

SHRINKING THE OUTER CRITIC IN COMPLEX PTSD

East Bay Therapist, Oct 2009

By Pete Walker

This article describes childhood trauma's role in creating an intimacy-destroying, toxic outer critic – a counterpart of the self esteem-destroying inner critic described in my article: “Shrinking the Inner Critic in Complex PTSD”. The outer critic projects onto others the same processes of perfectionism and endangerment that the inner critic uses against the self. It perseverates about the unworthiness [imperfection] and treacherousness [dangerousness] of others to avoid emotional investment in relationships for fear they will replicate early parental betrayals.

The outer critic builds fortresses of isolation whose walls are enumerations of the exaggerated shortcomings and potential treacheries of others. In an awful irony, the critic attempts to protect us from abandonment by scaring us further into it. If we are ever to discover the as yet unknown comfort of soothing connection with others, the critic's dictatorship of the mind must be broken. The critic's arsenal of intimacy-spoiling dynamics must be consciously identified, confronted, suppressed and gradually deactivated. Advice about deconstructing fourteen key programs of the critic can be found in the above-mentioned article.

The outer critic typically arises most powerfully during emotional flashbacks when it transmutes unconscious abandonment pain into an overwhelmingly negative perception of people in general and /or of life itself. It obsessively fantasizes, consciously and unconsciously, about how people have or could hurt us. Over the years these fantasies can expand from scary still-lives into film clips, and even movies, eventually morphing into a veritable video collection of real and imagined betrayals that destroy our capacity to be nurtured by human contact. “Don't trust anyone”, “Proud to be a loner”, “You can only depend on yourself”, “Lovers always leave you”, “Kids will break your heart”, “Only fools let on what they really think”, “Give them an inch and they'll take a mile”, are titles of video themes survivors may develop in their quest for interpersonal safety. These defensive daydreams are analogs of the critic-spawned nightmares that also shore up the “safety” work of frightening us into isolation. [Over time, with enough recovery, intrusive anti-intimacy reveries become clues that we are actually in a flashback, and that we need to invoke our flashback management skills. {See “Managing Emotional Flashbacks in Complex PTSD”}].

The dynamics of the outer critic are often obscured by minimization and denial. Because the critic develops and dominates the psyche so early in childhood, its obsessions and “daymares” often fade out of awareness, and become subliminal like the sound of waves at the beach...like the sounds of traffic in the city...like the sound of the critic repetitively calling you or someone else a jerk, a loser, an asshole.

Sometimes the outer critic's penchant for raising false alarms ensnares us with an insatiable hunger for listening to the news. When we do not resist this junk food feeding of the psyche with news “service” that exults so thoroughly in the negative, we can be left floundering in a dreadful hypervigilance. The critic can then work overtime to amass irrefutable proof that the world is beyond dangerous, and therefore isolation and minimal or superficial relating are our only recourse. At such times any inclination to call a friend

triggers images of rejection and humiliation before the phone can even be picked up. When flashbacks are particularly intense, impulses to venture out may immediately trigger fantasies of being verbally harassed or even mugged on the street.

Intimacy and the Outer Critic. Complex PTSD typically includes an attachment disorder, which arises from the childhood experience of not having at least one caretaker safe enough to go to for comfort or help. When the developing child lacks a supportive parental refuge, she never learns that interrelating can soothe and metabolize confusions, conflicts and hurts. She also never learns that real intimacy grows out of sharing all of one's experience – the good and the bad, the happy and the sad, the loving and the mad. To the degree we are vulnerable and authentic in relationship, to that degree do we experience the incomparable healing power of intimacy. However, to the degree that our caretakers attack, shame or abandon us for showing vulnerability, to that degree do we later avoid the authentic self-expression fundamental to intimacy. Inclinations to verbalize feelings, ask for help or reveal one's struggles are short-circuited by subliminal memories of being scorned or attacked for daring to seek our parents' support. Even worse, retaliation fantasies can plague us for hours and days on the occasions we do show our vulnerabilities. I once experienced this after being very honest and vulnerable in a job interview with a committee of eight. Over the next three insomnia-plagued nights, my critic ran non-stop films featuring my interviewers' [who subsequently hired me] contempt about everything I had said, and disgust about all that I had left out.

Passive-Aggressiveness and The Outer Critic

Children are initially wired to respond angrily to parental abuse or neglect until they learn that protesting parental unfairness is the greatest and most punishable crime possible. This then renders their anger silent and subliminal where it percolates as an ever accumulating sea of resentment, that fuels the critic's prodigious habits of fault finding and seeing danger in everyone. Viewing all relationships through the lenses of parental abandonment, the outer critic never lets down its guard. It continuously projects old unworked through childhood anger onto others and silently scapegoats them by blowing current disappointments out of proportion. It then cites these insignificant transgressions as justification for relentless fuming, silent grumbling and long resentful rumination. To bastardize Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "How do I find thee lacking? Let me count the ways."

