

How to Stop Being Cruel to Yourself

A Practical Guide to Disarming the Inner Critic and Forging Inner Peace

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I created this because my mind used to be a war zone, and it's not anymore. If you've ever felt like you are your own worst enemy, I promise you're not broken. You just need the right tools and skills to make peace with yourself. ❤️

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The truth about the Inner Critic

That mean voice in your head isn't your enemy.

It's part of you.

That gnarly painful stuck feeling you get when you are spiraling is not just because it's being mean. It's also because you are *fighting yourself*.

What does it want?

It may not seem like it, but your inner critic is trying its hardest to protect you from loss or harm.

It does this by trying to “educate” you on what you are doing wrong. It does this not out of malice, but because it learned how to act from a society that uses force and shame as motivation.

It remembers every single time you felt hurt or rejected, and it will remind you of them, *to try to prevent it from happening again*.

It is trying to ensure you get your needs met, in the only way it knows how. It is trying its absolute best to keep you safe and loved.

The tragedy is that its *strategy* for doing that is utterly misguided.

The solution is rehabilitation, not exile

Your inner critic isn't something you can get rid of. It's a part of you that needs to be won over, re-educated, and given better tools to do its job.

It may seem like just getting rid of it would bring you peace, but this part of you actually serves a vital function. It works really hard to protect you from negative outcomes.

And here's the magic: **You can teach your inner voice a new language.**

How to teach your critic to be kind

1. Recognize the love behind the cruelty

Every harsh word your inner critic speaks is a love letter written in a language it learned from a violent culture. When it says *You're not working hard enough*, it means *I want you to feel proud and accomplished*. When it says *You're too much*, it means *I want you to belong and be accepted*.

The next time your inner critic pipes up, pause and ask, *What needs are you trying to help me meet right now?*

Thank it for caring about your wellbeing, even if its methods feel terrible. Imagine it as an employee that only responds to positive reinforcement.

Here are some examples to help you translate. **These may not match your needs exactly—you must talk to it to find out your own needs.**

Table of Translations

What Your Critic Says	What It Actually Means	The Needs Underneath
You're not working hard enough	I want you to feel proud and accomplished	Recognition, mastery, purpose
You're too much	I want you to belong and be accepted	Connection, community, acceptance
Nobody really likes you	I want you to feel loved and valued	Belonging, connection
You're behind where you should be	I want you to accomplish what is meaningful to you	Contribution, purpose
You look terrible today	I want people to see how beautiful you are	Acceptance, confidence
You're being lazy	I want you to accomplish your goals	Contribution, self-worth, momentum

You always mess things up	I want you to feel competent and reliable	Mastery, trust from others, self-efficacy
You're not creative or smart enough	I see what you are capable of and I want you to express your gifts fully	Creative fulfillment, recognition, satisfaction
You're weird and awkward	I want you to have positive social interactions	Ease in connection, Belonging, Friendship
You should be doing more	I want your life to feel meaningful	Purpose, impact, legacy
You're selfish for wanting that	I want you to be seen for your goodness	Acceptance, being valued
You can't handle this	I want you to feel safe and protected	Security, safety, support
You're annoying people	I want your presence to be welcomed	Social ease, being cherished as you are
You're not spiritual/evolved enough	I want you to feel connected to something greater	Transcendence, wisdom, inner peace
You're a mess	I want you to feel stable and grounded	Emotional safety, resilience, wholeness

2. Patiently teach it a better way

There are some specific lessons you need to teach your inner critic. You do this through gentle, patient self-dialogue.

Your inner critic often freaks out because it learned what was dangerous when you were small and dependent, and had little power and few choices. You may also have been raised in a family system with harsh rules and expectations. It needs a reality-update.

These are **crucial reality updates about how the world actually works.**

1. **Even if others don't accept me 100% of the time, I won't die.** Sometimes that is just how it is, and it's OK. Everyone is different, and I don't accept everyone else either.
2. **I will make mistakes because I'm human, and that's OK too.** Mistakes aren't moral failures, they are just a normal part of life. Mistakes are how we learn.
3. **Being highly supportive leads to better results than being highly critical.** You can present this to your inner critic pretty simply: "Is this how you want me to treat you? To scream at you all day? You know you don't like it, and I don't either." Think of it as negotiating a truce. You can both agree that nobody likes being criticized, actually. But then follow it up with, "Here's what I'd like. Give me information I can use. And then encourage me and remind me that I'm doing OK and don't have to be perfect. This will actually improve everything for both of us."
4. **My worth isn't based on my accomplishments or performance.** As much as you want me to get everything right, that won't actually change how valuable I am. I can't become a better person, because I'm already OK just the way I am. My goal isn't to accomplish everything I possibly could, it's just to enjoy my life.

When you notice yourself in self-attack mode, respond with patience, compassion, and a reality check: "I hear that you're scared. Let me remind you of what's actually true right now."

