

Your Brilliance & the Inner Critic:

Your brilliance isn't your IQ. It is

- your unique talents and gifts
- your ideas, perspective, and voice
- your passions, values, and authentic self
- your particular contribution to the world

Your brilliance gets expressed when you

- follow a passion
- pursue a professional or personal dream
- share your ideas, perspective, or voice
- answer a calling
- use your unique talents and gifts
- live in a way that expresses your values and your authentic self

Living your brilliance is *scary*. It's vulnerable. It requires risking rejection and failure – rejection of the real you, failure in the pursuits that matter most to you. Living your brilliance requires emotional risk and playing full out.

The inner critic shows up when we step into – or even contemplate stepping into – our brilliance. It attempts to keep us safe in the status quo and protect us from any emotional risk. It says all kinds of things and makes up all kinds of arguments to keep us safe in the familiar.

The inner critic is a force of constriction, playing small. Living your brilliance is a force of expansion, playing big.



Some of the ways my brilliance shows up are . . .

These talents and gifts:

These ideas I'd like to communicate, or these things, organizations, movements, changes, works of art, etc. I'd like to create:

These personal and professional passions:

I feel most alive when.....

I feel most like myself when....

I long to create.....

The contributions I most want to make are.....

Inner Critic Narratives

Our inner critic narratives are sometimes explicitly self-critical, like these:

“You are not x [smart, beautiful, disciplined, talented, etc.] enough.”
“That’s stupid.”
“You are an idiot.”
“So-and-so would never do something like that.”

But our inner critic narratives are often well-disguised as “reasonable” arguments:

“It’s just not realistic.”
“It would be better to wait because [insert reason here].”
“It’s not appropriate in this context.”
“After you have more experience/education . . .”
“You don’t have the right resources/equipment/set-up to do this . . .”

Your inner critic will try to scare you from living your brilliance with lines like these: “It’s too risky because. . .” “It will lead to disastrous consequences because. . .” Your inner critic may try to guilt you: “This is unfair to others because . . .” “You don’t deserve to because . . .” Your inner critic will try to get you off your game: “Great idea, but unfortunately, honey, you don’t have what it takes.”

Is every “it’s not realistic” or “it would be better to wait” the inner critic? What about when it’s truly reasonable and wise to realize that something isn’t realistic, or that it would be better to wait?

Yes, sometimes an inner voice telling us to wait, hold back, or not speak up is wise. You’ll learn how to differentiate your inner critic from your best thinking or intuition as you move through this workbook.



Some of the narratives I commonly hear from my inner critic are . . .

Motives of the Inner Critic

Anything that involves venturing into the unknown – out of your comfort zones – wakes up the inner critic. Think of the inner critic as a guard or gatekeeper, attempting to keep you inside the small zone of the known and the familiar. His or her job is to focus entirely on avoiding risk – with no real attention to potential reward. As long as you don't try to venture forth from that zone, the inner critic can pretty much leave you alone. He or she will then be like a gatekeeper who often naps.

But when you approach the gate, when you begin to stray from the status quo, test old beliefs, expand your comfort zone, or contemplate change, you wake the sleeping guard. The inner critic will begin to use tactics to get you to turn around and go right back to where you were,

In one sense, then, there is always good news when the inner critic shows up: you are approaching real change and movement! The more strongly the inner critic shows up, the louder and meaner and more hysterical its voice, the closer you are to a breakthrough or important step in your life.



When in your life have you attempted to step into your brilliance and had your inner critic speak up to stop you in your tracks?

Our Too-Cautious Minds

Neuroscientists are now able to show how our brains have evolved to be very attuned to any possible risk. Our brains have also evolved to focus far more on avoiding negative experiences than on seeking positive ones.

That means your brain will naturally be more attuned to the risks (or perceived risks) of living your brilliance than to the rewards. It will be more attuned to the sting of rejection than to the fulfillment of getting your dream job. It will be more attuned to the pain of your idea's getting shot down than to the satisfaction of its being heard and implemented.

This focus on risk-avoidance made sense for a time when our physical existence was threatened day-to-day.