When the displaced blaming of the wrong person becomes habitual, it manifests as passive-aggressiveness. Common examples of this are distancing oneself in hurt and irritable withdrawal or pushing others away via backhanded compliments, hurtful teasing, poor listening and the withholding of positive feedback and appreciation. Chronic lateness and poor follow through on commitments can also be an unconscious, passive-aggressive way of expressing anger to others.

Vacillating Between Outer and Inner Critic. Many PTSD survivors flounder in caustic judgmentalness, shuffling back and forth between pathologizing others [toxic blame] and pathologizing themselves [the toxic shame of the inner critic]. They get stuck in endless loops of detailing the relational inadequacies of others, and then of themselves. My parents' twisted version of this boiled down to: "As fucked up as we are, we're still way better than you". Frieda Fromm-Reichman described this trauma two-step as all-or-none lurching between the polarities of the *grandiose self* and the *despised self*. When

we become lost in this process, we miss out on our crucial emotional need to experience a sense of belonging, as we lurch between the extremes of too good for others or too rotten to be loved. This is the social perfectionism of the Janus-faced critic: others are too flawed to love and we are too defective to be lovable.

Here is a verbal diagram of a typical critic-looping scenario. The need to escape the “in-danger” feeling that is triggered by socializing or even the thought of it excites the outer critic’s judgementalness and subsequent isolation-seeking behavior. Extended withdrawal however, reawakens a relational hunger and the impulse to connect. This simultaneously reverses the critic from outer to inner mode, which then laundry lists one’s own personal inadequacies, which in turn creates self-pitying persecution fantasies, which then reinvoke the outer critic mode of inventorying one’s self-righteous resentments of others...ad infinitum...ad nauseam - all in the “safe” hiding of silent disengagement. This is also a common thread of the fabric of an addiction to worrying.

It is important to note here that some 4F types [see: “A Trauma Typology: The Four F’s”] have different ratios of outer and inner critic engagement and some polarize to one or the other. The Freeze [Dissociative] type polarizes to the outer critic blanketly denouncing the entire outside world to justify its preference for isolation; the Fight [Narcissistic] type polarizes to and speaks from the outer critic to scare away anyone who gets too close; the Flight [Obsessive-Compulsive] uses inner critic perfectionistic striving to develop performance standards from which the outer critic judges everyone else as inferior; and the Fawn [Codependent] type uses inner critic self-hate to self-censor and avoid the danger of authentically showing up in relationship. Finally it is not unusual for recovering survivors who have significantly shrunk their dominant critic mode to experience a reciprocal increase in the virulence of its opposite counterpart, which then becomes an opportunity to further shrink the entire agency of the critic.

The Critic as Judge, Jury and Executioner. Not all survivors hide their outer critic. Fight types and subtypes can take the passive out of passive-aggressive and become very aggressive. Such outer critic polarized types often develop a specious belief that their subjectively derived standards of correctness are objective truth. At times of intense triggering the outer critic uses its distorted detective-lawyer-judge function to build hyperbolized cases out of scarce evidence [imagined slights, insignificant pécadillos, misread facial expressions, inaccurate “psychic” perceptions] to put potentially intimate relationships on trial. In the proceedings, it refuses to admit positive evidence or consider extenuating circumstances and is quick to interpret any relational disappointment as a deal-canceling, unforgivable betrayal. This is also the process by which jealousy becomes toxic and runs riot.

Once the outer critic has become adept at building a case, it ascends to a higher moral ground and claims the right to micromanage others. Typically this is rationalized as being for the other’s own good, but unconsciously is designed to protect the survivor from any reenactment of early parental abuse or neglect. Micromanagement of others can then further devolve into treating them like captive audiences, giving them unsolicited performance evaluations, making unreasonable demands for improvement, controlling their time schedules, social calendars and food and clothing choices, and, in worse case scenarios, dramatically acting out jealousy. At its worst, it looks like taking prisoners, not making friends.

