



# Next Level Practitioner

## Week 107: Healing Relationship Wounds That Feed the Inner Critic

Day 5: Critical Insights

with Ron Siegel, PsyD; Kelly McGonigal, PhD; and Ruth Buczynski, PhD

National Institute for the Clinical  
Application of Behavioral Medicine





Week 107, Day 5: Ron Siegel, PsyD and Kelly McGonigal, PhD

Critical Insights



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Week 107, Day 5: Ron Siegel, PsyD and Kelly McGonigal, PhD

Critical Insights



**Dr. Buczynski:** Hello everyone. Welcome back. We're going to jump right in and start with what stood out to you this week. I'm going to start with you, Ron, and then we'll go to you, Kelly.

## The Importance of Clients Empathizing with Their Inner Critic

**Dr. Siegel:** The central theme came up of the need to really appreciate the inner critic and understand how it's been developed to help us in some way, or to protect parts of us in some way. But this week there were a number of really lovely ways that people approached this.

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Ellyn talked about the two-chairs method borrowed from Gestalt therapy, and particularly the idea of putting the parent – who generated the inner critic for so many of us – into one chair and then put ourselves into the other chair, or our "child self" in the other chair, and create a dialogue between the two of them. It seemed like a very nice way to do it.

Stan came at this from a different approach – and I hope we'll get into this more: the idea that we don't really have that strong an ego function until we reach age 26 or so, so we need to take in these interjects from our parents about what's right or wrong. And those often become the inner critic. And of course, we need to appreciate them because without them we're sociopaths.

Then finally Pat had a really nice metaphor that she talked about: "How do you get rid of a ghost in this house? By setting a place for him or her."

"We have to find some way to nurture whatever the vulnerable parts are in us that become condemned by the inner critic."

We really heard some very nice approaches to this. All of them, in addition to embracing the inner critic, also talked about how we have to find some way to nurture whatever the vulnerable parts are in us that become condemned by the inner critic.

Ruth, you picked up on something really interesting in this regard when Ellyn said, in discussing supporting the vulnerable part, “If you try something new, don’t worry – you can always go back to your old pattern,” which was really quite elegant and eloquent on her part. A very interesting approach to support us in experimenting in new ways to do it.

Then Stan talked about also supporting the vulnerable part by engaging our partners, and Pat by holding and nurturing the vulnerable part. We had a very nice medley of different ways to embrace the critic and embrace the part that’s injured by the critic.

**Dr. Buczynski:** How about you, Kelly – what stood out to you?

**Dr. McGonigal:** One of the things that Ron mentioned was the example that Ellyn gave of having the two-chair dialogue with the parent and trying to be the self and the parent, answering questions from the parent’s point of view.

It reminded me of this intervention that one of my colleagues developed where you speak to a virtual avatar of your aging self, as a way to get to know your future self, or your retirement-age self. The idea behind that intervention is when you have to answer questions or be interviewed as another person, you project yourself into that other person or avatar in a way that then makes you feel more empathy for them and more connection to them.

This was the first time I’ve really thought of the two-chair dialogue as using or really exploiting that kind of mechanism of projection. I realized that a lot of the conversations we’ve had about inner critics were really asking people to take the perspective of the inner critic or the parent who gave rise to the inner critic, and maybe not fully appreciating how much of the self-projection is part of what makes that work.

When people have to take that point of view, either of the critical parent or the inner-critic voice, they project onto that maybe something that they can connect to, that they appreciate or that they have some empathy for.

It almost doesn’t even matter if it’s right. You could be making up a story about why your parent caused you to suffer, but when you project yourself in a way that allows you to empathize with the parent who caused that suffering, it changes your relationship with them.

It really highlights how much, when we ask people to take the perspective of the inner critic, we’re really

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taking advantage of that – that once you’ve taken that perspective, then you have a different kind of relationship.

**Dr. Siegel:** Kelly, as a note, when you’re talking about the avatar approach, you’re talking about the sort of virtual-reality avatar.

That’s a fascinating area of research: having people actually see themselves moving in space as the other and then identify with that other.

**Dr. McGonigal:** Yes. It does amplify it, for sure. But the two chairs, having to physically relocate yourself, having that internal body sense can go maybe not as far as virtual reality, but it definitely is more embodied and more real than just sort of casually thinking about it.

## Ways to Help Clients Distance Themselves from Their Inner Critic

**Dr. Buczynski:** I’ve got some specific questions for you, and I’m going to ask both of you to respond to this question. Stan Tatkin talked about how the inner critic can be viewed as “the superego gone crazy.” With that understanding, what are some ways to bring it back into check?

