Lynne Goodacre

Quietening your inner critic

Welcome to

Quietening your inner critic

If you're reading this workbook then I'm guessing you have a relationship with your inner critic that you would like to change? When you came across this download was there a voice in the background saying, "Oh, so you think you're up to this do you?" If so let me assure you, '*Yes, you absolutely are!'*

As a personal coach I can guarantee that dealing with the impact of an inner critic is something that crops up, at some point, with virtually every person I work with. I also know, from personal experience, how mean and limiting that voice can be when we listen to it and give it air time. It says things to about us that we wouldn't dream of saying to our closest friends and yet we can find ourselves not only listening to it but also believing it and acting on what it says.

Maybe in the past people have told you that you need to be more confident, as if confidence is something you can go out and buy. So, here's the thing, what if, instead of *trying* to become more confident, you focus your energy on rethinking your relationship with self-doubt? Standing up to your inner critic and starting to challenge and question what it says?

How would that feel? I wonder what impact that might have on the way you live your life? Are you curious to find out?

In the pages that follow you will find some exercises to support you in this work. Before you read any further grab something to write with and some paper. Let's dive in and do some work together.

Lynne

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What is an inner critic?

The inner critic has a number of names and is known also as the saboteur or gremlin. These are the names given to the negative and self-destructive thoughts that we all experience to a greater or lesser degree. These thoughts have the ability to shape how we feel about ourselves, how we believe other people experience us and how we behave.

They are self-defeating, self-deprecating and impact negatively on our self-esteem. They become especially loud when we think about moving out of our comfort zone, stretching into new areas or taking on a new challenge and we will explore why this is the case a little later on.

You may have had the experience of getting really excited about applying for a new job or putting yourself forward to take on a new role and then as quickly as that thought enters your head it is followed by another one saying, ‘Hmm, maybe not. I don’t have enough experience’ or ‘I’m not good enough to do that’.

Some of us know our inner critic so well that it can feel like our modus operandi. We have come to accept and believe what it says, ‘you aren’t good enough’, ‘it’s best not to raise your head above the parapet’, ‘there’s no point in trying because you know it won’t work’.

We have a dream of working for ourselves and don’t follow it because we automatically think it will fail. We want to commit to a life style change but don’t because our inner critic tells us, ‘every time you’ve tried in the past it hasn’t worked so why waste your time’. Not a great place to be operating from is it?

Where do these thoughts come from?

They often stem from things we have internalised as children. They may be things that we were told as we were growing up by our parents, family, friends, teachers and other significant people in our lives. ‘Good girls don’t do that’. ‘Don’t make a fuss’. ‘You’re not very good at ….’.

Another source of fuel for our inner critic are the societal messages we are bombarded with of the images and lifestyles we are meant to aspire to. We can find ourselves in a constant state of comparison, finding ourselves wanting.

Whilst the function of our inner critic may seem destructive it is actually driven by a desire to protect us from harm and keep us safe. This is the reason it becomes louder and more active when we think about stretching or challenging ourselves. Moving out of our comfort zone.

Think of it like a panic button being hit. We are about to leave the safety of the familiar and head out into the unknown. Our inner critic, in its own misguided way, wants to prevent this from happening. The familiar is a safe place to be, why rock the boat? Things could get dangerous out there, you might come to some kind of harm.

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Start listening out for your inner critic.

It uses words like should, can't, ought

You can't say that, you should do this, you ought to do that

It focuses on problems not solutions

You're not going to get this to work

It can appear to sooth and then hits back

Have some chocolate you deserve it, it's been a hard day. And then when you've eaten the chocolate, *You see you have no will power.*

It makes big leaps of association

You didn't stick to it last time so you won't stick to it this time

Can our inner critic be a source of motivation?

Some people feel that their inner critic is helpful as it provides motivation. For example, If I am writing a report or a proposal and my inner critic tells me that it isn't good enough to submit isn't that helping me to improve the report, motivating me to do better? **Definitely not** when spoken by our inner critic rather than being informed by realistic thinking.

This is an important distinction to understand so let's look a little closer. When spoken by our inner critic it sounds like this, *I afraid this isn't good enough and I don't want to look a fool*. It makes us hang on to the report for longer than necessary engaging in endless polishing when it would have been better to have handed it in.

