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**Self-Esteem: Dealing with the Inner Critic**

Self-esteem is the sense of having worth, and of satisfaction with oneself. Self-esteem is essential for psychological survival. Our problems with self-esteem have a lot to do with a process of self-hate, in which we are constantly judging and rejecting certain parts of our selves. This causes us enormous emotional pain. As a result, we try to protect ourselves from this pain, just as we might favor or protect a physical wound.

We will avoid anything that might aggravate the pain of self-rejection. We take fewer risks. We make it more difficult to meet people, to interview for jobs, or to push hard for something where we might not succeed. We limit our ability to open ourselves to others, to be the center of attention, to hear criticism, to ask for help, or to solve problems.

- Persistence of a poor self-image, despite feedback to the contrary (a negative delusion). We've all heard of crazy delusions when for example a person thinks that he is Jesus Christ, with very special powers. Well, low self-esteem is another kind of delusion.

**The Pathological Critic**

- The critic is the negative inner voice that attacks and judges you. Everyone has a critical inner voice, but people with low self-esteem tend to have a more vicious and vocal inner critic.

- The critic blames you for things that go wrong. The critic compares you to others - to their achievements and abilities - and finds you wanting. The critic sets up impossible standards of perfection and then beats you up for the smallest mistake. The critic keeps an album of your failures, but never once reminds you of your strengths or accomplishments. The critic calls you names - stupid, incompetent, ugly, selfish, weak and makes you believe that all of them are true. The critic reads your friends' minds and convinces you that they are bored, turned off, disappointed, or disgusted by you. The critic exaggerates your weaknesses by insisting that you "always say stupid things," or "always screw up in a relationship, or "never finish anything on time."

- The critic is busy undermining your self-worth every day of your life. Yet his voice is so subtle, so woven into the fabric of your thinking, that it seems like a natural and familiar part of you.

- The critic uses shorthand. He might scream the word "lazy," and that word would contain the memory of the hundreds of times your father complained about laziness and attacked your laziness.

- Sometimes the critic uses images or pictures from the past to undermine your sense of worth. He shows a re-run of some awkward moment on a date; he pulls out images of a failed relationship; of jobs you lost; or scenes of the times you blew up at your spouse, or at the kids.

- The critic often seems to have more control of your mind than you do. He may drag you over and over through a painful scene, using a process called chaining. He'll show you a past failure, which reminds you of another and another, in a long list of painful associations. Though you try to turn him off, you keep being reminded of yet another mistake, another rejection, another embarrassment.

### Origin of the Critic

- Studies of young children show clearly that your parents' style of child-rearing during the 1st three or four years of your life determined the amount of self-esteem that you started with.

- The critic is born during your earliest experience of socialization by your parents, who punished you for dangerous, wrong or annoying behavior. Psychologist Harry Stack Sullivan called these punishing events, forbidding gestures. All children grow up with emotional after-effects from these forbidding gestures. We have memories of all those times when we felt wrong or bad, and this is where the critic gets his start. There is still a part of you willing to believe you're bad, just as soon as someone gets angry at you, or you make a mistake, or you fall short of a goal.

### Why You Listen to the Critic

- You listen to the critic because it is very rewarding to do so. Incredible as it seems, the critic helps you meet certain basic needs, and listening to his vicious attacks is reinforcing.

- Any thought that relieves feelings of anxiety, guilt, hopelessness, or inadequacy will be reinforced. Obsessive worries are occasionally reinforced when they lead to a workable solution that reduces anxiety. This might happen once or twice a year, or even a few times in a lifetime. But the worrier keeps at it, moving from a worry to worry, like the gambler who plays quarter after quarter, hoping this one or the next one will finally pay off.

#### d1) Self-Worth

- The critic continually evaluates how you stack up in terms of intelligence, achievements, earning capacity, sexual attractiveness, likeability, social competence - virtually any trait or quality you value. Many times you find yourself less adequate than the other person in one or more dimension, and your self-esteem takes a blow. But once in a while you decide that you're more attractive, smarter or warmer, and you feel a moments satisfaction at being higher on the totem pole. Though it comes only occasionally, that moments' satisfaction is reinforcing and keeps you caught in the comparing habit.