“There’s always a dynamic tension between our instinctual nature and what we have to do to participate well in society.”

**Dr. Siegel:** Stan spoke about this obvious connection – which Freud pointed out so clearly: that there’s always a dynamic tension between our instinctual or just our mammalian nature and what we have to do in order to get along with one another and participate well in society. Freud mostly focused on sex and aggression but this exists in other areas also.

Of course when we’re young, it’s really up to the adults to teach us, “Okay, I understand that instinct but we’re not going to act on that one right now,” because you’re with other people, and other people have needs as well.

This becomes our conscience over time – what Freud called the *superego* – which is actually a terrible translation from the German; the much more direct translation is it’s the *over-eye* – which is how it feels to us: “There’s somebody standing over me that has a sense of telling me what’s right or wrong.” If we don’t have that, of course, we’re left with being sociopathic.

Stan adds, though, this really important other dimension, which is the neurobiological development of our capacity for reflection, on our capacity to think before acting on various parts of the frontal lobes.

I remember when somebody first pointed out to me, “You don’t really have to be a neurobiologist to know when the frontal lobes mature. All you have to do is go in to rent a car. When you go in to rent a car, they ask, ‘Are you other 25 or are you not over 25?’” There’s a reason why the car-rental companies know that, “Hmm, frontal lobes don’t really mature until you’re after age 25.”

Putting it in this perspective and looking at it neurobiologically is really a gift because it makes it make so much *sense* that we should have the inner critic. We *absolutely* need it until we develop a capacity to really play out what the consequences of our actions might be. And not just the consequences for me but, “What are the consequences for me, for others, in the short run, in the long run?”

It is these elements that Freud called *ego strength*, or what other traditions would say are *wisdom*, and this wisdom just doesn’t develop that well earlier, so of *course* we need this stuff to be interjected. And we can appreciate that it’s there rather than hating it.

But we can also get to a point in our lives where we realize, “You know, I don’t have to just listen to the interject as a black-or-white definitive statement. I can reason this out and see; you know, there may be exceptions here. And I certainly don’t have to beat myself up if my judgment, what I did, doesn’t happen to turn out well. It was the best judgment under those circumstances.” So that was a really useful contribution on Stan’s part.

**Dr. Buczynski:** How about you, Kelly – what are your thoughts?

“We can get to a point in our lives where we realize, *It was the best judgement under those circumstances.*”

**Dr. McGonigal:** It’s interesting listening to Ron describe the development and function of the superego. It

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reminds me of one of the conversations that I often found myself having with people who have strong inner critics.

They believe that who they *really* are is the one who has the negative or horrible impulses, and that the inner critic is somehow not them. They use this language of the superego, as Ron was saying, the sort of “above

eye” – the idea that you’re outsourcing the best aspects of yourself by giving it to the inner critic or the superego.

One of the strategies I often share with people is you need to reclaim as this core to who you are, those ideal aspirations that you are then judging yourself on, rather than outsourcing it and believing that who you really are is the one who will mess up, or isn't good enough, or wants to always indulge in harmful impulses.

In nonviolent communication, often, when someone is acting in unskillful ways, the best thing to do is to look for what the need is that is unmet, and you can do this through the inner critic as well. When the inner critic is getting on you, criticizing you for something you've done, or anticipating something that you might do wrong, you can think, "What's that value that has been internalized but not fully identified, that you are sort of giving the inner critic the job to monitor it?"

Is it that you want to be a good parent or spouse? Is it that you want to contribute? Is it that you want to not create harm or be a nuisance or whatever sort of the value is, what is it that *you* value? And you can *reclaim* it in the same way that you would acknowledge an unmet need and say, "This is something that really matters to me and I should look for ways to pursue it."

It is really interesting: even just to think of the inner critic as a superego. It really needs to be that part of you who wants to be discerning and monitor yourself. It's really part of who you are, and we don't need a voice in our head that monitors us as if we were like sort of the "object" as opposed to the "subject" doing the reflection.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Ron, what percent of the time do you think that the inner critic is the superego?

**Dr. Siegel:** I've been pondering that. I don't think it's 100 percent of the time at all. Sometimes it's just a relative of the superego.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Sometimes it's vague: "You're too fat/You're too..." whatever.

**Dr. Siegel:** Yes; sometimes it's not moral. Because the superego is generally around morality, around what one has to do.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Exactly. And sometimes it's more about, "You're just not good enough."