Overt Scapegoating. Scapegoating is an extreme outer critic process whereby personal frustration – typically fuelled by unworked through, childhood abandonment anger - is unfairly dumped onto others. Displacing anger however, not only fails to release or resolve old or unrelated hurts, it exacerbates them by destroying others' capacity to feel warmth or appreciation for us. Scapegoating is also typically a reenactment of a parent's abusive role – a parent whose own abandonment depression morphed into a rage that was targeted onto a child scapegoat, as the parent made sure that if she felt bad so did everyone else. Here is a common example of this type of scapegoating. An individual may be absolutely certain that her intense anger about a friend being five minutes late is only about his transgression, but with Complex PTSD, it is often merely the iceberg-tip of her unexpressed anger at her parents' transgressions – in this case, her parents' chronic lateness and failure to show up over and over to meet her normal childhood needs.

Shrinking the Outer Critic through Thought Stopping. Reducing outer critic reactivity requires a great deal of mindfulness. This is especially true for trauma types who rarely act out their criticalness yet still roil with diatribes against the entire human group known as “F***ing People!”. As with inner critic work, the two key fronts for critic shrinking are cognitive and emotional. The cognitive work is the demolition and rebuilding processes of thought-stopping and thought substitution, respectively. The emotional work is grief work - the labor of love that weds the unexpressed childhood anger that is healthy self-protection with the uncried childhood tears of self-compassion. Let us look first at the cognitive work. *Thought stopping* is the process of using willpower to disidentify from and interrupt toxic thoughts and visualizations. Saying “No!” or “Stop!” or “Shut Up!” to drasticizing and perfectionistic mental processes is the hammer of self-renovating carpentry. Saying “No!” to the critic not only sets an internal boundary against unnatural, anti-self processes, but also acts as a catalyst for outer boundary development. [My article, “Shrinking The Inner Critic” elucidates this principle more extensively].

Unfortunately, in early recovery the outer critic often seems to become worse, bigger, and stronger the more we notice and challenge it. We may even think we are counterproductively stirring it up by daring to resist it. What is really happening however is that we are experiencing an erosion of dissociation, which then provides us with a more accurate perception of our psyche's addiction to drasticizing and passing judgment. What is also happening is that we are flashing back to how our parents overreacted to our early, typically unremembered, protests at their attacks. This can then make us feel too afraid to challenge our own thinking. Hence, survivors in early recovery need to invoke the instinct of angry self-protection to empower their thought-stopping.

Successful critic-shrinking requires thousands of spirited skirmishes with the critic. Fierce motivation for this work often simultaneously arises when a more accurate picture of family of origin life is constructed - especially one that highlights how defenseless the child was against being inculcated with the critic. Most trauma survivors were blank slates who were brainwashed [intimidated/shamed/abandoned] into accepting the critic as their primary identity. Many now need, especially in the early stages of thought-stopping, to empower themselves with a healthy rage at this nasty legacy of parental abandonment. My son's birth graced me with an enormous boost in my motivation to practice thought-stopping. Witnessing the miracle of his ongoing development so greatly increased my drive to emotionally invest in him that my outer critic began to work overtime on its

endangerment programs. It warned me interminably about the danger of my rapidly expanding attachment to him. Trying to protect me from devastation should untrustworthy life take him away or render him a “bad seed”, it manufactured the most dreadful horror movies of accidents, diseases, kidnapping, mental illness, etc. Had I not known how to recognize, interpret and refuse to indulge these catastrophizations [and sometimes upstage them with outraged disidentification], I’m sure that my capacity to bond with and nurture him would have been seriously compromised.

Outer critic entrenchment is also difficult to dislodge because its parlance is normalized, and worse, celebrated in our society...especially on TV. In a society where emotional abandonment is epidemic, many influential, seemingly healthy adults model a communication style that is rife with the judgmentalness, sarcasm, negativity, fear-mongering and scapegoating that is characteristic of the outer critic. Giving control of our social interactions to the outer critic prohibits the cultivation of the vulnerable communication that makes intimacy possible. We must renounce unconscious outer critic strategies such as: “I will use angry criticism to make you afraid of me, so I can be safe from you”; “Why should I bother with people when everyone is so selfish and corrupt” [all-or-none thinking]; “I will perfectionistically micromanage you to prevent you from betraying or abandoning me”; “I will rant and rave or leave at the first sign of a lonely feeling, because ‘if you really loved me, I would never feel lonely’”. Finally, with enough practice and ongoing cultivation of mindfulness, the healthy observing ego will become established enough that willpower alone, without anger, will often be enough to disidentify from the critic.

