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Lifestyle/ Health & Wellness

How to make your inner critic your biggest fan, and why it's been holding you back

Your inner voice, the one that says you are not good enough, or that you look terrible, is holding you back. If you can temper these 'limiting beliefs', you can live more confidently and courageously



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Our inner voice is shaped by our childhood memories, experiences, fears and early decisions.

We don't like it when someone degrades us or calls us offensive names, yet how many of us pay attention to the negative things we tell ourselves, about ourselves? From "I look awful" and "I will never be able to do that" to "I'm not good enough", it's easy for disparaging thoughts to pop into our heads, often preventing us from accomplishing more.

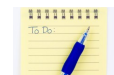


Cristina Rodenbeck.

“The quality of our existence relies on the quality of our internal and external communication. Imagine the impact negative self-talk has on reinforcing limiting beliefs, defining who we are, day in and day out,” says Cristina Rodenbeck, an executive wellness coach at Ignition Coaching, a coaching and training company in Hong Kong.

Tempering this “inner critic”, then, is key to living more confidently and courageously. First, though, it is important to understand how it came about.

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Nivedita Raj Ramanujam, CEO and clinical director at Inner Compass in Sai Kung, a town in Hong Kong’s New Territories, says our inner critic is shaped by our childhood memories, experiences, fears and early decisions. Think of it as a “script” that was created at a time when we were vulnerable to parental influences and authority figures.

“Many of these early decisions were made in our formative years and stored in our unconscious and subconscious mind,” the psychotherapist explains.



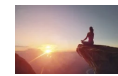
Nivedita Raj Ramanujam is a psychotherapist and CEO at Inner Compass.

An example of such a decision might be, 'If I can't please Mummy, I'm not lovable'. Over time, this voice strengthens its hold on our unconscious and subconscious mind, passing judgment on how we should be. Soon, it becomes our default way of thinking, shaping our core beliefs about the world and ourselves.

When we're older, this voice manifests in our social personality and relationships. A disagreement with a colleague, for instance, may trigger those unconscious messages of not being lovable and accepted.

There are several reasons why so many of us have an inner critic.

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"We learn most of our life lessons from mistakes, setbacks, negative experiences, benign neglect and compulsions – our own and our primary carers," says Ramanujam. "We come to associate these with faults within others and ourselves.

"This is how we make sense of why something has happened. From young, we're taught the relationship of cause and effect – for instance, 'Because I didn't do my homework, I cannot have my treat'."

Unfortunately, many of us aren't aware of the kinds of statements that run through our minds.



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Cristina Rodenbeck

"We're conditioned to instinctively turn to our faults," Ramanujam says. "Blame is central to the way the inner critic has been conditioned to solve problems. The tendency to be critical of ourselves is driven by our need to be accepted, recognised and validated. As soon as something is perceived to threaten that status, we default to the critical voice that tells us what fault in us is responsible for the problem."

If we don't keep this negative chatter in check, it can affect every aspect of our life, including our relationships and our work.

“If you hear the same words repeated over and over again, you may begin to believe them,” says Rodenbeck. “Such negative repetitive thoughts become hard-wired and turn into what we call limiting beliefs, which ultimately hold us back. So ‘I’m not good enough’ thoughts become myself, who I am, how I see and experience the world, the quality of my relationships, and my actions, too.”

It can also affect our health and well-being. Negative thoughts can contribute to stress, anxiety and despair, which have been proven to suppress the immune system and increase our susceptibility to illnesses, says Ramanujam.



PR executive Coco Chan believes growing up with critical and nit-picky people gave her self-limiting beliefs that held her back.

When it comes to tempering her inner critic, Coco Chan says that awareness is everything. Growing up surrounded by “critical and nit-picky” people, she says, caused her to have a lot of self-limiting beliefs, which in turn held her back from being the best she could be.

“All I heard in my mind were statements like ‘You’re not good enough’ and ‘You’ll never succeed’,” says Chan, who works in public relations in Hong Kong and is also the founder of wellness company Wellness Warriors. “Before I could achieve anything, doubt would set in and prevent me from giving it my best shot.”

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It wasn't until Chan went to boarding school far away from these negative influences that she reclaimed her power and grew more self-accepting.

"I learned to develop my awareness so that I would recognise that voice when it spoke," says Chan. "I'd work out where the negativity was coming from and ask myself if I would say the same thing to a child, a family member or a friend. If the answer was no, then I'd question why I was saying it to myself.

"I also rewired my negative thought patterns, and that involved replacing criticism with encouragement, positive words and pep talks, and focusing on my strengths and my blessings. It took some time and effort, but eventually I managed to turn that inner critic into my most supportive cheerleader."