

Plagued By an Inner Critic

Are you afraid to feel angry, jealous, lonely, helpless or anxious? It's no coincidence that four out of seven clients I have seen this week have all had the same paralyzing fear about expressing their feelings to someone they love, be it a parent, lover, friend, or wife. What they all have in common is a very strong inner critic. Often, those of us with this difficulty feel overwhelmingly vulnerable just saying what is on our minds and in our hearts to someone we love. Why is this?

Many people grow up with a critical parent or parents. What criticism does is teach the child that their feelings aren't valid, or that they are "overly sensitive or emotional", and in some families, negative feelings aren't tolerated at all. How many times has a client said to me "When I cried in front of my mother/father, I was told to stop it, or I would be punished further or sent to my room." "I remember my father saying to me that if I didn't stop crying, he was going to hit me." This lack of empathy and acceptance on the parent's part teaches the child that negative feelings are dangerous and therefore need to be suppressed.

In some cases the child grows into an adult who unconsciously chooses a partner that is also critical or judgmental of their feelings. And in some cases, the client simply assumes that their loved one is going to meet their expression with derision or scorn which keeps them from being able to get their need for emotional safety met at all.

I recently discovered a wonderful website dealing with this issue called www.forthelittleonesinside.com. Here is what the

author has to say on the subject of the inner critic: “Our inner critic, although it now seems only to torment and batter us, originally came into being to protect our small and vulnerable selves. It came to prevent us from doing things and being ways that threatened to bring upon us more frightening and dangerous external criticism...criticism that might have led to the withdrawal of the love and support that were so essential for our survival. ”

I think Alice Miller said it best in her well known book, *The Drama Of the Gifted Child, The Search for the True Self* “...for a child can experience her feelings only when there is somebody there who accepts her fully, understands her, and supports her. If that person is missing, if the child must risk losing the mother’s love or the love of her substitute in order to feel, then she will repress her emotions. She cannot even experience them secretly, ‘just for herself’; she will fail to experience them at all. But they will nevertheless stay in her body, in her cells, stored up as information that can be triggered by a later event.”

My clients feel ashamed and confused about their feelings because acknowledging and accepting their full range of emotions have never been safe, but we are “feeling creatures” by nature. Denying and suppressing our feelings leads to emotional pain and physical pain. Science confirms that there is an area in the brain responsible for detecting cues that may be harmful for survival, such as physical danger or social separation, and that this area shares a common pathway with cues for physical pain. In a meta-analysis by Eisenberger and Leiberan out of UCLA, the authors state that “It has been

suggested that, in mammalian species, the social attachment system borrowed the computations of the pain system to prevent the potentially harmful consequences of social separation.”

So I assure my clients that they are not crazy or defective for feeling so fearful. I help them to understand the basis of their fear of feeling, and encourage them to question their inner critic rather than to accept outright its insistence on pushing us to do more, be better, faster, smarter, and thinner in order to feel loved, worthwhile, and valuable. The only thing we need to change about ourselves is to stop holding ourselves to these unreasonable standards and begin to risk ourselves by being honest with those we love. As I remind my clients: “Those who never risk themselves, never fully become themselves.”

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