Thought Substitution: Supplanting The Outer Critic. *Thought substitution* is the practice of invoking positive thoughts and pictures about others to help erode the critic’s intimacy-spoiling habit of picking them apart. I encourage PTSD sufferers to practice the “5 positives to 1 negative” rule that John Gottman’s research has shown to be characteristic of the communication style of the many intimacy-successful couples he has studied. Since the outer critic was spawned in childhood by parental modeling that reversed this ratio, many of us are still developmentally arrested in our need to orient our psyches towards noticing what’s good, trustworthy and loveable about others and life in general. One powerful thought substitution exercise for strengthening this intimacy-enhancing perspective is to list ten recollections of positive interaction with a given friend, as well as ten of her attributes, and ten of her accomplishments. [This same technique works well when we self-apply it to help us separate and individuate from our inner critic’s negative self-image].

The most important thought substitution of all is a switch in the perspective of our thinking – a broadening of our overall perspective from the critic/superego’s narrow, negative focus to the more balanced and accurate focus of the observing ego/Higher Self. Perspective substitution resembles the firing of a bad manager or inept coach – one with a distorted view that dwells so much on what is wrong that it rarely sees what is right. Perspective-substitution can be enhanced with a spiritual practice of Gratitude. Gratitude is a type of mindfulness that looks for empirical proof that life is an incomparable gift even though it also quite difficult at times. One powerful exercise for cultivating gratitude can be done at bedtime by listing at least ten positive happenings of the day. More often than not these will not be all-or-none peak experiences but rather basic and simple pleasures and appreciations like a neighbor’s hello, a catchy tune, an engaging color, a

sweet scent, an enjoyable food serving of the day, a new flower in a local garden, a satisfying TV show, a feeling of fitness climbing the stairs, soothing words from a favorite author, a pleasant encounter with a pet or wildlife. Decades of this practice have helped me immeasurably to upgrade the perspective from which I am viewing my life and to dethrone the critic from its life-spoiling point of view. Alignment with the healthy observing ego provides us with a more balanced and accurate perception of life and over time more genuine experiences of feeling that it is good to be alive. This in turn enhances our ability to manage flashbacks and decrease their frequency, intensity and duration.

Defueling The Critic through Grieving. Fear is the key emotion that drives the toxic endangerment and perfectionism programs of the critic. We therefore need emotional tools to manage the fear that runs haywire during a flashback so that we can prevent it from morphing into the frightening endangerment cognitions of the critic. Angering and crying, the two emotional processes of grieving, are the penultimate tools for metabolizing fear before it can be co-opted and deployed by the critic. Here is a closer look at the dynamic of grieving out fear. If fear is the temporary death of feeling safe, it appears as if children are wired to release fear through angering and crying. The newborn baby, mourning the death of living safely inside the mother, utters the first of many angry cries to not only call for attention but also to manage her fear. Before long however, many dysfunctional parents punish children for emoting. The anger of the child gets trapped inside and soon fuels an angry internal looping between inner and outer critic, actually exacerbating the fear by creating an increasingly alienated and alienating internal environment.

Angrily saying “No!” to the critic, the sabotaging proxy of our dysfunctional caregivers, therapeutically externalizes our anger so it is not internalized against us or used destructively against our potential intimates. Psychodynamically speaking, angering at the critic helps us to work through unresolved transferential anger that emanates from the past and gets destructively displaced onto present relationships. Angering can also rescue us from the childlike sense of powerlessness we are flashing back to, further serving to antidote fear. Finally, angering also zero sums the critic’s shame supply as it reverses Erik Erikson’s equation: “Shame is blame turned against the self.” Crying, the complementary grieving process to anger, is also an irreplaceable tool for cutting off the critic’s emotional fuel supply. Tears can release fear before it devolves into frightened and frightening thinking. This is especially true when we cry for the suffering of our childhood abandonment as well as for the lifetime of unnecessary pain that our critic has wrought upon us. Such tears can awaken our developmentally arrested sense of self-compassion, which in turn augments our motivation to keep fighting to establish internal boundaries against the critic. I have witnessed my own inner and outer critic wither into innocuousness hundreds of times after a good cry. On thousands of other occasions, I have seen my clients dissolve their shame, fear and self-abandonment with the solvent of their tears.

The angering and crying of grieving also encourage and empower the myriad thought substitutions needed to affirm and establish a belief in the essential goodness and lovability of discriminately chosen others. Griefwork also bolsters us for the long-term, frustratingly gradual process of reeducating the psyche to make it more intimacy friendly [shrinking the outer critic] and more user-friendly [diminishing the inner critic].

Extensive guidelines and encouragements for navigating the long, daunting, three-steps-forward and two-steps-backward process of grieving the losses of childhood and effectively shrinking the critic are contained in my book, *The Tao of Fully Feeling, Harvesting [Self] Forgiveness out of [Self] Blame*.

Pete Walker, M.A.

*925-283-4575
1034 Second St, Suite D
Lafayette, CA 94549*