#### 2) Achievement

- The critic helps you achieve goals by whipping you like an old dray horse. He drives you with vicious attacks on your worth. If you don't make ten sales this week, or if you don't get a 3.5 average, then you're lazy, you're stupid, you're incompetent. What reinforces the critic is that you do achieve some things when driven. But every time the critic succeeds in driving you to complete a task, his painful battering is reinforced.

#### 3) Fear of Failure

- If there's a job available, the critic may say: "You can't do it. They'll never hire you. They'll see right through you." So you decide not to apply, and your anxiety

decreases. The critic is reinforced because his attack leads directly to a reduction in your level of anxiety about taking a risk.

#### 4) Fear of Rejection

- One way to control the fear of rejection is to constantly predict it, so you're never caught by surprised. The critic does a lot of mind reading. "She won't like you." He's bored to tears. He doesn't like your work. Your lover's frown says he is losing interest." If you anticipate rejection or failure - it won't hurt so badly when it comes. And once in a while the critic is reinforced when it does accurately predict some hurt or rejection.

- Another way to cope with fear of rejection is to reject yourself first. When the critic attacks you for all your flaws and shortcomings, no one else can say anything you haven't already heard. A well known poet has said, I always, had a sense that if I kept putting my work down, it would magically keep other people from doing it." Attacking yourself is very reinforcing - it helps to relieve your anxiety about being criticized by others.

#### 5) Guilt

- The critic helps you deal with guilt by providing punishment. You have sinned and the critic will make you pay. While you sit in the critics screening room, reviewing again and again videos of your transgressions, the feeling of guilt dissolves. the critic is reinforced once more, because the violence he does to your self-worth helps you to conquer for awhile that awful feeling of having done wrong.

- In every case, the critic is reinforced because it serves some positive function. To promote desired behavior, to protect you from anxiety, or to control painful feelings. To change this pattern, you must understand why you need the critic and how it protects you. You must ask yourself. "What would I be forced to feel or be aware of, if the critic weren't attacking me right now? What am I afraid I might do, or fail to do without my critic right now?"

### Disarming the Critic

- In order to disarm the critic, you must be able to identify his voice, and separate it from yourself and your other thoughts. When you can hear that it is the critic talking, you can begin to talk back.

1) An important technique is to blast the critic with what I call "Howitzer mantras." When the critics voice starts up, you can yell back, in your mind.

"This is poison. Stop it!  
These are lies  
These are lies my father told me.  
No more put downs  
Shut up!  
Get off my back!  
Stop this garbage!

It can help to get angry at the critic. Mentally scream at the critic so that you can drown him out with your anger and indignation. If the critic continues his assault, it's time for stronger measures. Put a rubber band around your wrist, and snap it while yelling your mantra. In this way you emphasize your "Stop" commands and your ability to interrupt the critics toxic thoughts.

### Affirming Your Worth - Compassion

- You must learn to affirm your worth if you are to fully disarm the critic - you must replace his voice with an awareness of your own worth as a human being. The essence of self-esteem is compassion for yourself. Understanding and accepting yourself, seeing yourself as basically good, and forgiving yourself for your mistakes.

It's partly a spiritual question. If you want to enjoy high self-esteem, you will have to affirm your basic worth as a person. Achievement has nothing to do with it. No matter what happens in your life, your human worth can't be diminished. And nobody is worth more or less than you are.

If it's comfortable for you, I'd like you to close your eyes for a moment. Recall a time when you felt good about yourself, when your human worth felt real. Recall the feeling that you were okay, even your faults and failings./Perhaps you've only had moments like this, which didn't last. However, your worth is like the sun, always shining - even when you are in the shade and can't feel it, because your critic has kicked up clouds of confusion and you've crawled under a rock of depression.

