

How to Work with Clients Who Struggle with an Inner Critic

How to Work with the Inner Critic and Depression

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How to Work with Clients Who Struggle with an Inner Critic: Module 9

How to Work with the Inner Critic and Depression

Dr. Buczynski: How do we help a client who is struggling with both a strong inner critic and depression?

Dr. Richard Schwartz says it requires a multi-step process. Because those two factors can often be at odds with each other. On one side, there's the inner critic trying to motivate the client with criticism., And on the other side is the depression, which can de-motivate them through shutdown.

Richard says this can create a painful tug-of-war within the client.

But as we'll discover later, it can also get worse. Especially when the inner critic makes the ultimate threat.

Dr. Schwartz: We specialize in inner critics – they're our bread and butter. And almost everybody has one. In general, people with depression have severe inner critics. In contrast to what many people do with their inner critic – fight with them, stand up for themselves or attempt to ignore them – we have the client focus on that inner voice and find it in their body. Most of the time they'll find it in their head.

"People with depression have severe inner critics."

We'll then ask, "How do you feel toward this part?" Most people hate it or are terrified of it. We ask our clients to give those kind of feelings toward their inner critics space. We let them know that if they step back they are going to be able to help their inner critic change. That's a great selling point because everybody feels completely dominated. We can quickly get clients into that curious place with their critic. This is where we would focus on it and ask it what it wants the person to know about himself. Oftentimes, the first answer to that question is more criticism. For example, "I want you to know that you're worthless and that you're lazy."

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Then I'd say, "Ask it why it feels the need to call you these names. What is it afraid would happen if it wasn't so hard on you?"

And in answering *that* question, like any other protector, we'll get some kind of protective answer: "If I didn't

do this to you...” – There are usually two common reasons:

The first reason is “I have to motivate you. If I don’t call you these names, then you’re just going to sit around and do nothing. I have to push you. And this is something your parents did so I, the inner critic, learned to do that. I even took on your father’s voice to coerce you into performing and being perfect. If I didn’t do this, you’d make mistakes, you’d be sloppy or you’d be lazy.”

The second reason is, “If I didn’t make you feel terrible about yourself, then you would be out there doing irresponsible things and getting yourself hurt. So, if I can run down your confidence, then I can keep you safe.”

Dr. Buczynski: As we’ve heard throughout the program, the inner critic will often take on a protective role. And it will often do this in one of the two ways that Dick just laid out.

At this point, Dick is starting to look at the dynamic between the critic and the client’s other parts. Sometimes the critic is trying to protect against another protective part, and this can complicate matters.

But before any of this inner critic work can take place, Dick knows that there’s a very important first step:

Negotiating permission.

Dr. Schwartz: We then say, “If we can heal what you, the inner critic, are trying to protect inside the client so that they weren’t so vulnerable to feeling like a failure if they tried, would you have to be so extreme?” or, “If we could go to the parts that might shut them down and not allow them to try, and then release all of that so that there wasn’t a fear anymore, would you have to be so hard on the client?”

Most of the time these parts will say, “No, but I don’t think you can do that anyway.”

I’ll then say, “Well, would you give me a chance to show you that we can?”

This is where the client and their critic gets hopeful, “Okay, I’ll give it a try.”

We then ask, “If we *could* liberate you from this role of being the inner critic, what would you like to do instead? If you could do anything you wanted.” The answer to this question is often something that is quite constructive.

We then get permission to uncover what it’s protecting. It’s either an exile or the protection of the client from another protector such as the lethargic, low-motivation example.

There's this polarization between the part of the critic who's trying to goad you into functioning and then the depressed, "Don't try" gloom and doom part that's trying to protect you from trying and failing. There are strategies to deal with these exiles that are afraid of failing, carry shame from failing or are very hurt.

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but it does work."

The strategy we use to help our clients begins with the critic. We then get permission to go to the other, depressed part, we work with that and then we get permission to go to what *it* protects and we heal it. We then come back and they're no longer polarized and they both want new jobs.

I know this sounds very casual, but it does work. Though, it sometimes takes a while.

Dr. Buczynski: That can be a crucial sequencing when we're working with a client who is depressed. Dick also knows that if he doesn't first get permission from the inner critic, it could try to sabotage the work.

So let's look at how he uses these strategies in a session. In the following case study, Dick welcomed a 24 year-old client who struggled with both a harsh inner critic and depression.

To add to the challenge, this client wanted to come off of his antipsychotic medication. But he was afraid that if he did so, his psychotic episodes would return.

Here's how Dick approached the problem and helped his client take the first step toward healing.

Dr. Schwartz: I began with having him explore his inner world. We found that he was dominated by a part that wouldn't let him get out in the world. This is what we focused on. It was a classic case where he had his first psychotic episode when he left home for college and began to have problems with school. He then had to move back home with his mother.

The other part was that he was now living with his mother and hating it, but he felt completely constrained by the fear of being in the world. This is that shutdown part of the critic that keeps people passive.

He hated and would attack himself both for his inability to function out in the world and for living with his mother. So he's living with his mother and he hated that, but he felt totally constrained by this fear of being in the world and that shutdown part that kept him very passive. And he hated that he was like that, so he was attacking himself for being in that state.

