



## PLAYING BIG:

*Practical Wisdom for Women Who  
Want to Speak Up, Create, and Lead*

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Excerpt - Chapter 1: The Inner Critic

## CHAPTER 1

# The Inner Critic

I recently had lunch with a colleague—an executive coach and business consultant. She’s worked at the most prestigious consulting companies and maintains a roster of executive clients who find her advice indispensable. Over our meal, she explained to me that she wanted to do more public speaking, sharing the ideas she’d developed in her consulting practice with a much wider audience. She sounded eager and ready to go, uncertain only about what practical steps to take next.

I offered to introduce her to a few speaking agents that I thought would love to work with her and could help her secure engagements. Suddenly, she started talking about how she needed to spend some months doing small, local talks to “hone her craft.” A new narrative came out, about how she wasn’t really ready to take her speaking to a large stage. Having just watched a video of her giving a speech, I knew this wasn’t the case.

I was hearing in her something I’ve now heard in hundreds of women. I think of it as “the voice of not-me”—the internal chatter that tells a woman she’s not ready to lead, she’s not enough of an expert, she’s not good enough at this or that. It’s the voice of self-doubt, of the inner critic. We begin our journey here because it is what most holds women back from playing bigger.

All women grapple with this voice of self-doubt in one way or another. For some women, it is most prominent around their professional lives. For others, it comes up around their sense of competence as mothers or partners. For others, it speaks mostly about appearance, body image, or aging. And for others, it chatters most loudly about their creative dreams—to make music or paint or write. We are so used to living with this voice, most of us don’t imagine it could be otherwise. It’s become the background noise we live with. Since women don’t talk to one another about the most vicious things it says, we don’t hear counterarguments or get support, and we don’t learn that other women—women we admire because they seem so confident—hear the same irrational, harsh voice in their heads too.

The costs of women’s self-doubt are enormous. Think of all the ideas unshared, businesses not started, important questions not raised, talents unused. Think of all the fulfillment and joy not experienced because self-doubt keeps us from going for the opportunities that would bring that joy and fulfillment. This is the bad



news around women's self-doubt: how pervasive it is, and how much has been lost because of it.

Yet there is also good news about women's self-doubt—and the good news is less well-known: While “confidence issues” seem complex and difficult to address, they don't need to be. It turns out you don't have to find a magic source of confidence, dig deep into childhood wounds to find the roots of your insecurities, or figure out how to permanently banish that critical voice in your head. Instead, you simply need to learn how to live with the inner voice of self-doubt but not be held back by it, to hear the voice and not take direction from it. Best news of all? You can learn to do that quickly, with simple tools you'll learn in this chapter.

Because self-doubt is so destructive when not dealt with, yet so manageable once you know those tools, I've become passionate about every woman and girl on the planet receiving what I think of as Inner Critic 101 Training. You'll receive that training in the pages that follow. I've come to believe that knowing how to work effectively with your own self-doubt is a basic and necessary a life skill, an even more basic and necessary life skill than driving or cooking yourself a meal. Imagine what a different world we'd live in if every girl learned what the voice of her inner critic sounded like and what to do to quiet it, if she was unhampered by self-doubt as she moved through her turbulent teen years and into adulthood. Imagine the different course your life would have taken, had you been taught the what and why of that critical voice inside and learned some techniques to use so that it didn't get in your way. In this chapter, you'll get that training, for yourself and so you can pass it on to others. Most important, you'll learn what you can do moment to moment so that self-doubt no longer stands in the way of your playing big.

## What Is the Inner Critic?

When I talk about the inner critic or the voice of “not-me,” I'm speaking about the voice in our heads characterized by the eleven qualities that follow. You probably won't notice all eleven qualities in everything your voice of self-doubt says, but you'll usually notice at least a few of these qualities when they speaks.



1. **Harsh, rude, mean.** When you hear a voice in your head saying harsh things to you that you would never intend to say to a person you love, you're hearing the inner critic.
2. **Binary.** The inner critic is a black-and-white thinker. You are awesome or you are pathetic. You are gorgeous or ugly. You are a fabulous friend or a horrible one. Your dreams are possible or they aren't. When the inner critic speaks, there's usually no room for gray.
3. **Ostensibly, the voice of reason.** This voice argues for what seems to be in your best interest, what is realistic and effective. For example, "If you go forward with the book, you'll ruin your reputation. Your work isn't ready for that level of scrutiny. Better to hold off for a while." Or "You are much better off studying someone else's theories and approach to this kind of consulting work before you pitch potential clients. People won't take you seriously unless you are steeped in a well-known method. Your own ideas aren't enough."
4. **The voice of "You aren't ready yet."** For women, this voice often manifests as "You aren't ready yet." "You need another degree." "You need more time to prepare." "You need more experience."
5. **The voice of "You aren't good at math/negotiating/technical stuff."** For many women, the voice of self-doubt shows up most strongly around those skills and activities that are associated with masculinity in our culture and, unconsciously, often in our own minds. This includes quantitative skills, negotiation, technical tasks, financial matters, and—unfortunately—sometimes leadership more broadly.
6. **The voice of body-perfectionism.** Another common expression of this voice is self-critical thoughts around body, weight, appearance, or aging. "You aren't attractive anymore." "Oh my God, look at your upper arms." "You look fat in this." "You need to lose ten pounds, by yesterday."