Today, we are all living with a brain that doesn't quite make sense for our time and circumstances. Small, safe risks – speaking up in a difficult situation, making a change to our careers or lifestyles – often feel, physiologically, like life-threatening ones.

But if we want to live fulfilling, authentic, knock-the-ball-out-of-the-park lives, we have to circumvent our outdated biology.

In the face of fear, the inner critic generates stories, theories, and conclusions to bring order and control to any situation. But what it makes up just isn't true. Accuracy isn't its aim; risk-aversion is.



What kinds of emotional risks does your brain get hyper and overcautious about, day to day? What is the impact of that on your life?

No Overcoming, Fighting or Defeating . . .

The goal isn't to kill or remove the inner critic – it is a part of each of us. You can't delete it or surgically remove it or graduate from it. You can't ever completely overcome it.

Nor is the goal to fight it or defeat it, because fighting a part of us doesn't work and doesn't feel good.

But you can learn to manage it, quiet it, bypass it, and lessen its presence in your life.

These are your aims:

Manage your inner critic

Quiet your inner critic

Bypass your inner critic

Lessen the presence of your inner critic

No swords or guns needed.

Claire's Critic

Claire is a client of mine who dreamt of being an entrepreneur. For over two decades she worked in various retail companies, knowing that her passion lay with a vision to start her own.

Her inner critic regularly chattered in her head about how she didn't have what it takes to be successful and how pursuing the dream would be financially irresponsible toward her family. Her musings about this possibility had, for many years, sounded like this:

"I would love to start a retail business. I would love the independence and challenge. I feel like it's what I am meant to do. . . . But I don't have what that takes. People who start businesses need much more experience and a broader skill set. I don't have the access to capital either. And doing this would be irresponsible to my family. I would be putting them in great financial risk."

Of course, Claire didn't know this voice was the inner critic. She thought she was just thinking realistically about the situation. Over time, she adopted the inner critic's narrative as a belief, a personal truth: "I don't have what it takes."

How do we know this is her inner critic talking? After all, not everyone has the skills to start a successful retail business – and there is such a thing as rationally evaluating our deficits and capacity. But we can recognize the inner critic in Claire by a few clues:

- It is making a definite pronouncement, with very little evidence to back it up. It's interested in "the way things are" (this is always a red flag!).
- It's undertaking a premature evaluation of the question, "Is it possible, or not?" rather than wondering, "What could be possible?" or, even better, "How can I make this possible?"
- It's stuck, repetitive. No real action is inspired by it. Clear thinking always inspires some kind of forward movement.
- The intention is shutting down a line of thinking, rather than opening up problem solving.
- The energy behind the mental chatter is one of self-critique rather than self-care

Here's how thinking about the same topic could go, without the inner critic:

"I would love to start a retail business. I would love the independence and challenge. I feel like it's what I am meant to do. . . . I don't know if I have what is needed. I wonder how I could find out what is needed and see how that fits with where I am. I wonder how I could start acquiring what I need. I'll do [one specific thing] to learn more about that this week . . . that feels exciting! I'm really committed to supporting my family

financially. I wonder how I can do this and maintain that support. That's important to me, and I really don't want to give it up."

You can hear the different feeling-sense in the second example. Isn't it interesting how the second line of thought is actually much more rational? There is an interest in real information-gathering. There is a focus on the topic itself – not on ego stuff about one's own worth or merit. The second way of thinking rapidly leads to action, because no mental junk is standing in the way of the path forward.

Recognizing The Inner Critic

We begin working with the inner critic simply by noticing when and how it shows up.

Remember the good news? That when our inner critic shows up strongly it means we are always at a juncture of stepping into our brilliance or stretching ourselves in some important way?

The second piece of good news is this: You don't have to *do* all that much with your inner critic. Just recognizing the inner critic goes a long way toward diffusing its power and mitigating its effects.

In a culture that is all about doing, this is a counter-intuitive truth: just *recognizing* that the inner critic is operating in your head reduces its power and impact significantly. We usually think we have to recognize something and then *do something* about it. (It's the doing that matters, we assume; the recognition was just the precursor to doing something. I notice a problem, and then I fix it. I notice an opportunity, and then I seize it.) Inner critic work is different: simply noticing has power.

