We can reject attitudes that oppose our best interests and diminish our self-esteem. We can stop [self-defeating and self-destructive behavior](#). We cannot tolerate angry, cynical attitudes toward others that turn us against people.

As you emancipate yourself from your critical inner voice, you will be free to engage in your pursuit of satisfaction and meaning in life. You will feel at peace with yourself and close to those you love. You will enjoy a compassionate view of the world and an optimistic outlook on life.