7. **The tape.** The inner critic's voice often feels like an audio tape that's running automatically in your head, rather than like thoughts you consciously author and generate. It may even feel as if the critic tape invades and interrupts your own thinking.
8. **A broken record.** The inner critic will come up with new lines from time to time, but it also tends to rehash a few core narratives it has been repeating to you for decades.
9. **Irrational but persistent.** Often we *know* that what the fearful voice in our heads says is irrational, yet it still has power over us.
10. **The one-two punch.** The one-two punch goes like this. Let's say first, the inner critic starts mumbling to you about how everyone else in the room has it more together than you do. Then the critic follows up with "Get a grip, get some perspective." Or "What is wrong with you? *Other people* are confident and relaxed . . . just look over there, at Susan . . ." In other words, the critic first attacks you with critical thoughts, and then shames you for having those thoughts. That is its one-two punch.
11. **The inner critic may take inspiration from critical people in your life.** You may hear echoes of a critical parent, a sibling, or boss in your inner critic's voice. Or you may hear echoes of the ethos of major cultural forces such as your religion, company, or country. Our outer critics come to exist inside our own heads.

## The Inner Critic versus Realistic Thinking

Often women say to me, "But there are things I'm truly not qualified for, or not good at. How do I know if I'm hearing my inner critic talking or if I'm just being realistic?" That's a really important question, because, of course, there are things we aren't ready for and we all have weaknesses in our abilities. In addition to using the list of



the eleven qualities of the inner critic’s voice, here’s how you can tell the difference between the irrational inner critic and solid realistic thinking.

Inner Critic	Realistic Thinking
Makes definite pronouncements about the situation	Asks curious questions about the situation
Has no interest in actual evidence	Interested in gathering evidence to inform conclusions
Thanks and speaks in black-and-white terms	Is able to deal with complexity and gray areas
Asks binary yes/no questions (“Is it possible? Yes or no? Am I qualified? Yes or no?”)	Asks helpful, open-ended questions (“How might it be possible? What part of this looks possible?”)
Is repetitive	Is forward-moving
Focuses on problems/areas of lack	Seeks solutions
Speaks in an anxious tone	Speaks in a calmer tone
Speaks from a fundamental stance of self-critique	Speaks from a fundamental stance of self-support

The realistic thinker in us is forward-moving. She seeks solutions. The critic will spin and spin, ruminating on the risks and worst-case scenarios. The critic often speaks in an anxious, emotionally charged tone. The realistic thinker sounds grounded, clear-eyed, calm. Many of us hold the belief that “realistic thinking” is skeptical if not pessimistic, but in fact *realistic thinking is inquisitive, exploratory, and highly creative.*

For two decades, Claire worked in retail companies, always wanting to start one of her own. When she contemplated that dream, she heard a stream of thoughts that 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. I need much more experience; I don't have the access to capital, and doing this would be irresponsible to my family. I would be putting them at great financial risk."

How do we know whether this is her inner critic talking, or if she's engaging in good, realistic thinking? We can recognize the inner critic in Claire by a couple of clues:

- It's making **definite pronouncements about what's true**: "I don't have what it takes." There's no evidence gathering or real exploration. There are no open-ended or curious questions about the truth of the situation.
- There's an **escalation of worry**: "I need a broader skill set . . ." quickly escalates to "I'd be putting my family at great financial risk." Worst-case-scenario thinking is a hallmark quality of the inner critic.
- It's especially concerned about those aspects of the work that are traditionally **associated with masculinity**: raising capital and earning money to support one's family.

Here's how "realistic thinking" on the same topic could go:

"I would love to start a retail business. 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 and see how that fits with where I am. I'll do x to learn more about that this week . . . that feels exciting, and a little scary too. And, of course, I'm really committed to supporting my family financially. I wonder how I can do this and maintain support for them."

You can hear the different tone in the second example: more positive, supportive, exploratory, and in fact much more rational. There is an interest in real information gathering. There is a focus on the topic itself, not on ego distractions about measuring up or not.



## Why Do We Have Inner Critics?

Why do we have this self-critical voice inside? Is it because of tough childhoods, our patriarchal culture, our stressful modern lives?

