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# 7 Ways to Shush Your Inner Critic

by Cheri Britton, M.Ed. of BOOM Thinking™

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Don't believe everything you hear  
~ even in your own mind.

Daniel G. Amen. M.D.

Do you have those needling, negative thoughts that swim around in your head? Or what about those menacing, and often wounding, things that you say about yourself on a daily basis? Is You are not alone. There is evidence that almost everyone has that negative inner voice that is critical and able to pin-point your every flaw in an instant.

My guess is that you know that the conversation going on in your mind is not the chatter of aliens that has been downloaded into your psyche or the involuntary reception of radio transmissions. You know that those comments are really your thoughts, your ideas and your opinions. I, and many others, like to attribute these rantings and ravings to the **Inner Critic (IC)**.

The National Science Foundations estimates that the average person has between 12,000 and 70,000 thoughts a day. That's a lot of thoughts. But here's the big let-down; the majority of one's thoughts are negative. WOW! Negative, stinky thoughts. What an enormous bummer! This means that our Inner Critic, that part of us that is judgmental and harsh, is extraordinarily busy.

Another thing to keep in mind is that these judgments and criticism cause wounds, real wounds that bring about genuine pain and suffering. It has been said that harsh words are like a sword, being thrust into your heart. You can remove the sword yet the cut still bleeds. Harsh words create wounds that must be healed and transformed.

And those wounds that are not transformed are often transmitted onto others. This is the ugly truth of being critical of ourselves. The criticisms that we turn onto our

selves have an awfully high chance of being turned on others as well, causing more hurt in the world.

So what in the heck are we going to do about this? How can we tip the scales so that our negative Inner Critic is less active and we are experiencing more positive inner dialogue? How can we become less immersed in all the unhelpful, pessimistic, harmful judgments that swirl around in our minds?

Below I offer you seven simple, practical steps that you can use to transform your Inner Critic and shift the balance toward more loving and productive inner conversation.

## 1. Acknowledge that you have an Inner Critic...and s/he does not always speak the truth.

Okay, we know and accept that the negative comments we blast ourselves with everyday come from ourselves, right? However, I've found that acting as if the comments are the voice of someone other than you can be the first step in releasing the power and control that his or her needling remarks have over us.



We are so close to our own thoughts (well duh...where else would our thoughts be) that they sound like the undisputable truth.

Okay, let me take this opportunity to let you in on one very important piece of information; everything you think is true is not. Did you know that? Let me say it another way. **You are thinking thoughts and holding beliefs that are false now and may never have been true.**

Dr. Daniel Amen's opening quote says it best, "Don't believe everything you hear ~ even in your own mind."

In fact, I'd wager that if your inner dialogue is like mine and those of my clients, the majority of what your Inner Critic says to you is false...or least debatable.

The first step in quieting your Inner Critic and putting the kibosh on your crappy inner conversations is to realize that your Inner Critic does not speak the truth. Got it? Good.

## **2. Identify your Inner Critic's most frequent comments, criticisms, and judgments.**

What is your Inner Critic saying to you? What are the words, phrases, verbal body slams that you most often hear in your head? It's time to get them out of your head and onto paper!

Warning. This task can be tricky. We are so used to hearing these catty remarks that we may not actually hear them anymore. Well, we hear them; but they are the constant background noise that we may not be aware is there.

To make this list you will have to pay deliberate and close attention to that voice to pick what you are saying to yourself about yourself.

Ask yourself, "What are the most common negative things that I am saying to myself?" Keep a log of how often and when.



Make special note of what you hear yourself saying when you make a mistake, get stuck in traffic, can't find your keys, are late for a meeting, eat too much, spend too much, fall behind with some deadline, visit your family, are around someone who you think is better than you in some way (more successful, prettier, more organized, better dancer, better cook, etc.)

Begin by writing down the negative things you have said to yourself in the last two days.

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Here are some examples to help you along:

- I'm always late.
- They never pick me.
- It figures, I'm always losing things.
- Money just runs through my hands like water.
- I'm never going to understand this.
- I ate too much...again!
- I was so much prettier when I was younger.
- Who would ask me out?
- Why should I work so hard to \_\_\_\_\_, nobody will like it anyway.
- No one listens to me.
- I better brace myself.
- I'm so weird. I just never fit in.
- I'm no good at\_\_\_\_\_.
- I'm just no good at computers.
- I'm getting so old and forgetful.
- I don't deserve that.
- This had better be perfect.
- Who do I think I am, trying to \_\_\_\_\_?