Liberating yourself from the traps of the inner critic occurs with the recognition of a very simple insight:

You are not that critical voice. You are the person aware of the critical voice. You are the person believing it and feeling perplexed by it or bummed out by it. You are the person trying to understand it and work with it and get rid of it. You are the entity that is hearing the voice. You are not the voice itself.

Most of us don't know any better but to think that the inner critic's opinions are as valid as those coming from our own thinking, our hearts, our intuition, or our souls.

The solution is to recognize the inner critic when it shows up, name it, and separate your core self from it.

We do that simply by saying, "Oh, I hear my inner critic speaking up. Hello, critic. It's saying x." Simple as that. From there, you can choose how you want to relate to that voice.

Inner Critic Clues

There are some very common characteristics of inner critic voices. Your inner critic won't have all of these qualities all the time, but these qualities are good ways to recognize it:

- This voice **critiques you harshly**. If you hear a voice saying things you would never say to another person, it's the inner critic.
- If you feel out of control of this voice, **more like you hear it than you create it**, like it invades your thinking rather than reflecting your real thoughts, it's the inner critic.
- The inner critic **repeats itself**. If you are plagued by the same thoughts over and over, not really thinking but rather hearing a broken record, it's the inner critic.
- If you hear a thought you **know is irrational** or untrue, but the thought won't leave you, it's the inner critic.
- The inner critic also **attacks us for hosting the thoughts it just put in our heads!** After it criticizes, or plays out the worst case scenario, it follows up with lines like these: "Get a grip, get some perspective," or "Don't be so insecure, other people are confident and relaxed. Just look at Joe. . . ."
- Though the inner critic seeks to sabotage you, it **argues about what's in your best interest** – what is realistic or effective, what will protect you from harm, what will ensure the best outcome. The inner critic tricks you by framing its argument in terms of what's best for you.
- The inner critic's thinking will be complaint- or worry-oriented, and it won't lead to thinking about solutions or resolutions. It's **not constructive** or clearheaded.
- The inner critic may **take inspiration from people in your life** who played the role of outer critic. It adapts and expands on their behavior and often exists as a version of their voices inside your head. Listen for echoes of a parent, a sibling, a boss, or the voice of societal institutions or major cultural forces such as your religion, company, or country.



Which of these qualities sound most familiar to you, given your own experience with your inner critic?

The Playground: Exercises and Experiments For Your Life

I. Recognizing the Inner Critic



1. **Get to Know Your Inner Critic**

Write your reflections on the following questions:

- What else does your inner critic say? Write down some of your inner critic's most frequently-voiced beliefs.
- Who from your current life or past does the inner critic echo or build upon when it speaks? Family members, old teachers, cultural messages?
- How would you describe your inner critic? Anxious? People-pleasing? Persistent? Pick five words that describe it.



2. **Name your Ensemble:** As you start noticing your inner critic and how it shows up for you, you may find that your inner critic doesn't feel like one voice, but like a few different voices. For example, your inner critic may sound like a former critical painting teacher and show up around your art, but it may also be really worried about disappointing people or get really cynical and nasty about the world and give up on things abruptly.

Give each voice a name and a character. For example, my inner critic has four major characters whom I have named "Perfectionista" (the voice of perfectionism), "Disastra" (the worst-case-scenario obsessive), "Preparissa" (the fearful over-preparer who believes more preparing = more success), and "People Pleaser" – enough said!

You can give your inner critic fictional names; take characters from a book, or film, or your own life experience. You can use animals, mythical figures, or celebrities for inspiration. The inner critics of clients and colleagues include the Wicked Witch, Grumpy Pants, Miss Manners, and the Skeptical Professor.

It can also be fun to think of this group of figures in a light-hearted way – as the cast of a cabaret show, a sports team, or a cast of characters from a comic book or soap opera. Get creative. As you do so, you put your inner critic into perspective and treat it with a light heart. Both take away its power.

3. Recognize Your Critic When It Shows Up

Now that you know what the inner critic is and what it sounds like, you can identify it when you hear it. That is the next important step. This means simply saying, "Disastra has shown up," or, "I'm hearing the voice of Perfectionista. Hello Perfectionista!"