We don't need to have had particular life experiences to develop a harsh inner critic. We're hardwired for it. The inner critic is an expression of the safety instinct in us—the part of us that wants to stay safe from potential emotional risk—from hurt, failure, criticism, disappointment, or rejection by the tribe. The safety instinct is cunning. If it simply said to you, “No, don't compose the song, don't run for office, don't make the career change, don't share your ideas—it's too risky,” you wouldn't listen. You'd probably reply something along the lines of “No, I feel okay about the risks. Here I go.” So the safety instinct uses a more effective argument: “Your paintings are terrible.” “Your book won't offer anything new—there are so many books on the subject.” “Your attempt at career change will cause you to end up broke.” The inner critic speaks up with more viciousness and volume when we are exposing ourselves to a real or perceived vulnerability—something that triggers a fear of embarrassment, rejection, failure, or pain.

Playing big—following our callings and dreams—puts us all in a vulnerable place, but for women the stakes are especially high. We know playing bigger may bring painful criticism or rejection, that others may call us “uppity,” not likable, too aggressive, bitchy, angry, not nice. We've watched that happen time and time again to women on the national stage. We've read violent, objectifying, often vulgar comments made about prominent women—particularly in online media. Our own safety instinct seeks to protect us from that external criticism by spewing cruel self-criticisms (“You aren't ready for that, you don't know what you are talking about”) that keep us from stretching into greater visibility and encountering those kinds of attacks.

It's as if you've got internal departments and the inner critic works for the Risk Aversion Department. The folks over at the Risk Aversion Department don't coordinate with the folks in the Fulfillment Department. They don't care if you have a fulfilled or self-actualized day in your life! They'll be pleased if you feel relatively bored, numbed out, and sad—as long as you stay stuck in the zone of the familiar.

For this reason, the folks at Risk Aversion don't worry about whether what they say to you is true or not. This is the big “aha” that we all need to have around





our self-doubt. What the inner critic says— “You aren’t ready. You don’t know what you are talking about. That idea/question/creation has no value”—just isn’t true. Being accurate isn’t the aim of the inner critic; getting you to avoid emotional risk is. When we understand that our safety instinct uses the inner critic as a strategy, and that its chatter is not a reflection of reality, we take away its power. We can say to ourselves in the moment, “I hear that voice, but I *know* it’s not the voice of truth, and I choose not to take direction from it.”

## You’ll Hear Self-Doubt Most Loudly When . . .

Many women find their inner critic speaks up most loudly around their most deeply felt dreams for their lives and work, because we feel particularly vulnerable about them. They experience the most panicky, overwhelming self-doubt when they are moving toward what they truly long to do. The inner critic is like a guard at the edge of your comfort zone. As long as you don’t venture forth out of that zone, the inner critic can leave you alone—like a guard taking a nap. Yet when you approach the edge of your comfort zone, test old beliefs, contemplate change, or stretch into playing bigger, you wake the sleeping guard. The inner critic recites its lines in an attempt to get you to go back into the familiar zone of the status quo. Many women find that the more strongly the inner critic shows up, the louder and meaner and more hysterical its voice, the closer they are to a breakthrough or the more likely they are to be on the edge of taking a very important step. In this sense, when you hear a major inner critic attack, you can often greet it as good news: It likely means you are playing bigger.

We can get confused if we’ve been taught that we’ll feel good or excited when we’re on the right track. In fact, often when we start doing what we most want to do in our professional lives—or when we even contemplate doing so—we actually feel a sense of discomfort. Many women mistakenly think all those doubts and uncomfortable feelings mean they aren’t on the right path after all. But really, we’ve just woken the sleeping guard at the edge of the comfort zone.



## But What If My Inner Critic Motivates Me?

Now that you have a sense of what the inner critic is, we'll turn to the tools and practices you can use, moment to moment, to lessen its influence in your life. But first, there's one concern women often bring up when I teach about this topic that I want to address. It's a concern that I could never have predicted: Many women aren't sure they *want* to quiet their inner critics! After all, they ask me, isn't the inner critic part of what motivates us to do meticulous, excellent work?

I first heard this question a few years ago, when I taught a workshop about the inner critic at a major accounting firm. A woman in the front row raised her hand. "I hear what you are saying about how the inner critic holds us back, but honestly, if I stopped listening to my inner critic, I'd be a total slacker. My inner critic is what motivates me to work hard and perform. Can't the inner critic be a positive force?"

As is true for so many of us, her inner critic was a kind of a companion with whom she had a tried and true partnership: The critic hurled words of panic and disparagement, and she ran on the treadmill harder, producing careful, thorough work. This cycle—played out dozens of times each day—had produced some really good professional results.

This was my response to her, and it's my response to you if you share her question: Self-doubt *can* indeed motivate us to work hard and achieve, but there are *serious costs* to being motivated this way.