### Meeting Your Needs Without the Critic

#### 1) Achievement

- Your old strategy relies on the critic for motivation to achieve more. But you pay by feeling bad and worthless every time you miss a goal or make an error. This happens if you believe the critic's premise that your worth is not a given but is something you must continually prove.

- A healthier form of motivation is to visualize the positive consequences of success. When you see yourself reaping the benefits of your success, when you can hear the approval of friends and feel the satisfaction - then you have created an extremely powerful motivational force.

#### 2) Fear of Failure

- A healthier strategy for controlling the fear of failure is to redefine the meaning of your mistakes. Generally, if you have low self-esteem, you see mistakes as an indication of your lack of worth! But, one of the fundamental laws of human nature is this: "you always choose actions that seem most likely to meet your needs, based on your current awareness." You make the best decision you can at any point in time, given what you know, and what you want. The secret is coping with any failure, any mistake, is to recognize that each decision you've made was the very best one available to you under the circumstances.

#### 3) Fear of Rejection

- The critic helps you cope with rejection by predicting it, and thus you'll feel less pain when it comes. but a healthier strategy for dealing with the fear of rejection is to redefine a social error as the best available decision at the time. You also need to check out an assumed rejection, rather than mind-read. Social blunders are not an indication of your worth - they are merely decisions that hindsight would lead you to make differently.

#### 4) Guilt

- The critic helps control your guilt by punishing you. A better strategy is to determine if your guilt comes from the violation of a healthy or an unhealthy value. If the value is inappropriate for you as a person, you may need to adopt a new one. If the rule you violated feels healthy and right, then stopping the critic involves positive movement - making amends as best you can, and making peace with the mistakes that you have made.

### A Special Vulnerability

- Those of us who grew up in dysfunctional families have a special vulnerability to the critic. If we were abused, or abandoned emotionally, or were victims of extreme punishment, or felt deprived by an alcoholic parent, we often developed a basic sense of worthlessness. One child of an alcoholic parent told her therapist:

"It's a feeling that I'm bad, screwed up. Just a gut feeling. Like I'm unworthy---like I don't deserve anything. The critic comes from that feeling. When I attack myself, I'm just putting words to a feeling that's already there. Even if I strangled the critic, wiped him out, I'm sure this self-hate would still be there, sticking to me like the tar baby."

- That old feeling of badness has the effect of amplifying even mild hurts into a devastation. If someone gets angry at you, you have the automatic response that you're dead wrong. Almost any painful event can trigger the "I'm not ok" feeling: The loss of a relationship, being criticized, or feeling pushed away or ignored. A small mistake or failure can be blown up to the size of Mt. Everest.

- It's as if you're carrying inside an awful secret: that beneath your social exterior is a person so psychologically disfigured that no one could stand seeing the real you. But you live in constant fear that they will see you, that they will catch a glimpse of the worthless person inside. If someone gets angry, criticizes, or pushes you away, you sense it is because they have seen the person inside, and are rejecting him or her. Each small trauma is a reminder of the times as a child when you felt rejected or abandoned, and came to believe that you were to blame.

- A basic feeling of wrongness puts you in constant danger of feeling a great deal of pain. One harsh word can do it, one look of annoyance, one noticeable error. You need protection. And you may find that minor defenses such as putting it out of your mind or arguing back to the critic doesn't work. The pain is simply too great. Underneath everything is that empty, lonely place where you feel worthless, and you are afraid of falling into it. Pain requires massive defenses. There are three major kinds:

- 1) Running Away: This defense includes drugs and alcohol, avoidance, and emotional isolation.
- 2) Attacking Others: You block the feeling of being bad with rage at other people.
- 3) Attacking Yourself: You block the feeling of being bad by directing rage against yourself.

- Attacking yourself is the most damaging to your self-esteem, and also the most addicting. Attacking yourself is an exercise in denial - denying the tangible fear that you will always feel as worthless as you do now. You maintain the fantasy that everything you hate in yourself can be fixed. That when you've literally beaten yourself into shape, the feeling of a wrongness will finally be gone. Attacking yourself relieves pain, because it masks for awhile that deep underlying feeling of not being ok.