Consciously separate yourself from what the critic is saying. But instead of noting, “I get insecure,” be more precise: “I hear Miss Manners in my head telling me I can’t do x, I’m different, flawed, etc.” This may feel goofy. This may *be* goofy. The thing is, it works.

You can also tell a partner or supportive friend about your inner critic, the character or name you gave it and its common refrains, so that they too can call it out when it shows up.

II: Working with Your Inner Critic

Recognizing and identifying the inner critic is more than half the battle. If all you do is use the tactics listed above, the power of your inner critic will lessen significantly. But there is more you can do to reduce its impact further.

1. **Remove the critic from the scene.** A great tool from the Coaches Training Institute is to use a physical ritual to put the inner critic away – to stand up and move it into the closet or put it in the corner. Or you might envision a nice place to send the inner critic, a place that will keep him or her busy for a while. Send your inner critic to the beach. Send her mountain climbing. You then have some time and space with a reprieve from the inner critic. If this sounds silly to you, rest assured it sounds very silly to me too. The thing is, it works.

2. **Compassionately see** the inner critic's misguided intentions: to keep you safe, protect the status quo, and ensure that you are not vulnerable to the kinds of attack and embarrassment it is afraid of. When the inner critic comes up, silently acknowledge its intent to keep you safe, and say, in some form, "Thank you but I don't need you right now."

3.  **Write a sincere "thank you, but no thank you" note** to the inner critic. Here is an example:

Dear Perfectionism -

I feel your pain! Life can be so stressful, and I know you believe strongly that if we just work really hard, if we just do an excellent job, life will be safe, and people will like us. You have helped us get good results in lots of situations. And your work ethic is incredible! Right now, however, I am going to try another approach. I'm okay without you in this situation. Thanks so much for trying to protect me, as always. I'll see you later.

Jeannie

3. **Laugh!** If your inner critic is like most, it is adorably panicky, unbelievably repetitive, persistent, and often irrational. What would it be like to take all its chatter lightly? Note it, laugh it off, refocus on your vision, and move on. Notice what is hilarious and absurd about your inner critic.

4.  **Check it out.** When you hear your inner critic talking, question it with questions like these:

1. Is what this voice is saying true?
2. Do I have any real evidence that what it says is true?
3. If so, is this the whole truth or just one small part of the truth?
4. If I check in with my heart (or my breath, or my gut, or my body), what's the real truth?
5. Does listening to this voice serve my goals or make me happy?
6. If this voice and its ideas were absent from my mind, how would I see the situation? How would I act?

These questions expose how our inner critic's lies or illusions cannot stand up to even a little examination.



Use these tools through the week, and write about their effects. What did you notice? What shifted?

Part III: Keep Evolving with Your Inner Critic

The inner critic is very crafty and intelligent. It's a flexible, rapidly-evolving entity. Think of it as a brilliant actor – always a chameleon, wearing different costumes, playing different characters for different times in your life.

This means that when you learn to recognize its usual lines, it will come up with new ones. It will come at you from a different angle.

It is ongoing work to notice new ways the inner critic is showing up as your life evolves – guest stars to the cast of inner-critic characters, we might say, speaking new lines. As it shows up in new ways, you can continue to add characters or qualities to your inner critic.

Beware: the inner critic will disguise itself in your language and values. For example, let's say your inner critic used to show up with lots of messages pressuring you to work long hours. You successfully became aware of its messages and are now reducing your hours and valuing your recreational time. You can expect to hear the inner critic show up with the opposite message, beating you up for not reducing your hours enough or sufficiently valuing your recreational time. It will work itself into your new framework; it will use the currency of what you value. For example, if I start doing yoga to relax (and get beyond my inner critic), it will start talking to me in yoga terms. Now it may criticize me for not taking good enough care of myself, not relaxing enough into the pose! Pretty sneaky.

Inner critic work is ongoing. It never ends. Set your expectations realistically. If you do this work, you'll likely find that your inner critic will not expire entirely, but it will visit less frequently, speak more quietly, and garner less of your mental space. And when it does show up, it won't stop you, because you will have a variety of tools for neutralizing its effects.