**Dr. Siegel:** Yes. Exactly. That's a really important point: that, while Stan was identifying it with the superego, that's *a* component. But it's a useful component when that *is* operating, to have that perspective. But sometimes it's a different kind of critic as well.

## When Lovingkindness is Key in Working with the Inner Critic

**Dr. Buczynski:** The next question is about something that Pat Ogden said. As you will recall, she was working with a woman whose inner critic was constantly telling her that she wasn't good enough, which prompted her to always feel like she had to work harder and harder in order in order to be better.

Once they worked through where that critic came from, Pat noticed that her client was still motivated but now it was for the sake of her own joy and satisfaction. It's common for people to feel motivated by their inner critic, to feel even afraid that "If I didn't have this critic on my back, I'd be a lazy bum." So how do we help them find new motivation, like Pat's client did, that's not based on just trying to hush up the inner critic?

**Dr. Siegel:** It's really just such an important question, and it comes up all the time when teaching either lovingkindness practices to people, is used a lot in positive psychology nowadays; it's basically some way to self-soothe, as well as self-compassion practices. Because people are afraid that if they're kind to themselves, they won't produce, or they won't be good citizens as a result of that.

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There is *some* truth to that. Very early on, we really *do* need the interjected parents to start to get ourself in line; in other words, when we take the kid's lollipop, if we *only* get the soothing without the admonition that "No, that's not a good idea," it might be problematic. But most of us carry it way, way further than we actually need to.

There's all this research on self-compassion – this is Kristin Neff's research – showing that if people are higher on self-compassion, they actually respond *better* to failure.

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For example, in the case of an academic failure (she's in the university – it's easy to study this stuff), when kids do poorly on a test, if they can find a way to be compassionate to themselves, it's quick/they're quicker at getting up and studying again and trying to do better the next time than if they're self-flagellating, thinking "I'm such a failure. I can't believe I was so bad, and I'm so lazy," and the like.

It's very important to talk to people about these fears: What is it that makes you feel you would never produce if you didn't have that inner critic?" Then to ask people, "Have there been situations in which you *didn't* have the inner critic running in a big way but you still were productive in the world or lived the kind of life you'd *want* to live in the world?"

Most of us can find exceptions to that: “Oh, yes! Well, I used to love doing this because I just did it for fun, not because somebody was beating me up if I didn’t do it correctly or I had to get a good report card on it.”

There was one time when Pat responded to her client and her client’s genuine pain about this by saying, “You really *are* good enough.” I was a little concerned about that, although it worked very well clinically in the situation – and I can imagine many situations where it would work well.

In a sense, to say, “You really *are* good enough” is to buy into the whole evaluative scale by which the inner critic operates, in which we’re either “good enough” or we’re “not good enough” – as opposed to, when the client was in pain, doing something that focused more on self-compassion or common humanity; for example, saying, “Of *course* that hurt when you did poorly, or when you failed” or, “We all like to feel good enough. It’s painful for all of us when that happened. Tell me what it was like for you. Let me help you with that” – some way to resonate empathically with the pain.

I get a little uncomfortable with the “You’re good enough” because it puts us back in this basic competitive world in which we can be good enough or not good enough, and that leaves us with a continuous vulnerability to the inner critic.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Yes, but we are continuously vulnerable to the inner critic.

**Dr. Siegel:** That’s also true. Again, I’m not saying it was unskillful. I’m just very often noticing the difference between when we’re activating the sort of achievement, dopamine-based system which the inner critic thrives on, which is about “Did you make the grade? Didn’t you make the grade?” versus the mammalian “tend and befriend” system, which is much more about “It’s okay – we’re in this together.”

The interesting research out of the self-compassion field is that the tend and befriend system works pretty well to motivate people. Just feeling loved – you still rise up and get up the next day and do the thing that needs to be done. So it’s just a thought.

**Dr. Buczynski:** You and I are coming from two different models of psychotherapy. Yours is teaching the person to really deal with – very importantly – always needing more and more approval in order to be good enough and in order to be okay, and dealing with that hungry heart.

There’s another model of some nurturing parent that Pat provided, that perhaps the client hadn’t had, and that there’s some healing from that nurturing parent that perhaps your model would frustrate.

**Dr. Siegel:** The trick is, is there a way to be healing and nurturing without further addicting people to feeling like you can be a “winner or a loser,” in these terms – to help people to feel that there’s some way in which you’re loved, either way. I totally agree with you that feeling loved and nurturing is bottom line; that’s most important.