This source of motivation is founded on fear and anxiety: the fear of failure; the fear of not being good enough; the fear of being found out. Does this feel like a healthy way to live? It is a great way of not moving forward, *'I need to read another book before I hand this in'*, '*I need to obtain another qualification before I am in a position to apply for that job*'.

However, realistic thinking **IS** helpful. If we take the above example and you know that you have rushed the report off in twenty minutes in a gap between meetings then it is helpful to pause and check in with the reality of the situation. To give some thought as to whether you have given the work the time and consideration it deserves.

What are we trying to achieve?

Before we go any further it's important to understand that what you are aiming to do is to reduce the impact of your inner critic **not** to get rid of it. In essence you are working to redefine your relationship with it. By bringing some more realistic thinking into the equation. To, in effect, insert a pause in your thinking when you hear your inner critic to give you time to ask, 'who is talking right now and is there truth in what is being said?'.

In doing this you are moving to a place of recognising the voice of your inner critic for what it is and starting to question and challenge what it says.

Imagine moving into a more adult conversation, one of not just taking those self-critical comments as true but of starting to challenging the assumptions and turn down the volume. Moving away from the harshness and into a more self-compassionate space. This is an ongoing work so don't see it as a one off fix. The exercises that follow are designed to support you in moving forward.

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Let’s get started on some work

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Recognising your inner critic.

The first two exercise we are going to do is to start to recognise what the voice of your inner critic sounds like. A word of caution, don't get bogged down in trying to work out why it's saying what it says or where, in your past, this voice has come from, simply listen and increase your awareness.

Exercise 1
We all have triggers which send us into inner critic thinking and it's helpful to get to know the kinds of situations in which your inner critic talks loudest.

To help you do this think about what these situations are? Where does your inner critic show up most often?

Over the coming days make a conscious effort to recognise when your inner critic is showing up and the kinds of negative self-talk that goes on in these situations.

Journal about this, keep a record of the situations and see what stands out. Are there any specific triggers or similarities?

Exercise 2
Choose one of those situations to work with. We are going to start by really connecting with it.

Sit quietly for a few minutes, close your eyes and imagine yourself in that situation.

- Where are you?
- What are you doing?
- Is anyone with you or are you on your own?
- How are you feeling.

Use this space to describe the situation.

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Having connected with the situation now answer the following question.

In this situation my inner critic says to me……..

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Giving your inner critic an identity

We are now going to use the comments you have just written from the perspective of your inner critic as a basis for visualising it. This exercise is designed to give you a quick way of recognising it when it shows up and of becoming more playful with it, robbing its voice of its power. Read back over the comments you've written on the previous page.

When you read what you have written above have a think about the following:

- If you pictured someone saying those things what would they look like? It might be a person, a cartoon character, an animal, a shape
- What colour is it?
- How big is it?
- Is it wearing anything, if so what?
- Does it have gestures or movement?
- What words would you use to describe it e.g. bossy, mean, overpowering, people-pleasing?
- What kind of voice does it speak with - squeaking, moaning, harsh?

Use the box opposite to draw it, describe it, give it a name. Be curious if you have automatically gone to the point of, 'but I can't draw'. If this is the case you might check in with who is speaking?

You're not creating a masterpiece to go on public display. This is something for your eyes only (unless you want to share it).

A word of warning here - resist the temptation to visualise your inner critic as someone you know. If a person close to you comes to mind think about the traits they personify and create a characterisation of those.

Draw a representation of your inner critic.

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You have now created a quick way to recognise your inner critic and, more importantly, to change those self-critical thoughts you may have got used to hearing.

You now have an opportunity to change the 'I' statements which are so easy to believe and go round in your head, I am not….. I am too…… I should….. into 'you' statements said by someone else. 'You are not…….', 'You are too…….', 'You should……' and to visualise those comments being said by who or whatever you created in the visualisation.

How does that shift feel? When you imagine those statements being said by your inner critic are they infused with less certainty and power? Perhaps a little easier to challenge and question? Maybe you can even laugh at them but hopefully you feel more able to explore the evidence to the contrary and replace them with more accurate statements.

Like anything this is going to take time and practice. Think of it like building a muscle. It's highly likely that you inner critic muscle is strong and healthy and now you need to develop an alternative. You are bringing more balance into the relationship. Turning down the strong shouting voice of your inner critic which is used to taking centre stage and shifting the spotlight into more realistic thinking.

