

A Basic Meditation to Tame Your Inner Critic

Nearly everyone recognizes the inner critic. That judgmental voice inside us that heckles and cuts us down. Whatever we do isn't enough, and during times when we'd be kind to our best friend we become down on ourselves instead. This push for perfect is exhausting, but often avoidable with practice. Rationalizing, with what is basically an irrational habit, doesn't help much. The critic is like the old two guys on the balcony on the old Muppet show; endlessly deriding whatever happens without reason at all. Reasoning with our inner tyrant validates it, as if it deserves our attention, when mostly it's just an unhelpful pattern of thinking we've picked up along the way.

Through practice, we aim to give self-judgment less energy and thought. Labelling it briefly in our minds; *"that's judgment again," "that's self-doubt,"* we notice it, and then shift our attention somewhere else instead. Not forcing it away, but not leaping into debate either.

To start this mindfulness practice, begin by focusing on breathing. Notice the physical sensation of breathing in, and then breathing out. As best as you're able, find yourself a posture of ease and strength. However you're feeling right now, let things alone for these next few moments. Your attention wanders, and then coming back to breathing in, and breathing out.

For many of us, this is already enough to bring self-judgment to mind. You may immediately start thinking, *"I'm not very good at this,"* or *"I should do this more often,"* or countless other ways judgement finds its way into our lives. If nothing has come to mind related to judgment, that's great! But for this brief practice today, reflect on somewhere in life you do feel judged; around school, or work, as a parent, friend, or child, or maybe in something that happened in your life recently.

Notice first how judgment is more than a single thought. It may affect how you feel, with tension, or unease somewhere in your body. It may influence your emotional state. And notice where your thoughts go when experiencing this kind of self-criticism, and the patterns you fall into under this kind of stress.

Now, for the next few minutes, practice letting that voice of judgment, that inner critic, alone. Stop wrestling with it, or appeasing it, or pushing it away. Label it if you like, judgment, or even give it a specific name if you prefer. Recognize what judgment feels like to you, and then let it be.

On each in-breath as you sit, acknowledge whatever you're experiencing right now, in your body, in your emotions, in your thoughts. Nothing to fix or change; this is what's going on right now.

And on each out-breath, offer yourself relief. Wish yourself what you would a close friend with the same doubts. Set an intention, in an un-forced way. Breathing out, wishing yourself relief, or strength, or humor, or joy, or anything else that feels appropriate right now.

Breathing in, this is how things are, and breathing out, focusing on ease, or whatever else comes to mind.

Again, wherever your mind has gone, on the next in-breath, noticing and guiding your attention, recognizing whatever is going on for you, and on the out-breath, picturing an intention without strain for yourself. Wishing yourself well; not because you deserve it more than anyone else, but because you deserve it as much as anyone else.

Breathing in, paying attention, and breathing out, letting go.

Instead of wrestling with our inner heckler, and trying to convince ourselves we're fine, we can develop awareness that it represents little more than a less-than-helpful habit. Use this practice at any time during the day you catch yourself caught up in self-judgment, and focus somewhere more useful instead.