And every time he *would* start to get out and try, he would have a paranoia episode and find himself in the

hospital and soon back at his mother's.

We started with the shutdown part and had him find it in his body, which he was able to do. We asked it what it was afraid would happen if it didn't do this to him and it said, "If I let him try, he would fail again."

"This shutdown part felt like it was literally saving his life."

The failure would bring on a new part of the critic that would be so unbelievably brutal that it would then make him suicidal. So this shutdown part felt like it was literally saving his life.

We had to get permission to go to the suicide part first, so that it wasn't such a threat. There was a lot of fear about doing that, but we negotiated and began to focus on the suicide. We had him get curious about it and ask what it was afraid would happen if it didn't kill him. It talked about how much he would suffer the rest of his life if he failed one more time and felt the shame of failure again. It couldn't allow that.

Like most inner critics, we could honor it for trying to protect him, but we had to get to the root of it. We began the common negotiation used for these types of parts. If we could heal the one that gets hurt by failing, would it have to kill him? It said, "No, but I don't think you can do that." We replied, "Would you give us a chance to show that we can?" We received the permission.

We then needed to work with the psychotic, shutdown critic to get to the suicide one. And that took a lot, because it seemed like everything – the psychotic, suicide and shutdown parts – were all organized to protect the parts that carried the shame about failing. Some of this shame came from his father's attacks on his past failures. The critic would repeat a lot of what the father had said about him.

They finally gave us permission and I could help him have that conversation. I had to do what I call *direct access*, because he was so afraid of this critic. I would ask to talk to it directly. It went like this: "Okay, so let me talk to the part of you that's so hard on you for a second, directly. Are you there?"

This part of him would respond, "Yes."

"Okay. So, you call him names all day, and make him feel completely worthless. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Okay. Why do you do that?"

This is where the part of the critic will usually respond with, "Because he's worthless. He deserves it."

I'll reply, "Okay. Maybe that's true, but what are you afraid will happen if you *didn't* do that?"

It'll say, "He'd feel good about himself, try to go out into the world, fail, and then kill himself."

We were then able to give it a lot of credit for keeping him alive and saving his life, which caused the part to soften enormously. I then could say, "Okay, let me talk to the kid again" – *kid*, he's 24 – followed by, "How do you feel toward the critic now?"

And he had a totally different idea about it and could let it know he understood that it was trying to protect

"He could let it know he understood that it was trying to protect him."

him. This allowed him to form a new relationship with it.

And his therapist was in the room – this was a consult – and I could hand the time to his therapist, who began helping him do that work with those parts.

Dr. Buczynski: When clients are able to acknowledge the important job of their self-critic, it can change the power dynamic. The critic can finally feel heard and appreciated. This can also help the client create some space from their critic by renegotiating its role in their life.

One of the things I wanted to revisit was Dick's comment about why an inner critic can be so harsh to our clients. If you remember, he said it was for two reasons: to motivate them and to keep them safe.

And I wondered – could there be another goal or sub-goal of chronic self-criticism? For some thoughts on this, here's Dr. Kelly McGonigal and Dr. Ron Siegel.

Dr. McGonigal: the motivation one I see a lot.

But even more than that are people who are trying to assert agency and who are really blaming themselves for past suffering as a way to try to give them the sense that they can control or prevent future suffering.

I see this a lot with parents, for example, whose children have suffered in some way and there's a very strong inner critic that has a story about what they could have done differently to lead to a different outcome. It's not so much about motivation as it is "There must have been something I *could* have done – and therefore there's something I can do now."

That's interesting because it's a really positive motivation, and, rather than getting into a battle with whether or not it's true, you can sort of shift the focus toward, rather than blame and self-criticism, an approach

orientation, commitments and the future: “What are the rules that you want to live by? What do you want to prioritize? What are your values?”

That was something I haven’t seen come up quite as much in these series, these conversations: that you would use self-criticism to regain a sense of agency.

Dr. Siegel: That a really important point. It is so hard for us to imagine that we’re simply at the whims of fate and that so many things are relatively random that happen. Thinking, “It’s my fault and it’s because I’m bad” offers the option that, “Well, if I can only get my act together, then I’d be able to control my fate,” which is not necessarily the case.

Dr. Buczynski: Ron’s thought points out how much we tend to value control over uncertainty. Even if it means blaming ourselves – at least it’s something we can hold onto. This need to avoid randomness could help explain why some clients will listen so strongly to their inner critic.

Dr. McGonigal: Yes; it’s interesting to think that people might prefer the feeling state of self-criticism and self-blame over the feeling state of being out of control, the same way that people prefer feeling angry over feeling afraid.

“People might prefer the feeling state of self-criticism and self-blame over the feeling state of being out of control.”

I remember having an argument with a meditation teacher that I would only give up the inner critic once I’d fixed everything it was helpfully pointing out to me needed to be fixed. It was so *obvious* that it was right, and I would just take care of that stuff, and then we would move on. Of course the inner critic is right.

Dr. Buczynski: A strong desire to control the future could leave clients vulnerable to a harsh self-critic.

Coming up, we’ll look at how our views of self-esteem could also be giving power to the inner critic. I’ll see you there.