See how many times, over the coming week, you recognise your inner critic and start to challenge what it says.

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Some techniques to turn down the volume of your inner critic

The work we have done so far has focused on recognising the triggers for your inner critic and developing a visualisation to help you connect with it quickly by asking, who is talking right now? We are now going to explore some strategies for reducing its impact once you know it's there.

1. Realistic v Inner Critic Thinking

I mentioned earlier about learning to inserting a pause before you act and questioning what your inner critic is saying. The first technique is designed to help you bring some realistic thinking into the conversation by asking yourself, 'is that true?

As you can see from the table below the voice of realistic thinking is curious and explores possibilities and options. It moves you forward and is less black and white in what it says. Use the table on the next page to revisit what you have written earlier from the perspective of your inner critic and for each of the statements you wrote what would realistic thinking look like?

Inner Critic Talk	Realistic Thinking
You aren't good enough to do this	Is this true? What evidence is there for this?
You never stick at anything	Is this true? What things have I stuck at?
No-one will think it's a good idea	Is this true? How do I know this if I don't share it?
You're going to make a fool of yourself, don't do it.	Is this true? I know I'm nervous but I've been nervous before and survived
You'll never be able to fit it in with work and family life	Is this true? Will there ever be a right time? How can I make it work for all of us
You'll never be able to afford that course	Is this true? I wonder what opportunities for funding are available?

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Inner critic talk	Realistic thinking

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2. Get it out of the room

When you are aware that your inner critic is present one way of quietening it is to get it out of the room. Start by acknowledging its presence and visualising it. Visualise taking it by the hand (or whatever else you can grab hold of), thank it for caring about you then walk it out of the room and close the door.

3. Make it small

Another visualisation technique is to imagine it drinking from the 'shrink me' bottle from *Alice in Wonderland*. Watch as it gets smaller and smaller. As it shrinks imagine its shout becoming a whisper then a barely audible squeak.

4. Assign it to the bin.

If you notice that you are having lots of inner critic thoughts another way of quietening them down is to literally get them out of your head. Write each one down on a scrap of paper - then one by one screw them up and put them in a bin. Then put the bin outside of the room.

5. Check in with what it is trying to protect you from

As we discovered earlier your inner critic is, in its own misguided way, trying to keep you safe from harm. It has your best intentions at heart but its has a tendency to dominate. Maybe it doesn't want you to fail, or to put yourself under too much pressure. It can be helpful to become curious about what it is trying to protect you from. Strip away the nastiness and see what lies beneath by asking yourself, 'what am I concerned about in this situation?' You can then respond to what you discover in a more self-compassionate way and focus your energy in a more constructive way in addressing those concerns.

For example if you're inner critic is telling you to avoid giving a presentation because you will be too nervous respond with a statement like, *"I may get nervous but that's OK. Everyone feels nervous sometimes"*. Thank it for its concern and reassure it: '*I've got this covered'*. You can then focus on ways in which you can reduce your nervousness which is a much more constructive activity than not giving the presentation at all.