- **Costs to your quality of life.** How much joy can you experience in your work if fear and a soundtrack of harsh thoughts about yourself play in your head every day?
- **Costs to your professional life.** The critic can lead us to work hard, but it often leads us to do the *wrong* work. When motivated by the critic, we'll dot all the *i*'s and cross all the *t*'s (many times over), but the inner critic can't motivate us to take the intelligent risks—doing stretch assignments, speaking up, developing key relationships—that dramatically advance our careers. *The inner critic can motivate you to be a meticulous worker bee, but it can't motivate you to be a game changer.*



- **Playing bigger costs.** Whatever playing big looks like for you, think about this: Can your inner critic really help you do that more boldly, more quickly, and with greater enjoyment? Can your inner critic motivate you to pursue your callings? No.
- **Health costs.** When we are motivated by fear of failure, stress hormones flood our systems. Long-term stress is correlated with a variety of health problems, from heart disease to asthma to depression. Human bodies are not designed to be in a stressed state for hours each day, and it wrecks our health if we are.

If you care about your physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being, listening to the inner critic is not a viable way to stay motivated.

In some sense, the woman at the accounting firm who asked the question was correct: If she let go of her inner critic, she might, indeed, have trouble getting motivated for a while. But in that fallow time, she'd have the space to begin to discover where her natural river of motivation lay. She'd either find a *positive* reason to get excited about performing with excellence in her current job, such as doing incredible work with her team, sharing her talents in the world, and earning more for her family, or she'd need to explore alternative roles that sparked more of her passion.

## Noticing and Naming the Critic

Now let's turn to what you can do day to day, moment to moment, self-doubting thought to self-doubting thought to quiet your inner critic.

The day of unflinching, gorgeous confidence isn't coming. Self-doubt will always be a part of what we each work with as we take steps to play bigger. The name of the game is not eliminating self-doubt. *The name of the game is learning how to let the inner critic do its thing, without taking direction from it. The goal is to hear the inner critic's voice but not let that voice determine your choices.*

Bestselling author Dani Shapiro's work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Elle*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. She has taught in the



writing programs at Columbia University and NYU. By any account, she has plenty of evidence that she's a successful writer. And yet here's what she has to say about self-doubt showing up in her writing process:

"I was looking at my computer one day at my list of everything I had written in the last few years—essays, stories, books, blog posts, everything. I realized that every single one of these pieces had begun with the words running through my mind, 'Here goes nothing. Here goes nothing. It's not going to work this time . . . I know it's worked before, but this time somehow I'm in over my head. I'm not going to get it right, I'm not going to be able to figure it out. But you know what? I'm gonna do it anyway' . . . I've had this practice for so many years now, of hearing that voice say, 'You can't do this' and not listening to that voice. We all have that voice, I call it our inner sensor. It's always sitting on our shoulder in some way and it says different things to each of us. It says, 'You're stupid,' or 'Someone else did it better,' or 'How dare you? What right do you have?' . . . **The practice is in quieting that voice, not banishing it.**"

Cherry Murray is the dean of Harvard School of Engineering and Applied Sciences. Prior to her tenure at Harvard, she led some of the nation's most brilliant scientists and engineers as an executive at Bell Laboratories and the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. As described in an article in *Nature*, "She has published more than 70 papers in peer-reviewed journals, has won a number of awards, holds two patents and has served on more than 80 national and international scientific committees and governing boards. Yet the self-doubt still lurks. 'Do I ever think I'm not qualified?' she says. 'All the time.'"

Twyla Tharp, award-winning choreographer, describes in *The Creative Habit* the five big fears that still play out in her artistic life:

"1. People will laugh at me. 2. Someone has done it before. 3. I have nothing to say. 4. I will upset someone I love. 5. Once executed, the idea will never be as good as it is in my mind."



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She writes, “If I let them, they’ll shut down my impulses (‘No, you can’t do that’) and perhaps turn off the spigots of creativity altogether.”

I think of it this way: If women like these, women at the very top of their fields who have every reason to feel confident, continue to grapple with regular and serious self-doubt, you and I probably will too. In fact, these women grapple with self-doubt *because* they are playing big, regularly exposing themselves to criticism and visible failures and expressing their unique ideas and leadership in the world. Their words show that they’ve been able to play big because they know to recognize the inner critic as just *a* voice within—not the ultimate authority.

It almost seems too easy, but it’s true: You don’t have to do all that much with your inner critic. In a culture that is all about doing, this is a counterintuitive truth. Recognizing the critic’s voice consciously is often enough to immediately snap us out of its trance.

Why is noticing and naming the voice of self-doubt so powerful? Liberating yourself from the influence of the inner critic depends on a very simple insight. You are not the critical voice. You are the person *aware* of the critical voice. You are the person feeling perplexed by it or bummed out by it or believing 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. The critic is not the core of you. The core of you is the you of your aspirations, of your inner wisdom. The critic is a kind of intruder. It’s a voice that happens to play in your mind, but it is not who you really are.