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## Alternative Motivations to Guide Your Clients Away from Their Inner Critic

**Dr. Buczynski:** How about you, Kelly – what would be your approach?

“I found it quite useful to introduce what other motivations are possible.”

**Dr. McGonigal:** I was enjoying that interaction. I often talk about motivation in a very didactic way, so I found it quite useful to introduce what other motivations are possible; for instance, the inner critic, or shame, or “shoulds.” I often will actually map out, from self-determination theory, the different more autonomous motivations, and ask people to consider exploring each one, maybe for a week at a time.

We know that, in addition to the inner critic and the “should” being a possible motivating force, another possible motivation for doing things is that you deeply value the outcomes. I sometimes call that the big want or the big why, and that you could spend time thinking about what it is you really want that you are pursuing, and that that is an approach rather than an avoidance motivation – have people spend some time thinking about that.

“Another possible motivation for doing things is that you deeply value the outcomes.”

I also will talk about intrinsic motivation, which is a form of autonomous motivation. It’s not always possible but sometimes you discover there’s something you truly enjoy about an activity; you find some state of flow, or you enjoy something that you experience *about* yourself.

So there are some things that I do that bring out a little bit of anxiety that also make me feel courageous. And I can enjoy that, even if the entire experience isn’t comfortable. Fun, play, connection – all of that; sometimes it’s actual intrinsic motivation. Some of these people don’t even know that that’s available. Explore if any of that is part of what might motivate a project or behavior change.

Another is the meaning that you make out of doing it – often connected to values. Rather than focusing on

what it means if you *don't* do it well – what are the negative things it means about you – what does it say about you that you're engaging in this activity, that you're giving it your all?

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And finally, identity: who/what does it say about you, and who you want to be, and what you care about that makes you want to commit to this change, or this activity, or behavior?

Honestly, people who have been very driven by the inner critics do not know that these motivations are powerful and available. They may already be available, and they're literally suppressed by the weight of the inner critic who just gets all of the airtime.

I like this avenue because, again, it redirects the attention towards other possible motivations, and in a way it's actually modeling that approach versus avoidance: we're not going to avoid the inner critic; we're going to just shift our attention to something that provides its own words, and provides its own motivation.

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**Dr. Buczynski:** To a small extent, what you're talking about is being mission-driven.

**Dr. McGonigal:** Yes. That's part of it, but what's so interesting about self-determination theory is – although they sort of scale different levels of how autonomous motivation is – I've found when I show it to people that people are quite happy to have some behaviors driven by intrinsic motivation, and recognize that other things are *never* going to be fun and pleasurable, but to allow *that* to be driven by, say, mission, or meaning, or identity.

I like having these multiple types of positive motivations because too often people, in the same way that they can get addicted to the inner critic, people get addicted to the idea that the only motivation that's healthy is intrinsic. But not necessarily – you can have autonomous motivation that is accompanied by serious dislike for the activity that you're doing, and that's still positive motivation. So I like giving people the options.

**Dr. Siegel:** Another really nice thing about the model that you're outlining is that **we can be very fully human; we're not aiming for some kind of perfection.** We can have *all* of these different motivations coexisting, and accept ourselves with them all.

“We can be very fully human; we’re not aiming for some kind of perfection.”

**Dr. McGonigal:** And to feel the energy that they provide. One of the things that this theory has demonstrated is, when you’re connected to these types of motivations, it gives you a vital energy to pursue a goal in a way that criticism often doesn’t – inner

criticism doesn’t. People will taste that energy when they shift their focus, and feel themselves really propelled in a positive way rather than like being whipped by the inner critic.

**Dr. Buczynski:** When we were talking about the superego before, with Stan Tatkin’s model and so forth, we were also talking about the adaptive child in terms of transactional analysis parenting from the child/parent. Terry Real talks about the adaptive child, and the problem with the adaptive child is that it isn’t a very good parent in the wisdom sense. It’s more like, if you look at/watch a little girl with a doll and how she’ll scold the little doll and so forth; it’s just not very evolved yet.

**Dr. Buczynski:** That’s it for us for this week. We’ll be back again next week. Next week will be the last week that we’ll be focusing on the inner critic, and then we’ll start a new question, and next week I’ll share with you what that question is going to be.

But meanwhile, we’d like to hear from *you*: what are *your* ideas and how have *you* used the ideas from this week and the ideas that you heard today? Please leave a comment below. We’ll be back next week. Take good care, everyone.