Do any of these sound familiar? Keep a log of your special versions of these sentences and other things you may say to yourself. Be as specific as possible.

### 3. Determine the origin of these thoughts.

Okay, now that you have a list of your inner criticisms in front of you, it's time to do some investigative work. Chances are you were not the first person to sling these zingers your way. So, where did they come from? Were comments like these said by people in your family? Did they say them about themselves or did they say them about you? Was it your mother, your father, your grandparents? What about your 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, your piano instructor or your soccer coach? What about your friends, your family doctor or your college biology professor. Think back over your lifetime and identify where and when you have heard your most frequent comments before.

**Be who you are and  
say what you feel  
because those who  
mind don't matter  
and those who  
matter don't mind.**

~ Dr Suess

Why is this important? Well, people have baggage. All people have baggage or their own agendas and shall we say it...flaws. Chances are those people who said negative things to you were projecting their own beliefs, healthy or not, onto you. Remember, even things that were said to you out of love and concern can have destructive effects. This exercise is not meant to lay blame on others for your less-than-perfect life. No, actually, this exercise can actually help us find some sympathy and understanding.

Let's think of some examples: Perhaps your mother would ask you "Are you going to eat all of that?" when she looked at your plate. You got the message that you were eating too much. Was this true? Who knows? Your mom could have been an anorexic with a severely distorted view of what healthy eating looks like and therefore was a poor judge of correct portion sizes. Or you could have been a kid who piled it on. Regardless, the question of "Are you going to eat all of that?" has become a regularly part of your inner conversation causing you to feel like a pig on a daily basis.

Or what about your father who was always lecturing you about how important it was to work hard. Growing up, he was constantly espousing the merits of being a "nose to the grindstone" kind of person. He would say things like "Got to get the work done before you can play." Or "Hard work is the only true satisfaction one can ever enjoy." Now, as an adult you continue to say these things to yourself

and find that you feel lazy and ashamed when you take a day off or, heaven-forbid, a vacation. Your father's past comments have become your own internal negative dialogue and are keeping you from enjoying your life....and your work

Lastly, what about that college professor who said you were a "terrible writer?" (Okay, personal story here...read below for the whole scoop.) Now every time you write or even before you put a pen in your hand you start barraging yourself with comments like. "You can't write." "It's just not your strength." "What ARE you thinking?"



*An Example from my Life: Professionally I wanted to be a speaker, coach and writer. I was fine, even excited about the first two..... but I had a lot of resistance to being a writer. I would say and think things like "I'm just a lousy writer." "I really suck at grammar and all the rules of writing." "I don't think I have what it takes to be a writer." "Writers are supposed to be driven and passionate and find it hard to imagine a life without writing." These negative thoughts paralyzed me for YEARS.*

*At the same time...I simply would not let go of my desire to write. (Actually I wanted to have written, not necessarily to write. But that's another story.) As I did this step of searching out the origins of these debilitating beliefs I recalled a very important memory. It was my first year in college and I was taking the required English class. I wrote a paper only to have my professor tear it and me to shreds. She made comment after comment about what a poor writer I was. She even went so far as to joke about what a poor foundational education I had gotten in high school. I was humiliated.*

*Then fast forward one year. I transferred to a larger university and was once again required to write a big paper. Although it wasn't an English class we were told that we would be graded heavily on grammar as well as content. I was frozen in fear.*

*You can imagine that from this fearful place I did not write a very good paper. Once again I was in a position where a professor was hyper-critical of my writing and criticized my conversational tone and my lack of applying grammar rules correctly.*

*Well, that cinched the deal. From that point on I was not a writer.*

*Even when I was hired to write I would not see myself as a writer. Because it was writing curricula I would make excuses that it didn't count as real writing.*

*Fast forward again to the end of the story and I've busted through this one a bit. But it took me having a deeper understanding of where this belief had come from. Once I knew it's origin I could begin to separate fact (I'm not so hot in grammar) from supposition (I must write "formal" in order for my writing to have merit.)*

*Having this understanding began the healing process and the loosening of my Inner Critic's grip on my ability to write.*

This exercise helps you to separate the comments a little further from who you truly are. You can begin to have the appreciation that you are most likely not the first person to have said or thought these things.