- We become addicted to psychological defenses, just as you've been addicted to drugs and alcohol. After a time, you are willing to tolerate very little of the original anxiety or hurt, before resorting to the defense. Just as you turned to chemicals over and over, you run away, or attack others, or attack yourself at the first sign of feeling wrongness.

- One of the most basic problems is the unwillingness to face certain kinds of pain. But eventually, the defenses against pain become more painful than the original feelings you ran away from. As an alcoholic, you often felt better after a drink or a drug. But eventually the addiction took its toll on your work, your relationships, your life. It's the same with self-attacks. Over time, you are further destroying your self-worth.

### Facing the Addiction

- You cannot recover from an addiction without facing the truth. If you are addicted to the defense of self-attack, then you must admit this before anything can change. Hoping or expecting to fix what's wrong with you is part of your system of denial. Every time you try to beat yourself into being better, you are running away from reality. By attacking yourself, you are helping to destroy the #1 requirement for healthy change - sense of worth. Self-attack reduces your capacity for change, for trying, for reaching out. It creates a greater sense of helplessness.

### Seeing the Consequences

- As with your chemical addiction, you have to face what your self-attack addiction is costing you. When you judge yourself harshly; nearly every aspect of life becomes more difficult. For example:

- You expect that others see your flaws and are as disgusted by them as you are. So you must be constantly vigilant to prepare for their inevitable rejection.
- It's hard to be open or revealing with people because you expect them to reject "the real you"
- You get very angry or depressed when criticized.
- You avoid social situations where there is a chance of criticism or rejection. You don't take risks, you don't meet new people, and you endure loneliness other than reach out.
- You fear mistakes, and so you don't like to do new things. It's hard to learn anything because the inevitable errors throw you off. You have to work extremely hard so that no one will ever find fault with what you do.
- You avoid challenges because you expect to fail.
- You avoid disciplining your children because you are afraid of their anger.
- It's hard to say no or set limits in relationships because you would feel wrong if the other person got upset.
- You are afraid to ask for things because a refusal would mean that you're an unworthy person.
- You choose sexual partners who are flawed and who you image will put up with you. It's hard to pursue someone really attractive because you can't conceive that such a person would want to be with someone like you.
- You give too much and sometimes let people use you because you can't imagine why else they would hang around you.
- You are so focused on your flaws that you often feel depressed or disgusted with your self. Much of what you do seems wrong or stupid or incompetent.
- You avoid people who admire or really love you because they must be either deluded or worse off than you are.

- Not all of these examples may apply to you, but each one that does diminishes and restricts your life. It's much harder to get your needs met, to do things that excite you, or to be with people who are really nourishing.
- You may have grown up in a family where you felt wrong or cut off from love. Those feelings are very hard to face. But your defense of self-attack is only making the damage worse, and making you more vulnerable.

### Abstinence

- As an alcoholic or addict, you've learned at Spofford Hall that abstinence is the only real road to recovery. It's the same for anyone addicted to self-attack. You must begin abstinence from all forms of pathological judgement.

- Here are some specific kinds of judgements that you must abstain from:

- Always judging others behavior as good or bad. Hard as it sounds, you largely give up moral opinions about the actions of others. Cultivate instead the attitude that they have made the best choice available, given their awareness and needs at the time. be clear that while their behavior may not feel or be good for you, it is not "bad."
- Comparing people on any dimension where one person is judged to be better and the other person is judged worse. This includes speculating about who is more intelligent, more generous, more competent, and so on.
- Using negative global labels of any kind (stupid, selfish, crazy ugly, fat, phoney, insane, and the like).
- Expecting that people should be any different than they are. It is critical that you accept people as doing exactly what they have to be doing (given their current needs and awareness). It may be unpleasant or painful for you that they act the way they do, but you must accept that their behavior is exactly what it should be at this moment.
- Blaming anyone for your pain. The pain exists, but to blame anyone is to say they should be different than they are.
- Judging yourself as good or bad in any way. This includes your thoughts, feelings, motivations, hopes, cravings, fantasies, or behavior.