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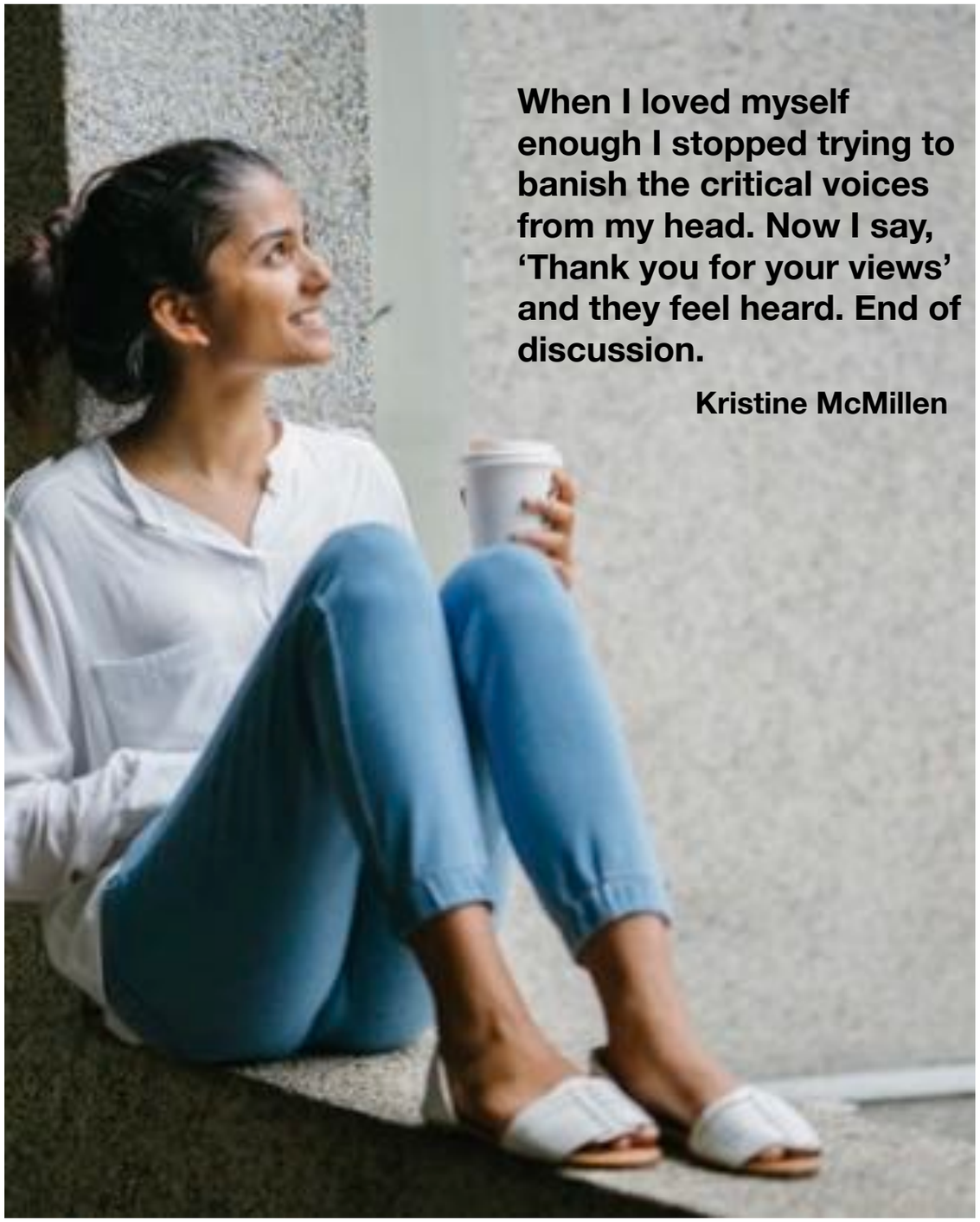
A final recap

In this workbook we have covered three approaches to quietening your inner critic:

1. Starting to recognise its voice
2. Developing a visualisation as a shortcut for recognising it
3. Developing some strategies for turning down its volume when it shows up.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if it were that easy? But as you no doubt know it's not.

This is on going work. The more you use these tools the better you will become at recognising and turning down the volume of your inner critic. Given it's focus on keeping us safe from harm our inner critic will always have a voice in our life but hopefully, as you start to do this work, it will become a more balanced voice that doesn't go unchallenged.



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About me

Here are some bottom-line pieces of information. I'm a personal coach, writer, researcher and occupational therapist and have worked in the public and voluntary sectors for many years before developing my coaching practice.

Through my clinical practice I have supported people from all walks of life as they've navigated living with long-term health conditions. Through my research I have sought to understand how people experience living with a long term health conditions and supported health professionals as they develop as health researchers. As a professional coach I am now working with a wide range of women as they explore areas of personal development.

Many of the things I write about are informed by issues which crop up on a regular basis in my coaching practice. I appreciate that not everyone is in a position to work with a personal coach and so this workbook is designed as an introduction to some of the work you can do through self-coaching.

Our inner critic can be a key factor in holding us back from doing the things we strive to do and becoming the person we want to be. Learning how to quieten that voice and challenge what it says is important work for anyone especially if, like many people, you have a voice inside you bursting to be heard, whispering 'what if……'. 'wouldn't it be great to……..' 'I'd love to…….'.

Find out more about my work as a personal coach, ebooks and courses by checking my website www.lgpersonaldevelopment.co.uk or follow me on Twitter @lynnegoodace.

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