Most of us are untrained in differentiating the various voices we hear in our thoughts. We think they are all “us” in the same way. As you name the inner critic voice when it shows up, you begin to unbraid it from the other strands of “you”: your imagination, your aspirations, your wisdom. By saying, “Oh, I’m hearing the critic right now,” you can remember that’s all it is and move forward despite its rants and threats.

## But What If the Critical Voice Really Is Me?

Many times, when I introduce the idea that the critic is not who we really are, a woman in the room will say to me, “No, Tara, this *is* who I really am. This is how my voice, my thinking sounds. This is the ‘me’ I know in my own head.” A few others



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will nod as they listen to her. If you feel that way, it simply means the critic has taken over—temporarily—as the dominant voice within. This can happen for a number of reasons:

- **Working in a role or attending an academic program in which critical thinking is the dominant mode.** When we spend years strengthening the critical-thinking muscle (poking holes in ideas, finding the problems with potential solutions, etc.), assessment, skepticism, and criticism become the dominant modes with which we respond not only to our work but also to our own burgeoning dreams. When it comes to our aspirations, a more nurturing and generative response would serve us better.
- **We received consistent criticism from key people in our lives in early childhood** and have internalized their voices.
- **The critic has won out—for now.** For many women, there is a self-compounding quality to the inner critic. Once allowed to be in charge, the critic takes more and more control, as if a conqueror gathering territory. Like an untreated, progressive disease, this worsens over time. As it does, your comfort zone shrinks and ossifies. When that happens, you will start to feel like the inner critic is “just you” because it’s the primary voice in your head.

If you feel like the inner critic is “just who you are,” rest assured: It’s not. You are in for some wonderful, liberating changes as you use the practices in this chapter. You’ll start to hear and know the other voices within. I promise.

## The Practices: What to Do, Moment to Moment, When Self-Doubt Shows Up

1. **Label and notice.** When you hear your critic talking, label this voice by simply saying to yourself, “Oh, I’m hearing my inner critic right now.” This is the foundational inner critic practice on which all the others depend.



2. **Separate the “I” from the inner critic.** For example, you might say, “*My inner critic* is having a little freak-out right now” rather than “*I’m* having a freak-out right now.” When you refer to the inner critic as the inner critic, instead of conflating it with the core “I” of you, you train your mind that the critic is simply one voice within you and not the primary one.
3. **Create a character that personifies your inner critic.** This is a great tool that I learned from the Coaches Training Institute. The journaling questions and examples later in this chapter will guide you, step by step, in doing this. When you create a character with a name and visual image, you help yourself remember that the critic is not the core of you, it’s one voice, with its own personality and pathology. It’s easier to get a handle on the critic because you can see its words as coming from a finite (and usually rather absurd) character. You can begin to have a sense of humor about the critic too. After all, what it’s saying is usually ridiculous!
4. **Compassionately see your inner critic’s motives.** When you hear the critic, check in and ask that voice of self-doubt, “What are you trying to do right now? What harm are you trying to protect me from?” Once you’ve created an inner critic character, you can picture your character and actually ask him or her, in your mind’s eye, what his or her motivation is. You might ask what he or she is most afraid of. Once you are in touch with the root of the critic’s intentions, respond with compassion toward the critic’s misguided attempt to keep you safe—usually from attack, embarrassment, isolation, or failure. A great way to do this is to acknowledge those motives and then sincerely respond with, “Thanks so much for your input, but I’ve got this one covered.”
5. **Look for the humor.** Ask yourself, What is absurd or funny about what my critic is saying right now?
6. **Remove your critic from the scene.** Either stand up and “act out” walking your inner critic character into a different space or imagine him



or her going off to a different place. Then begin your work again knowing “It’s just me here—the inner critic is on a break for now.”

7. **Pantomime putting all your inner critic thoughts into a vessel (a cup, bowl, box).** Then move that vessel out of the room and begin your work again with the sense that the critic isn’t present in the room with you anymore.
8. **Picture the voice receding into space.** Notice where, physically, it feels like the inner critic voice is located in or around your body, and picture the voice receding into space, moving away from you.
9. **Imagine you can simply turn down the volume on the critic’s voice.** See an “inner critic volume dial” in your mind’s eye and turn the volume way down.

## Inner Critic Don’ts: Arguing and Attacks

These nine tools give you lots of options for what to do when the inner critic shows up. There are also a couple important “don’ts”—what *not* to do when you hear the critic.

Fitness coach Jillian Michaels is known as “America’s Toughest Trainer.” A couple of years ago, we talked about the inner critic on her radio show, and we explored how Jillian’s inner critic had impacted her.

Jillian asked me what we do after we acknowledge the critic: “Tell her to piss off?” she asked. She was starting to see all the ways her critic had held her back, and understandably, she was getting angry about it.

“Well, how well has that worked in the past?” I asked Jillian.

“Well, she’s not gone . . .” she answered.