- Your judgements are poison. They are like a double shot of whiskey when the doctor's already told you that your liver is in bad shape. You can't afford judgements about yourself or anyone. Everytime you make a value judgement about another person, you priming your critic to level the same judgement at yourself.

- How does a person addicted to self-attack stop judging? It takes a great deal of will power and commitment. It takes constant vigilance to stop the little voice that wants to say, "He's a jerk.. she's lazy.....  
...I'm selfish...my roommates are slobs..." That little voice is spewing poison much of the time. You have to find a way to quiet it. Abstinence is the key. Just as you must abstain from one drink or one drug, you must abstain from even one judgement.

- Abstaining from judgement doesn't mean that you have to spend time with people you don't enjoy, or let yourself be abused, or taken advantage of. You remain free to do what you think best to nurture and protect yourself. It's fine to have preferences, to enjoy Fleetwood Mac, but not Beethoven. But these choices are based on your particular needs and tastes, not on any sense of moral rightness.

- How do you escape a world view based on judgement? You do so by developing the awareness that everyone chooses their highest perceived good. Plato said it first: "man always chooses the highest good." This means that you are doing the best you can at any given time, based on your awareness, needs, and values. It means you cannot blame people for what they do, nor can you blame yourself.

### Facing the Pain

- When you abstain from judging, you may become more consciously aware of a basic feeling inside of "wrongness." Judging is your defense against the fear of falling into the pit - that empty, worthless place inside. Without judgement, you cannot use anger at yourself or others to deny or obscure these feelings.

- Just as you must stop using chemicals to run away from feelings, you must learn to stop escaping the inner feelings of wrongness with judgements. But it means having to face the pain. Obviously this is easy to say and very hard to do. The pain can be envormous. But the only alternative to facing pain is avoiding it, and that strategy has already cost you too much.

- Facing pain is a skill. If you learn how pain works and how to cope with it, your actual encounters with it will be less overwhelming. You'll learn that pain is never static or unremitting. Pain comes in waves. Your "not ok" feeling has exactly the same oscillations as any other kind of pain. It comes on so intensely that all you care about is escape. But if you face the pain, you'll notice that soon enough the wave passes. And you must remind yourself that you've endured this feeling before and that eventually you get through it. You don't have to attack yourself or anyone else, because soon the worst of it will be over.

- It's important to not be fooled or overwhelmed by the immediacy of pain. Don't get caught in thinking: "It will last forever", or "I can't stand it." Instead, use coping thoughts: "It will pass". "I know I can wait until the wave passes"; "This feeling comes from early hurts - it has nothing to do with my true work"; "I can feel like I'm bad and still be good."

### The Option of Therapy

- Sometimes the "not ok" feeling is extremely difficult to overcome. Many people need the help of a trained psychotherapist to change these long-standing negative feelings. Research indicates that psychotherapy is extremely effective with problems of self-esteem. (A therapist is an authority figure who becomes a substitute for the voice of a critical parent.) Over the course of months, or several years, relationships with such a therapist, who sees your strengths and accepts your imperfect qualities, can be enormously healing.

In my work as a psychotherapist, I am often surprised at how much emotional pain individuals have accustomed themselves to living with. I believe that a considerable amount of daily misery and distress can be traced to an individual's low sense of his basic worth. As one therapist has written, "The crucial factor in what happens both inside people and between people is the picture of individual worth that such person carries inside him or herself."

One of my most important tasks as a therapist is to assist a person in developing his or her positive internal tapes. To do this, it is first necessary to identify the existing negative tapes and work toward a growing awareness that who we are and our basic worth as individuals is separate from the internal negative tapes, i.e., that the tapes are learned behavior.