Bear in mind also that our negative conversations may not have been actually said to use earlier in our life. We could have gotten these messages from how we were treated or our perceptions of what others thought of us.

#### **4. Give your Inner Critic a Persona.**

I know this may sound a little nutty but naming your main Inner Critic and giving him or her human (or maybe even animal) characteristics allows you to feel further removed from the harsh criticism and biting remarks.

Let me show you what a mean. My Inner Critic is Sasha. The following is an excerpt from my book ***BOOM Thinking: The Gutsy Guide to Breaking Out of Old Mindsets*** in which I describe Sasha. *My Sasha is a younger version of Merrill Streep's icy, bitchy, control-freak character in the great movie, The Devil Wears Prada. She's excruciatingly thin, impeccably attired and quick to attack my*



*every thought, word and deed with her sharp-tongued insults. She has long, silky, luxurious chestnut hair that she continuously flips back over her shoulder for effect. She's the queen of passive-aggressive snide compliments, such as, "Oh, my dear, that haircut isn't nearly as horrid as the last one!" She's my "inner critic," the constant, nagging little voice whispering contemptuous observations like, "You'll never accomplish that! What a stupid comment! Just sit down and shut up. No one cares what you have to say!"*

Once I gave her form I could begin to more easily disentangle the comments that she flung my way.

So ask yourself the following questions and begin to give your Inner Critic a persona. You could have more than one Inner Critic but focus now on the primary voice that harasses you the most.

1. Is the voice in your head male or female?
2. How old his he or she?
3. Describe his or her physical characteristics. For example, height, weight, skin color, hair color, facial features, etc.
4. Describe how your critic is dressed. For example a dirty white T-shirt, a Donna Karen suit, or Daisy Duke shorts and a crop top. What about glasses and other accessories?
5. What does your Inner Critic's voice sound like? Is it a soft, condescending tone or a nails-down-the-chalkboard squeak? Warm and alluring or harsh and dogmatic?
6. Who IS this critic? Imagine if they were to vote would they be Republican, Democratic, Independent, etc. Would they attend a church, synagogue or mosque? Where do they shop? What are their favorite foods? Do they have friends? What do they do with their time?

Go as deep as you can with this activity. Once you have the image in your mind go on to step 5.

## 5. Now, have a conversation with your Inner Critic.

You've probably heard it said that talking to yourself is okay but you better start worrying if you answer back. We're going to suspend that notion for this step.

Now that you've created a little space between you and that pesky, nagging Inner Critic it's time to have a dialogue.

You're probably thinking that you've heard enough from him or her and you are not interested in hearing what he or she has to say. But this step can be the most profound.

I encourage you to have a conversation with your Inner Critic to get at what's BEHIND those needling remarks. Not so much what the words are, but why your critic feels the need to be so forceful. What are his or her intentions with the negative comments?

For example, when I began "talking" to Sasha I found that she (really me, remember) was afraid that if I stuck my neck out and did certain risky things that I would fail. But failing was not what Sasha was afraid of. She was most worried that the result of that failure would be feelings of embarrassment and even humiliation.

Wow, could it be that that negative part of me was really trying to do something good?

I know...it's weird to think that you can have a conversation with yourself and discover a big thing that you don't know and besides it's feels silly. But trust me on this one. This step can bring significant insight.

Here are a few suggestions to get the dialogue started.

1. **Make a picture composition of what your Inner Critic looks like** taking all the answers you found in step #4. Create a collage on poster board or in a picture frame. It is often easier to have a conversation with a tangible item like your critic's imagined picture.

**"Remember, no one can make you feel inferior without your consent."**

**~ Eleanor Roosevelt**

2. **Ask a good friend, someone who knows you really well, to help you out.** This friend should have some awareness of the kinds of things that your Inner Critic says to you and how those biting comments make you feel. Then begin a role-play. Your friend would play you and you would be your Inner Critic.