Jillian had the instinct many of us have: to make the inner critic the enemy and blast it with anger. That can feel like an empowered response, but it’s not. We don’t ever want to make a part of us the enemy, to go to war with a part of





ourselves. Plus, an angry, forceful response doesn't make the inner critic shrink away. In fact, it can strengthen the critic's power.

Why? Imagine for a moment that the inner critic voice is a very afraid child misbehaving because of his or her terror. Would telling that child to "leave you alone" or "shut up" cause the child to behave better? No. Reassurance, love, and addressing the child's underlying fears would. The critic is like that child, stemming from a very afraid part of ourselves. By getting angry at it, we often just inflame it.

Jillian and I talked about how else one could respond: noticing and naming the critic, understanding the critic's motivations of self-protection so that we could then reassure the afraid part of ourselves and move forward in spite of the critic's doubts.

Like getting angry, *arguing with the voice of self-doubt* is another knee-jerk response many of us have, and it's just as ineffective as a forceful or angry response. Arguing sounds like this:

Your critic says: "You look ugly!"

You say (or try to say) back, "No, I look great in this!"

Your critic says, "You aren't prepared enough for this presentation—you are about to lose this client!"

You say, "No, I won't—I did a good job preparing!"

We never win arguments with our inner critics. When you spend any time arguing with the critic, the critic is "winning" because while you are busy arguing with it, you are not doing your thing, putting your voice out there, risking failure to fulfill your aspirations, nurturing your budding dreams. Plus, your critic has a long list of reasons you shouldn't play bigger, and if you successfully win the argument about reason #84, the critic will simply move on to reason #85. It's a rabbit hole. *You don't have to win the argument with your inner critic; you have to step away from the conversation.*

You can do this with the simple "Oh, I'm hearing the critic now" that we've talked about—by noticing and naming the critic's voice. You can also add a second tool from the list: investigating the critic's motives. When you hear the voice of self-doubt, ask that voice, "What are you trying to do? What are you trying to prevent or protect me from?" When you are in touch with its underlying motives, you can



compassionately see the inner critic's intentions: to keep you safe from the kinds of attack, embarrassment, or isolation it most fears.

My own inner critic often comes up when I head into certain speaking engagements ("This audience will never go for this! You don't have enough research backing up what you are going to say!") or when I have a media appearance coming up ("You haven't been taking good care of yourself and you're going to look horrible. You didn't go over your talking points. You are totally unprepared for this one!").

One of my favorite things to say back to my own inner critic in these situations is this simple sentence: **"Thanks, but I've got this one covered."** That "thank you" is sincere, not flippant. When I say it, I feel real appreciation for the critic's attempt to protect me from potential embarrassment or failure in these highly visible moments. In the "but I've got this one covered," the more mature me takes back the steering wheel, reassuring the fearful part of me that things are okay. It's like finding the calm, responsible adult within who can say to the hysterical child, "You don't need to worry. I'll take care of us here." When I say those words, I'm neither arguing with the critic nor repressing it. I'm hearing the objection, providing some reassurance, and moving on.

## What if My Inner Critic Character Is My Mom?

A few years ago, I gave a workshop on the inner critic for a large national women's organization. Most of the women in the audience were over sixty and had been pioneers—among the first women in their professional field.

How would they respond to the topic of the inner critic, I wondered. Would they still be grappling with the voice of self-doubt, or would they have moved far beyond it? Or would women who had been such trailblazers have been relatively free from self-doubt all along?

As I spoke about the inner critic, there was lots of nodding, laughter, and tears of recognition. One woman in the back raised her hand. "My inner critic voice is my mother's internalized voice," she said, "and I'm wondering how many other women in the room that was true for too."



We did a show of hands. About three-quarters of the hands in the room went up. Three-quarters of the women in the room had seen some version of their mothers as their inner critic.

This was new. When I teach an inner critic workshop to midcareer or early-career women, usually some notice that their inner critic connects to their mother's voice, but that connection is not nearly as common as it was for these older women.

I told the women in the room that the prevalence of mother inner critics was unusual and asked them what they thought about it. "Our mothers raised us in a very different time. They were teaching us how to be appropriate women—the kind of women who could survive in the culture. We were taught to be polite, to find a good husband, to take care of our children—to focus on our family first." I wonder if this is an expression of the progress women have made. Liberated themselves, perhaps far fewer mothers today are imparting the kinds of beliefs and judgments that become a harsh inner critic voice inside their daughters.

But no matter what your age, you aren't alone if you've noticed that your inner critic is an echo of your mother's voice. After all, no one has as formative an impact on our psyches as our mothers. But you also aren't alone if you notice your inner critic voice is an echo of your father's voice, or your sisters' or your brothers'. None of those are uncommon either.

Or perhaps you notice the voice of a significant mentor, professor, or boss. On another occasion, I gave an inner critic workshop to women in a large law firm. There were about fifty partners, junior partners, and associates in the room.

