



Negative Inner Critic Voice Discovery Exercises



Most of us have what we would call a “negative inner critic.”

This is a well-integrated but maladaptive part of us that speaks up in response to some or many situations, usually with disparaging, limiting, or painful refrains:

“I’m too fat to find love.”

“I’ll never have enough money to be safe.”

“Men like that don’t want to date women like me.”

These negative inner critics can cause us so much pain, grief, and frustration.

We carry them around like a constant, irritating companion in our mind, wondering and wishing how things would be better and different if these voices didn’t exist, desperate to get rid of them and to think more highly and optimistically about ourselves.

The goal of these negative inner critic discovery exercises is not to fully get rid of these voices (spoiler alert: I don’t think we can ever truly get rid of them but I do think we can quiet them down and even learn how to work with them).

The goal of this exercise is first and foremost to give shape and form to the voices that are loudest for you, to be curious about their origins, how they once served you (yes, really!), and also begin to think through how we can invite other, more supportive voices to the table instead.

So, be gentle with yourself as you begin these exercises, but also be honest and be curious and, if you can, open-minded as to what these negative inner critic voices have to teach you.

Only when we begin to get to know the voice with curiosity and, dare I say, compassion, do we allow the possibility for change to paradoxically happen.

Ready? Great. Grab your journal or open up a new Google doc page and let’s begin.

What does one of your meanest, most unkind and unsupportive voices sound like? What does it say to you? (e.g.: “You’re disgusting. Look at the way your belly hangs down! Look at the cellulite over all of your body and all of those ugly stretch marks. Good thing you never wear a bikini!”)

Keep going, write it all down, give that nasty, mean part of you some room on this page to get the toxic vitriol out. (Yes, really. Write at least a few paragraphs.)

Okay, now tell me, how do you feel seeing the words written down of what this negative inner critic says to you? (Nauseous? Angry? Sad? Hopeless?)

Let’s get to know this critical negative further: Around what content does this voice pipe up the most often? (e.g.: When you look at your body in the mirror after getting out of the shower? When you’re attempting to buy a pair of white jeans? When your slim, marathon-running coworker stops by your desk to chat?)

What is the proverbial penultimate fuel-for-the-fire for this negative critical inner voice? (e.g.: Phone calls with your mother? An hour spent on the Instagram rabbit hole comparing your body to the body of other women? Hanging out with that girlfriend who humblebrags endlessly?)

How often would you say this voice’s dialogue is running? (e.g.: All day every day? Only in the evenings? Only in discreet triggering moments?)

On a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all disturbed and 10 being completely, utterly disturbed, how would you rank the impact this voice has on you and why? (e.g. 8. When I see how mean the voice is and think about how present it is in my day-to-day, I feel hopeless and overwhelmed imagining things will ever get better.)

On a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all and 10 being 100% bought in, how much do you believe the truth of this voice? (e.g.: 5. Intellectually I don’t believe it and I can even come up with reasons why it isn’t true, but emotionally it still packs a wallop.)

What does it bring up for you to look at both of these numbers that you ranked? (e.g. Are you surprised to see how impactful this voice is? Unsurprised?)

Let's keep going: Whose voice does this negative critical voice remind you of? (hint: it's not your voice, it's always an earlier one).

Is this voice an amalgam of other people's voices? Of some abstract but damaging cultural introject? Or is this voice more personal and familiar? (e.g.: It reminds you of your abusive dad's critiques of other women's bodies)

What do you know, what do you imagine as to why you absorbed this voice? How did it come to pass that you absorbed this voice? (Believe me, babies aren't born with negative inner critical voices! You didn't come into this world programmed with these beliefs - you picked them up along the way)

Now, stretch yourself a bit here, is there any way (even in the smallest way!) that this voice served you when you first started to absorb it? In what ways did it actually try to protect you? (e.g.: It wanted to help me stay thin by shaming me for being fat. If I was thin, dad would love me and I wouldn't get picked on so much at school.)

How effective actually was that voice at "protecting you"? (e.g.: Not so well. Dad was a raging addict that couldn't love me even if I was thin.)

Now, let's toggle back to the present day, when does this voice not pipe up? When is this voice actually a little more (or a lot more) quiet? (e.g.: When you're doing the work that you love and are super competent at? After a sweaty, invigorating weight lifting session? When you're with your adorable niece or nephew?)

Why do you think your negative inner critic doesn't pop up in those moments? What meaning do you make of that? (e.g.: When you're in the flow with your work and literally building your strength, you feel good, strong and powerful.)

What's the cost to your present life having this negative inner critic being as loud, vocal and frequent as it is? (e.g.: It keeps me from asking for a raise at work and my boyfriend to commit to me. It stops me from wearing a bathing suit on the beach with my daughter in the summer.)

What would be different in your life on a feeling level if you could quiet and shift this negative inner critic voice? (e.g.: I'd be happier! I wouldn't spend so much time in angst and belittling myself)

And what are three goals of yours in your life that might suddenly seem more doable/possible if you could tame your negative inner critic? (e.g.: I'd have more confidence to launch the business I daydream of. I'd be more authentic and boundaried in my relationships and I'd stop spending time with that braggy girlfriend from work. I'd sign up for the 5K and start training because I wouldn't care what my butt looks like in Lycra when jogging in public.)

Looking at the ways your life would be different and what the cost is to your life if nothing changes, is it worth it to you - truly! - to invest the time and energy into challenging, quieting and disempowering this voice? (hint: if part of you is feeling resistant to changing this negative inner critic, now's the time to write that down and flesh out what that possible resistance might be about!)

I know it can be challenging, emotional, and maybe even disturbing to do these exercises and give explicit voice to a negative inner critic that might otherwise be implicit for you.

Take care of yourself after finishing this document and rest assured that we CAN confront and re-wire this pattern of negative critical thinking.

If you would like help doing this, please get in touch with me personally at annie@anniewrightpsychotherapy.com or by signing up for a complimentary 20-minute consult call to see if I could be a support to you as a therapist.

Warmly, Annie

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