Explain to your friend that their task is to pull out some of the motives that may be hidden within the Inner Critic's actions. Then begin your dialogue. Stop every 5 minutes or so to write down what was said and your feelings about the comments. Even better, record the conversation.

**Sample Conversation:**

***Inner Critic (played by you):*** I can't believe that you are so disorganized. You just never seem to get a handle on all the things that have to be done. When are you ever going to grow up and finally act like a responsible adult?

***You (played by your friend):*** I try! I work really hard but I have a lot to do. There is just so much that has to be done and there is only me to do it.

***Inner Critic (played by you):*** Excuses, excuses. Other people get stuff done. You're just lazy and not disciplined enough.

***You (played by your friend):*** Now wait a minute. I'm not lazy. I work hard and get a lot done. I'm not perfect but cut me some slack. Just what's got you so riled up? Why do you harp on me so hard about being perfect?

***Inner Critic (played by you):*** Well, you've seen your family. They are all so disorganized and never seem to get the important stuff done. I'm terrified that you're going to let things get so bad that the same kinds of bad things will happen to us.

Note: It is really critical that your friend begin by only playing her/his role and leaves their analysis to the end. This is a time of self discovery for **you**. The reason I point this out is that it may be easy if not even expected that your friend share with you their observations and opinions. I suggest that you be clear about their role from the beginning. I suggest that your friend first keep their ideas, insights and observations to themselves until you have had an

opportunity to glean your own wisdom first. Then you may want to ask what they think and feel.

Here are some questions you may want to ask them.

- What did you hear me say that you think is significant?
- What do you notice about my body language, facial expressions or voice tone that is note worthy?
- What, if anything, do you think I have missed in my assessment of what we just did?

3. **Have a written conversation with your Inner Critic.** This is my personal favorite and the one in which I have had the most success.

Begin by writing down a question that you want your Inner Critic to answer (some examples are listed below). Then with your non-dominate hand begin to answer the questions from the perspective of the Inner Critic. Because the speed of your writing will be significantly slower, your brain will have to slow a bit so your hands can catch up. This reduced pace will allow some really profound insights to percolate to the top.

Don't just ask one or two questions. Rather do this for quite awhile. It takes a bit of time to get used to this and even more for your Inner Critic to begin to "speak up".

Sample questions:

- What do you most want me to know?
- Why are you so hard on me?
- Why have you chosen to badger me about \_\_\_\_\_?
- What would get you to let up on me?
- What are you afraid of?
- Are you angry? If so, why?



## 6. Lavish the Inner Critic with gratitude.

My experience has been that once you get some deeper awareness as to the real motives behind you Inner Critics haranguing and you understand that these ideas have a history you can begin to feel gratitude.

You may be thinking, “Are you kidding me? Gratitude for that part of yourself that badgers and judges and puts you down.”

But bear in mind, your Inner Critic is a part of you and most likely has your best interest in mind. In some cases this may be a real stretch but it’s true. Among reasonably healthy adults, that badgering part of yourself has been there to keep you from some kind of perceived harm. While the truth may have been that you were never really in danger or that the pestering itself caused you harm, the intention behind your critical voice was not completely evil.

### **So where does having gratitude come in?**

It has been said that if you want something new you must be grateful for what you already have. This applies to your Inner Critic as well.

Let’s go back to my Sasha. After I had had a deep dialogue with her I took the time to absorb her intentions. I hated her delivery. I was angry at the words she chose to get my attention. I was extremely wounded from her constant belittling of me.

Despite all that I thanked her.

Yep, I thanked that bitchy, harping part of me for all those years of beating me up. I thanked her for caring for me enough to be relentless in her efforts to keep me safe.

Now the skies did not open up and all my wounds were not immediately healed. But this step of finding gratitude for my Inner Critic was the real step in taking back control of my inner dialogue. It is a practice that requires...well...practice.

**Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.**

**~Cicero**

As you find gratitude for that needling part of yourself you will feel the benefits over and over and deeper and deeper. After all, getting to know your Inner Critic has been a primary reason you have gained the insight in the first place.

## 7. Assign your Inner Critic some new tasks.

There is no such thing as a perfect, conflict-free relationship. In most healthy relationships there are times where one person must go to the other person and make a request.