People had seemed engaged and were taking lots of notes, but when I asked people to write down a description of a character who personified their critic, and to give that character a name, the room went totally silent. I looked around and saw that all the pens in the room stopped moving. I assumed I hadn't given clear directions for the writing exercise, so I repeated them, this time paying more attention to my words. Still, no pens moved.

"I'm noticing no one is writing," I said, a little nervously. My own inner critic was getting worried that the material was too out-there for them and they had given up on me. "Did the instructions make sense?"

"Oh, yes, they made sense," one of the younger women in the room said, with a kind of chuckle in her voice. "I just can't write this stuff down about my inner critic



character because it's someone who works here." Women around the room nodded and laughed in recognition.

"How many people in the room are having that same problem right now?" I asked. Dozens of hands went up.

The culture at this firm was tough. It was highly competitive, and feedback was given in an insensitive way. Most of the women in the room had an internalized inner critic that was reflective of the firm's culture—and in particular, reflective of a few harsh senior voices in the company.

If, as you've been reading this chapter, you've noticed that your inner critic sounds like an internalized voice of a family member or professional colleague or boss, you can use this to your advantage. You know something about this person's struggles and fears. You can probably see some of the wounds in their own life that led to the beliefs that you've internalized as an inner critic. You can shine the light of understanding on your critic even more brightly because of your familiarity with this person.

Second, don't blame. It's not this person's fault that you grapple with self-doubt. Remember that we are hardwired for the critic: If your inner critic didn't find inspiration in your mother, your father, or your boss, it would have found it elsewhere.

And third, don't preach. Especially with family members, you might feel tempted to go tell them about your new discovery of your inner critic and what they had to do with it! Not a good move. The best way you can be of service to both your own growth and to theirs is to focus on your own inner work. They will be more influenced by who you become than by what you try to tell them.

## Getting to Know Your Inner Critic — Journaling Questions

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*Write down some of the things that your inner critic says. What are its commonly voiced beliefs? If you are having trouble thinking of what it says, here are some situations that may prompt your answers:*



- *What—if anything—does it say to you when you contemplate speaking up about something that feels scary or like a stretch during an important meeting at work?*
- *When you think about making a career move that excites you?*
- *When you come up with a big idea?*
- *About starting a website or blog of some kind?*
- *When you walk into a party where you don't know many people?*
- *When you are feeling challenged as a parent, wife, or daughter?*
- *About reclaiming a creative hobby or sharing your creative work with others?*
- *When you're getting dressed in the morning?*
- *When you look in the mirror?*
- *When you are trying on clothes in a store or getting dressed for an important event?*

*Sometimes, our inner critics take “inspiration” from people in our lives—that abusive boss from years ago, the mean advisor from graduate school, a tough family member. Does your inner critic echo any external critics?*

*Sometimes, our inner critics have cultural sources. For example, you might see your inner critic is the archetype of “the perfect Southern wife” or “the ideal daughter in Chinese culture.” What cultural archetypes does your inner critic embody or ask you to live up to?*

*Looking over your inner critic's common narratives, brainstorm five adjectives that describe your inner critic's personality. For example, maybe your inner critic is hyper or anxious or people-pleasing or stubborn.*

*Create a character. Bring your inner critic's voice to mind. Notice: Does it sound like a female voice or male voice? An older voice or a younger voice? From there, start to imagine: If your inner critic were a person, what kind of person would it be? An old, stern professor? The popular girl in high school?*



*Create a character that personifies your inner critic. You can invent a character or pick a figure from film, literature, politics, or pop culture. Build out a portrait of his or her life: Where does your critic live? What does he or she wear? What does he or she eat for breakfast? Name your character and begin to call it by its name when it shows up.*

Lisa Jemus, a student in my Playing Big program, put it this way, “My inner critic is an older female. She is in a dark kitchen with this fringy lamp lighting her. She’s got the long fingernails and the red lipstick and the dark dyed hair. She’s got a crackly sort of voice, and she’s quite mean. I named her Sharza. When I wrote her name again at the end of all the describing, I wrote, ‘Hah, what a joke!’ I thought, ‘She doesn’t even know what she’s talking about.’ That’s really what I felt in that moment, and I had never felt that before about this voice in me. That was a gift. I look at her with quite a bit of humor actually. The whole thing is quite funny.”

Here’s how Rebekah described hers: “I named my inner critic ‘Slave Driver.’ She has harsh angular features and dishwater blond hair. She’s super intense, high energy, muscular. She’s always in motion, always demanding more. She carries a whip at her hip and drives a very fast red car. It’s kind of fun to laugh at it now that I got it written all out there. She’s bitter over her past and wants to project that on me. She keeps herself safe by living by strict rules and wants to impose them on me also. She’s trying to keep me busy, always pushing me to be more, do more. There is something deep within her that she’s never dealt with that she copes with by being busy, projecting her pain and need for busyness onto me.”

