



Meeting Your Inner Critic: What Is It Trying to Protect?

An explainer and parts-informed reflection · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)
© 2026 Insightful Journey Inc. All rights reserved. Free for personal use. Not for resale or redistribution.

At a glance

- Most people have an inner critic, a voice that judges, pushes, and points out flaws.
- In many therapies, the critic is understood as a part of you trying, often clumsily, to protect you.
- Getting curious about the critic, instead of fighting it, can soften its grip.

Where the inner critic comes from

The inner critic often develops early. It may echo the voice of a strict parent, a teacher, a culture of high expectations, or experiences of being bullied or shamed. At the time, criticizing yourself may have felt like a way to avoid criticism from others, to stay safe, or to keep up.

A different way to see the critic

Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy suggests the mind is made up of different "parts." The critic is often a protector part, trying to prevent something painful like rejection, failure, or shame. Compassion-focused therapy similarly sees self-criticism as a threat-based safety strategy.

This doesn't mean the critic is right. It means it may have good intentions and poor methods.

What the critic says	What it may be trying to protect you from
"You're so lazy."	Being seen as a failure or disappointing others
"Don't speak up, you'll sound stupid."	Embarrassment or rejection
"You should have done better."	Being caught off guard by future mistakes
"Who do you think you are?"	Standing out and being criticized or envied

What the research says

Internal Family Systems therapy works with protective "parts," including inner critics, with curiosity and compassion rather than force (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020).

Compassion-focused therapy was developed for people with high shame and self-criticism and helps build a kinder inner voice (Gilbert, 2009).

Tool: Getting to Know My Inner Critic

Find a quiet moment. Approach these questions with curiosity, as if you're getting to know someone new.

1. What does my inner critic usually say?

2. When does it show up most?

3. How old does this voice feel? Whose voice does it remind me of?

4. What is it afraid would happen if it stopped criticizing me?

5. What is it trying to protect me from?

6. What would I like to say to it, with appreciation for its effort?

7. What might a wiser, kinder voice say instead?

Strategies to try

- **Name it.** Giving the critic a name, like "the Coach" or "the Worrier," creates distance.
- **Thank it.** Try, "I see you're trying to protect me. I've got this."

- **Ask for space.** Gently ask the critic to step back so you can try something different.
- **Notice the body.** Where do you feel the critic? Breathe into that area.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Try the two-chair dialogue.** Sit in one chair and speak as your critic. Move to another and respond as the criticized part of you. Used in Emotion-Focused Therapy, this can reveal what each part needs.
- **Give it a silly voice.** Repeat a harsh thought in a cartoon voice or sing it to a tune. This ACT "defusion" technique loosens the thought's grip.
- **Say "Thanks, mind."** When the critic speaks, respond with a light "Thanks, mind, for that thought," then return to what you were doing.
- **Write its job description.** What does the critic think its job is? When was it hired? Is it still needed?

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

How has my inner critic helped me in the past? How has it hurt me?

What would change if the critic trusted me a little more?

What does the part of me that gets criticized need to hear?

What is one way I can respond differently next time the critic speaks?

When to reach out for support

If your inner critic is relentless, cruel, or connected to depression, anxiety, or past experiences, therapy, including IFS-informed and compassion-focused approaches, can help you build a new relationship with this part of yourself.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Gilbert, P. (2009). The compassionate mind. Constable & Robinson.

Schwartz, R. C., & Sweezy, M. (2020). Internal family systems therapy (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

Usage Notice

© 2026 Insightful Journey Inc. All rights reserved.

This resource is intended for personal growth and education purposes only. No part of this publication may be copied, reproduced, shared, or distributed in any form, digital or printed, without prior written consent from Insightful Journey Inc.

This material is the intellectual property of Insightful Journey Inc. and may not be modified, resold, or integrated into other programs or publications.

For permissions or clinical use inquiries, please contact: info@insightfuljourney.ca

Insightful Journey Inc. | www.insightfuljourney.ca