
Claire's Tips and Tools for Relationships That Work

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Life Balance-What's Your Inner Critic Got to Do with It?

Do you dream of relaxing weekends? With plenty of time to enjoy your family? And free time that's really free?

Sure, you say, but it's not going to happen anytime soon, unless I win the lottery, move to France, or my boss undergoes a complete personality change.

What if I told you there is a way to lighten your load? A way that's completely under your control and doesn't require any drastic changes to your lifestyle?

There is a way-get your inner critic off your back.

I write a monthly column on relationships for the wedding website, www.byrecommendationonly.com. On a good day, I turn out an article in ninety minutes. On a bad day, it can take up to ten hours. What makes the difference? Am I just smarter on the ninety-minute days? In a sense, yes. On the ninety-minute days, I'm completely focused on what the stressed-out brides who are my readers need to have a happier engagement. It's just me and the work.

On the ten hour days, I have an uninvited guest-my inner critic. The critic adds a voice-over to every task: That was a silly idea. You think that's going to help anyone? And besides, the article is way too long. Or too short. Too complicated. Too simple. In some way or other, just not good enough.

Now what happens? **You probably know from your own experience that if you listen to criticism long enough, you start to believe it.**

Remember the movie, Billy Madison, with Adam Sandler? Billy gives a completely incoherent speech, and afterward, his teacher says, "Your speech was so poor that we are all stupider for having listened to it." After a session with the critic, all those ideas you were so excited about have mysteriously vanished. You have to go searching for them all over again and get back on task-until the next monologue starts up.

Imagine going back and forth like this all day. Then you go home and your partner asks, "How was your day?" You say, "Terrible! I'm exhausted! Just whipped to a frazzle! This project is a real bear and my boss is breathing down my neck all day. I don't know how I'll get it all done." But it's not the project or the boss. **It's the criticism, working like an invisible tax on your time and energy.**

The solution? First, you have to perceive when you're on task and when the critic distracts you. One important clue is your awareness of time. **When you're really working and "in flow," you**

lose track of time. When you're aware of time, either because it's going too fast (I'll never make this deadline!) or too slow (Three whole hours to go?) chances are the critic is afoot.

Get in the habit of noticing those moments when you're acutely aware of time. Stop and write down what your inner critic is saying.

This is what my client Kathy, a designer, wrote when she was struggling with a website: "I can't get these colors right. They're either too bright or too dingy. I've never been that good at color. How can I be a designer if I don't have a natural feel for color? Maybe I'm just not ready to run my own design business."

Choose the idea that bothers you most and ask: **What's the evidence?**

Here's the evidence Kathy came up with for "I'm not ready to run my own business."

"Color isn't my main strength." When forced to write it down, she couldn't honestly say, "I'm bad at color." It just didn't ring true.

Then brainstorm all the other possible ways to look at the situation. Here's what Kathy came up with.

"It always takes time to come up with a palette. It's like writing a story or composing a piece of music. You usually start with something you don't like very well and then improve it little by little. My biggest talent is coming up with concepts. No one is equally good in all areas. There are plenty of designers running businesses who aren't nearly as good as I am. Just because one website is taking more time than I expected doesn't mean I can't run my business."

Seeing her thoughts in black and white, it was clear to Kathy that she was making a big leap from being challenged by one project to thinking she shouldn't be in business at all.

"My inner critic is a master at exaggeration!" she laughed. "But I'm getting quicker at catching her in the act."

The result? She spends less time worrying about her work and more time actually working. And she gets home earlier and has more energy to enjoy her evening.

Want to get your life back in balance? First, get your critic off your back.

Claire Hatch, LICSW, is a licensed counselor who helps people raise self-esteem and turn conflict to connection. She works with clients in her Seattle area office and by phone around the world. Claire gives seminars on how to settle conflicts, tame stress, and balance family and work.

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