One person is annoyed or even angered at the behavior of the other. But they don't end the relationship. Nor do they ignore the conflict. In a healthy relationship the annoyed person will have a conversation with the offender, explain the behavior, the feelings it creates and request a behavior change. If this is done correctly and with compassion some kind of change occurs.

You are in relationship with this part of you that is your Inner Critic. And much like a husband would go to his wife and request that things be different or a supervisor would go to an employee, we can go to our Inner Critic and have a healthy conversation.

In some respects you may have to teach your Inner Critic how to be beneficial to you.

Jack Canfield, in his book ***"The Success Principles: How to Get from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be"*** says that our Inner Critic seldom tells us the whole story.

For example our Inner Critic we might say to us, "If you do *that* people will make fun of you." Pretty harsh, huh? But if you asked your Inner Critic to keep talking they might go on to say. "If you do *that* people will make fun of you. When that happened last time you were devastated. I don't want you to feel that kind of pain again." Without hearing the later part of the thought you might think your Inner Critic was saying that you would be doing something worthy of making fun of. Rather, what your Inner Critic really wanted was for you to avoid the pain of being humiliated. Interesting distinction, don't you think?

Make a request of your Inner Critic. Ask him or her to tell you more. Ultimately we may want the negative comments to stop, but for now you need to hear more. What are the feelings that are underneath this comment? Is it anger, fear, frustration and or love. Is there a part of you that is really scared and is using harsh language to get your attention? Ask your Inner Critic to let you in on the whole story.

**And the day  
came when the  
risk to remain  
tight in a bud  
was more  
painful than the  
risk it took to  
blossom.**

**~Anais Nin**

For example, maybe your Inner Critic has been badgering you about not being more organized at work and at home. He or she has been relentlessly pointing out to you the times you lose papers, miss deadlines, and are unproductive. As nasty as she or he has been you may now understand that this part of you is actually frustrated because you have declared over and over that you want to change, but you haven't. You've also learned that there is a lot of fear that if you don't make some changes soon there are going to be dire circumstances that will put your happiness in real jeopardy.

Use this new information to ask your Inner Critic to help you change your ways. Request that instead of pointing out all times you fail, that your Inner Critic do the opposite; point out your successes, even if they're small. Keep in mind; critics do not necessarily always have to give negative comments. Just like a film or restaurant critic, he or she can give praise as well.

You can also request that your Inner Critic point out to you opportunities to do things differently. For example, instead of saying "Hey fatso, not gonna take the stairs are ya?" You could ask your Inner Critic to rephrase their idea and use the love they feel for you to say, "Remember, we want you to be around for a long time. Let's take those stairs this time, okay."

I know, I know, this can sound silly, but it works. Assign him/her a new task and request a change in how your Inner Critic communicates with you.



# So . . .



Transforming your Inner Critic may sound simple but it's really a life time of work. But remember your life is full of times when you learned something difficult or overcame adversity. You have a lot of examples of time you did things differently. Remember riding a bicycle or driving a car? I'm sure it felt awkward and uncomfortable until...well...until it didn't.

Breaking the habit of taking critically to yourself and shifting your energy in new directions will be the same way. It will feel challenging and some days even impossible until it doesn't.

**Celebrate your successes, no matter how small.** Find time to find gratitude for all that you learn along the way, redirect your inner voice to be a helpful, motivating part of yourself and you will find more happy and less crappy! I promise.



Cheri Britton, M.Ed, is a speaker, author, coach and trainer who has been helping individuals and organizations effectively BOOM Think for over two decades. Through metaphors, anecdotes, and powerful journaling exercises, Cheri challenges executives, employees, entrepreneurs, parents and regular folks to confront limiting beliefs and break out of their “velvet rut,” where they survive, but definitely don’t thrive. The results are literally transformational.

Cheri recently authored her first book, “BOOM Thinking: The Gutsy Guide to Breaking Out of Old Mindsets.”

As a single mom raising two youngsters, Cheri maintains a realistic view of working professionals who juggle careers with family and outside interests. She resides in Asheville, North Carolina with her kids Sawyer and Noah, and her dogs Chance and Moxie.



## Helping You Break Out of Old Mindsets

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