Remind it that it doesn't have to shout to be heard. Check in with yourself regularly: "What do I need right now? How can I support myself through this?" Then actually do those things.

3. Meet the real needs underneath

Your inner critic will feel a lot better (and be gentler and quieter) if your needs are actually being met on a regular basis. In essence, it functions as a kind of

watchdog. If your needs are chronically undermet, it's overworked and frazzled.

Meeting all your needs well is a long-term project, but you can start with just identifying the most urgent needs—the ones your inner critic is constantly screaming about. Think of this as a triage situation—work on the most urgent needs first.

I have a [mobile-friendly list of needs](#) online, as well as a list at the end of this book.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that having only one strategy to meet a need is a very fragile situation. Ideally, you want multiple strategies (options) to meet every need, not multiple needs being met by one strategy.

To break that down, think about socializing. If you have a lot of different friends, groups, a partner, and you know your neighbors, you have a lot of options for socializing. In contrast—if you meet all your social needs, as well as your needs for emotional validation, trust, and deeper connection from one person—well, what happens if that person is not available? Suddenly, a whole bunch of needs go offline.

This is the difference between scarcity and abundance.

scarcity



abundance



How to change self-harming beliefs

Sometimes the methods above will seem to not work because there is an underlying belief system that needs to be questioned on a deeper level.

Table of Belief Examples

Theme	Self-Harming Belief	Self-Supporting Belief
Self-Worth	My worth is determined by my accomplishments.	My worth is inherent and unchanging.
Love	I have to earn love by being good enough.	Anyone who truly loves me will love me for who I am. (And I can always love myself).
Emotions	Feeling bad means something is wrong with me.	Feelings are neutral and are simply indicators of if my needs are met or not.
Mistakes	If I fail, it means I'm a failure.	Mistakes are part of growth and don't mean anything except I have more to learn—which is always true.
Rest	Rest is lazy and unproductive.	Rest is essential and restorative.
Relationships	I have to please others to be safe or accepted.	I choose relationships where I can be safe & loved as myself. I also accept myself regardless of anyone else.
Growth	I have to fix myself; I'm broken.	I am inherently whole, I have just been wounded or learned negative habits, which I can change.
Perfectionism	I have to get it right or it's not worth doing.	Nothing is ever perfect and things are worth doing for their own sake.
Vulnerability	Showing weakness makes me unsafe or unworthy.	Vulnerability is a bridge to connection.

Control	I must control everything to be okay.	I can trust myself to respond to life, even when it's uncertain.
Suffering	If I'm suffering, I must be doing something wrong.	Pain is part of life, and can't be avoided. All I can do is respond to it in the healthiest way I can.
Self-Reliance	I shouldn't need help.	Helping each other is a natural part of human community, friendship, and family and I get to be part of that.
Self-Criticism	If I'm hard on myself, I'll improve or work harder.	Support, encouragement, and positive reinforcement are more effective than criticism or shame.
Success	I must be impressive to be respected.	I want to be valued for my authenticity, not my achievements.
Doing it Right	There's a "right" way to do things, and deviation is failure.	There are many valid ways to do things, and diversity is valuable.
Comparison	Comparison to others is how I know my worth.	Comparisons are harmful. I am happier when I focus on my own needs and goals and affirm my inherent worth.
Flaws	Flaws make me wrong and bad.	Flaws and weaknesses are a natural part of being human. I can work on them, but it's OK that I'm not perfect right now.
Compassion	Self-compassion is self-indulgent.	Self-compassion and kindness are essential for growth and well-being.
Standards	If I can't meet X standard, I'm a failure.	Standards are arbitrary and do not help me meet my needs.

Changing your beliefs is done through making an executive choice that the new belief is better, and then through reinforcement any time you notice thoughts related to the old belief. This reinforcement should be

done gently, just like we did above under Step 2. It's a reminder of what you believe, not trying to force your mind to change.

If you are not sure if you can get behind a new belief, take the time to really think about it. **You can't force yourself to change your mind—it has to be a genuine choice.**

Here are some questions to help you think it through:

1. What would it feel like to have the new belief?
2. What would the new belief make possible?
3. What am I worried is at risk with this new belief? Is it really at risk?

I am a big fan of sticky notes or reminders in my phone to practice new beliefs.

Although it is a bit of a simplification, in some ways **beliefs are just thoughts we keep thinking**. And the more we think new thoughts, the more those thoughts become spontaneous, and start to reorganize the way we see the world.

Help for Inner Critic emergencies

Ok, so you have the general idea now. But what do you do in the moment when your mind is going overboard?

You have to intervene and have a compassionate dialogue where you hold a gentle and firm frame of mind. In other words, **you have to be the bigger person in relation to the Inner Critic**. You have to stay calm, remember the goal, and remember how you get there: through neutrality and compassion.

Example Inner Dialogue

Here is an example of talking to the Inner Critic, which is spinning out due to a specific incident:

You: Hello, Inner Critic. I notice you seem *really, really* concerned about what I said at the party last week. I hear you. It was pretty awkward.