You may find that your inner critic has a few different voices. For example, one critic voice might sound like a former ceramics teacher and show up around your pottery, one might worry about disappointing people and so pushes you to overcommit, and one might get really cynical and nasty and give up on things abruptly. That’s great—you’re refining your understanding of how the inner critic operates in your life. You can untangle the thread of your inner critic into several different strands. Kellie McElhaney, a professor at UC Berkeley’s Haas School of Business, talks about her two inner critics:

“I have two inner critics. One is a personal life inner critic and one is a professional life inner critic. The personal life inner critic is



Heather from the film *Heathers*. The professional inner critic is the stereotypical old, male professor. In my mind he looks like Ebenezer Scrooge. Interestingly, they often cross over out of their area of expertise. The personal inner critic, Heather, will criticize me about things on the job (about which she knows nothing), and the professor will criticize me about my personal life.”

*Journal about your inner critic character. What’s he or she like? What would his or her name be?*

*How does personifying the critic lighten its influence and help you take it less seriously? How does it help you see it as simply one voice within—not the whole of you or the real you?*

*Investigate your critic’s motives. Think of something that your inner critic is talking to you about at this stage of your life. Close your eyes. Picture the character that you’ve created. Hear the inner critic saying that thing it says. Then, in your mind’s eye, ask him or her, “Why are you saying that to me? What are you trying to achieve by saying that?”*

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

Dear Perfectionista—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

*If you’re motivated in part by your critic, look back: When in your life did you experience a lot of motivation that didn’t come from fear and self-doubt? What motivated you then? How did acting from that place feel, and what were the results?*



## Friendly Warning:

### Inner Critic Work is Ongoing

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As you use the tools and journaling questions in this chapter, you'll find your relationship with your inner critic begins to change. But no matter how amazing your initial results, don't think you are done! The critic will be back. Remember the function of the critic: to try to keep you safe from any emotional risk, even those emotional risks you want to take on the road to playing bigger. It will speak up when you stretch in new ways. Come back to the tools and journaling questions again and again as you need them.

The inner critic is a crafty, rapidly evolving entity. Let's say your inner critic used to show up with messages pressuring you to work long hours. You successfully became aware of it and are reducing your hours and valuing your free time. You can expect to hear the inner critic show up with the opposite message—that you are not doing a good enough job reducing hours and valuing your free time! It will work itself into your new framework; it will use the currency of what you value at any given moment. When you learn to recognize your inner critic's usual lines, it will invent new ones and come at you from a different angle. So, expect to use inner critic management tools in an ongoing way in your life. These are practices for forever.

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### The Big Ideas

1. Having an inner critic is neither abnormal nor pathological. We *all* have inner critics.
2. The critic is one voice in you—a voice that may have become dominant. But it's not the core you. The core you is the you of your talents, your aspirations, and your desire to express and receive love in the world in your unique way.
3. The goal isn't to get rid of your inner critic. The goal is to learn how to hear those crazy thoughts and self-doubts, know them for what they are, and not let them determine what you do.





4. The inner critic is worried about keeping you safe. It doesn't care at all whether you are fulfilled along the way. If you listen to the critic, you'll take fewer risks of a certain kind, but you won't make the contribution you are meant to make.
5. The foundational tool for dealing with the inner critic is this: Recognize the inner critic when it shows up and name it for what it is.



## What's Next? Get the Book!



If you want to play bigger, move past self-doubt and fear, and start going for your callings, get you *Playing Big* book, published by PenguinRandomHouse. You'll learn how to manage your inner critic, unhook from praise and criticism so you can do your boldest work, take swift action towards your dreams, and so much more. Grab your copy [here](#).

### Praise for *Playing Big*

"At last. At last this very important book has been written, encouraging women to take up all the creative space they deserve in the world. I hope it will empower legions of women to step into their greatness. I couldn't be happier about this publication."

Elizabeth Gilbert  
*Big Magic & Eat Pray Love*

"With clarity, warmth and wisdom, Tara shines a light on our blocks to manifesting our potential, and offers practical, well-honed strategies that move us toward fulfillment. This is a book that can transform the trajectory of your life."

Tara Brach  
Author of *Radical Acceptance & True Refuge*



*Playing Big: Practical Wisdom for Women Who Want to Speak Up, Create, and Lead*  
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## About Tara

Tara Mohr is an expert on women's leadership and well-being. She is the author of *Playing Big: Practical Wisdom for Women Who Want to Speak Up, Create, and Lead*, named a best book of the year by Apple's iBooks. Tara is the creator and teacher of the global **Playing Big leadership program** for women, and creator of the **Playing Big Facilitators Training** for coaches, therapists, managers and mentors. She is a Coaches Training Institute-certified coach with an MBA from Stanford University and an undergraduate degree in English literature from Yale. Her work has been featured on national media from the *New York Times* to *Today Show* to *Harvard Business Review*. She lives in San Francisco with her husband, son, and daughter.



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