

Names used in this column are changed to honor client confidentiality.

Shame on Your Inner Judge

“I gossip about myself.”

Dawn, 37, was talking about the constant stream of critical self-talk that trips her up at every turn. One minute she expresses disgust over her weight, the next she’s condemning herself for failing to perfectly perform some task. Or she’s critical that she forgot someone’s birthday, lost her keys, missed an exit, spilled coffee, or simply bought the wrong box of cereal for her family. In our counseling session, we explored where this mental habit of judging herself came from.

“Well, my mother criticized me all the time,” she said. “In her eyes, I wasn’t even capable of brushing my hair.” She described how her mother would angrily slap Dawn’s hand, then say—while grabbing for the hair brush—“Here, give me that brush! I’ll do it. You’ll never learn!”

Because children are easily molded, they’re fertile soil for the formation of an inner critic—an internal oppressor that judges and reprimands unmercifully. Dawn doesn’t need to be near her mother to receive harsh criticisms. They now originate inside her head; she’s internalized her mother’s negative attitude and treatment of her. The problem Dawn faces isn’t what her mother did to her, but what she continues to do to herself. Freedom from her internal critical oppressor starts with questioning its authority.

If our inner critic lacks objectivity, wisdom and compassion, then why do we give it such a high ranking? Such prominence and power are undeserved. Any voice that’s less than kind and loving has no business in our brain. But the problem doesn’t stop there. It’s common for people with stern internalized critics to bond with people who match that inner critic.

This is true of Doug, another client. His girlfriend, Regina, “finds fault with just about everything I do,” he said. “I don’t drive right, I don’t dress right, and I don’t eat right. When I pick something up for her at the store, she’ll complain about the brand, the price ... or something!”

As a child, Doug felt pressure from his dad to do everything perfectly, including getting good grades. “Anything less than an ‘A’ wasn’t acceptable,” he said.

So when he receives poor “grades” from Regina—when she criticizes him—it knocks him off center. He reacts defensively, lashing back as if she’s the enemy. He’s not entirely wrong; she’s not innocent by any measure. But the real problem goes much deeper.

“You know, Doug,” I said, “the enemy’s within you. Regina couldn’t affect you if your inner critic didn’t instantly agree with her.”

Doug thought for a moment, then responded: “I see that ...”

The appropriate battleground for Doug is in his mind. Regina is good for him because she provides a perfect external example of the voice in his head. As he learns to confront her—in a healthy manner—he’ll be simultaneously taking the power away from his inner critic.

“What do you do for a living?” I asked.

“I’m an auto mechanic.”

“Are you good at it?”

“Damn good.”

“Would it set you off if I criticized your work?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because, I would know you were full of it.”

“Exactly,” I said. “How about analyzing what your inner critic says and deciding when he’s full of it? That’s the path to freeing yourself, Doug.”

In gaining mastery over his internal underminer, Doug won’t be fazed by Regina’s criticisms, they’ll fall flat to the ground. And then he may find he’s not as drawn to her as before, or she may abandon behaviors that no longer work on him.

As with Doug, I advised one of my teenage clients that her inner critic had to go—that it was toxic and handicapping for her. Puzzled, she said “But what else is it going to do, then?” Maybe it would just be forced to go sit in the corner and pout.

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