Technique: Validation, acknowledgement, shared reality.

Critic: OMG, it was SO BAD! Why would you say that!? We want people to like us!! They probably think you are a complete dork now!!

You: Well, it's possible. We don't really know what they are thinking.

Technique: Neutrality, validation, while also reminding this part that we can't read other people's minds.

And it's true, we want people to like us and to have a good time at parties and get invited back.

Technique: Validation, aligning goals.

What do you suppose we should do differently in the future? What do you think would help us be less awkward in these situations?

Technique: Assume positive intent, enlist its support, ask for input, but orient it toward the future and problem solving, not angst about the past.

Some things to notice about this dialogue:

- I'm not angry or emotional, I'm demonstrating the calm and helpful attitude that I want it to adopt.
- I'm not fighting or arguing with it or trying to convince it of anything.
- I'm not taking anything it says personally.
- I'm validating and acknowledging its perceptions, needs, and mission.
- I'm putting it to work. This part is eager to help, and it's going to "help" whether you want it to or not. So it's important to harness this energy, not fight with it.
- I'm giving it responsibility by enlisting it to help improve our future. This is counter-intuitive but giving someone responsibility

can actually bring out the best in them. Think like a manager or a parent.

But what if your Inner Critic is super, *super* harsh?

If you are dealing with an extreme critic, **you may have to begin with setting some boundaries.**

Let's take the above example, but make the Inner Critic worse:

Critic: You're pathetic. There is a reason you have no friends. People can see there's something wrong with you. You can't hide it. They will all figure it out eventually. Why do you even bother?

You: Ouch! Stop. I know you are trying to help me, but do you realize you're actually just hurting me? I need you to give me feedback in a way that can help improve things for us, not make me depressed.

Critic: Just stop fucking everything up for us. Stop acting like a loser and making everyone hate us. You are boring, pathetic, and stupid.

You: Stop. I want your input, but insults don't help me understand you or improve the situation. I hear that you are angry and you want us to have a better social life. So do I. It sounds like you are scared that we'll never get there. Is that right?

Technique: Using "us" to include it as part of the team, not a spectator, empathy for underlying feelings and needs, alignment of goals.

Critic: Yes. You'll never be part of anything if you keep acting like that!

You: What do you think we should do differently in the future?

You end up in the same place at the end, but setting boundaries maintains respect between you and this part of you. Being compassionate toward the Inner Critic doesn't mean taking abuse from it. It just means understanding where it's coming from, and using that knowledge to work with it effectively.

Where to learn more

Here are more resources for working with your inner voices:

- For more help with inner dialogue, or with the relationship between feelings & needs, I recommend Nonviolent Communication (NVC). You can Google your local area to see if there are NVC teachers or groups near you. NVC is the single biggest thing that helped me change how I talk to myself, and NVC principles are woven throughout this ebook.
- The therapy method called Internal Family Systems works with inner parts of all kinds. There is a book called *Self-Therapy* that explains techniques you can use with yourself.
- If you have a very harsh Inner Critic, I recommend the book by Pete Walker called *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*.
- If you struggle with emotional dysregulation and/or needing external validation, my article on [Self-Validation](#) could be useful.
- If you want to work on your inner critic (or anything else) with me and others, I run a private community for people working on their healing & growth journey called [Self-Liberation Society](#).

Thanks for reading and I hope this helped you! 💚

List of Needs

health

nutritious food
clean water
shelter
sleep
movement
sexual expression
touch

safety

boundaries
privacy
predictability
stability

freedom

choosing for oneself
individuality

to be valued

consideration
respect

to be known

acknowledgement
appreciation
recognition
representation
self-worth
self-awareness
innocence

fairness

equality
mutuality

celebration

mourning

integrity

authenticity
honesty
trust
self-respect

belonging

acceptance
inclusion

harmony

ease
cooperation
peace

contribution

to use one's gifts
to help others
purpose
meaning

competence

efficiency
productivity

clarity

shared reality
information
communication

connection

friendship
community

intimacy

affection
warmth
tenderness

support

encouragement
reassurance
understanding
empathy
compassion
kindness
forgiveness

order

beauty
structure
comfort
taking one's time

competence

efficiency

leisure

relaxation
play
fun
laughter

growth

learning
discovery
exploration
challenges
variety

creativity

self-expression

inspiration

hope
faith
transcendence

About the author

Hi! My name is Emma Love Arbogast. I write about self-liberation: how to be radically happy, fearlessly powerful, and free from the inside out.

It started with me trying to figure out how my not-so-great childhood affected me and how to become a happy, functional adult. Along the way, I studied a lot of different healing methods and read a lot of self-help books, and got hooked on personal growth.

I have been doing this work for about 20 years, and I love distilling and passing along what has worked for me.

You can find all of my writing and projects at emmaarbogast.com.

