



# Diet for a 1,000 Lb. Inner Critic: A case study

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## ***What a mess you've made with your life! Loser! Get a life!***

I'm sure some of these insults are familiar and you could easily add to the list. If you take some time out for yourself, an inner voice tells you that you are lazy and/or selfish and that you'll never amount to anything. When you work hard, keeping your eyes on your goals, this inner critic will lambaste you for not having a life, or quality relationships, or for being a 2-dimensional workaholic. Your inner critic will get you coming and going.

Most people are so used to hearing their inner critic monitor and judge their every thought, word, action and appearance, that they don't even realize the steadily eroding effect it has on them until they are plunged into a flat-out depression. A common approach these days is the decision to "not indulge in negative thinking", so 'affirmations' are chanted as if they were magical mantras that will somehow eradicate the messages of the inner critic.

How is it that an inner critic can grow to weigh 1,000 lbs.? What animates it's ferocity? Most important, what can a person do to help their inner critic lose weight and transform into something they can recognize as functionally helpful?

Let's go back to my example above of an inner critic, and take a look at what kinds of needs such a person (we'll call her Wanda) is trying to fulfill. On the one hand, Wanda has a real need for economic security for now and for her future. She has a need to express her creative talents in a satisfying way and she needs to feel needed and appreciated by others. To take care of these needs, she's developed a way of being in the world that is hard working, driven, responsible and pleasing.

At the same time, and in direct opposition to those valid needs, Wanda has a real need for physical rest and rejuvenation in order to maintain her health and energy level. She also has a need for sensual enjoyment. Then too, she's become more aware of a need for spiritual upliftment and centering. Somewhere in her, there's very different part of her who can take naps, go for walks on the beach, take scented baths, meditate, and take art classes.

Now here's where the inner critic comes in. Wanda, like all normal and healthy people, is a psychological mosaic of many inner parts. Some parts of her directly feel those needs and how well they are being fulfilled, and some other parts of her have developed to strategically fulfill those needs. If Wanda, the whole person of the mosaic, primarily becomes identified with what we'll call the hard working self, she'll rarely take time out because it's contrary to the purpose of this part of her who is the "hard-worker." This inner part (or voice) NEVER wants to take a nap or go to the beach because, "How is that going to pay the bills? Or contribute to her retirement fund??" This inner self is wholly focused on meeting her security needs. Wanda's inner pleaser and inner responsible voices NEVER want her to selfishly take time out just for her because "How are people going to know that they can depend on her when they need or want her?" As long as Wanda is identified primarily with these inner voices, there is no room in life for her spiritual, private, or sensual selves to come into action. They have become disowned and disenfranchised by Wanda's over-identification with the value systems of only parts of her full potential. It's as if Wanda is literally asleep to the needs and powers of those disowned selves.

However, those needs for relaxation, time out and time within are still very real and pressing, so they DO break out. Whenever they do, her inner critic is right there to let Wanda know she's breaking the rules for how she should be. The inner critic is the part of Wanda who is trying to alert her to the vulnerability of her needy selves. If she were to stop being hardworking, she's lazy! Wasting her time! Selfish!

Her inner critic is even more attuned to vulnerability than this, because even if Wanda works hard, and keeps her nose to the grind, never letting her self-caring, spiritual, sensual selves out, her inner critic can still find something wrong with her. Sensing all the pent-up fear and frustration of her dis-owned laid back self, her inner critic gipes, "Everyone else has a life, what's the matter with you?" "You're getting to be just like your father - a type A

workaholic.” No matter what Wanda does, her inner critic has a sharp comment.

What’s Wanda to do? First, she needs to listen for her inner critics’ underlying anxiety. She can ask her inner critic, “Hey boo-bala, what are you so worried about?” When Wanda is listening receptively (rather than trying to drown her inner critic out with affirmations), this inner critic doesn’t have to just call her a loser; the critic can tell Wanda what’s really bothering it. “I’m worried that you work so hard and someday you’ll get sick (just like your father) because you aren’t taking care of your body properly. You’re so stressed; you’re headed for an accident.” “You have no real relationship with your Maker, and when you die, you’ll be unprepared.” “I’m bone tired.”

Now Wanda can start to feel some self-compassion for these parts of herself, rather than just try to overpower them. Next, Wanda needs to find out why she’s been primarily identified with certain inner voices who have then run her life without much choice being exercised on her part. Whatever vulnerable needs lay underneath those primary inner voices, are the ones she at some point came to believe are most at risk of being unmet. In this case, Wanda feels more afraid of becoming a bag lady, of being unwanted and powerless in the world than she feels afraid of becoming ill, or of missing out on the pleasures of life, or of losing contact with her spiritual center.

Why? Because the way Wanda experienced the events in her early, formative years convinced her that those former needs are much more vulnerable and significant than the latter. Whether this is actually true or not anymore, she still lives by those early convictions.

Now it’s time for Wanda to take stock of what she’s learning from her inner critic. By listening intently within, she’s begins to feel the validity of both of these opposite sides in her. She now has to make decisions in her life - made more difficult and simultaneously more rewarding; these are decisions on how to live in ways that honor the paradox of simultaneously divergent and yet valid needs.

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Let’s give a practical example. The Monet show has been around for months and Wanda has been wanting to go, but something always comes up. Now it’s the last day of the show and her critic is yelping at her that she’s going to miss it and she’s stupid for never having just bought a ticket. “What’s really the matter here,” she wonders. The disowned side shows up and says, “I really need a quiet afternoon to myself looking at beautiful, inspiring art, and I probably will never get a chance to see so many Monet’s at once!”

Now Wanda checks in with her responsible, hardworking inner voice. She again wonders, “On the other hand, what do I fear the consequences are, of taking off an afternoon to go to the show?” “Your boss will think you’re flaky, so you might get looked over for the upcoming promotions and you’ll get docked the time; I need all the money I can get to meet the bills.”

Wanda, feeling the reality of these opposite voices in her, and momentarily, not being identified as being either one, can now make a decision based on the felt awareness of each side. When Wanda makes the decision, the critic loses its weighty concerns because now Wanda is aware of the differing vulnerable needs at stake.

If the hardworker in her had made the decision, she could never go because she would always feel urgently needed at work, always feel that her job security depended on being perfectly reliable. If her selfish, sensual side had made the decision, she’d have to go because life only happens once! Either way, Wanda’s critic would have had plenty of fuel and Wanda would have been paying with plenty of guilt and Maalox!

If Wanda (rather than her hardworking self) decides not to go, chances are she’ll experience her disappointment that afternoon, and feeling it, will be motivated to stay attentive to that “other” side of herself. Even staying at work that afternoon, she may go at a more relaxed pace and decide not to take work home with her like she (her workaholic) often does.

If Wanda (rather than her playful, sensual side) decides to go to the Monet show, she’ll stay more connected to the concerns of her hardworking, responsible inner self. She can more easily resist all the lovely “Monet” items in the gift shop because she has stayed in respectful contact with the part of herself who is worried about money.

As Wanda moves away from relating to her inner aspects as good or bad, instead seeing them all as valid pieces of a whole mosaic of being that deserve to be literally incorporated, she lives a richer life.

Give an ear to your inner critic; it would love to lose the weight of all that underrecognized vulnerability! The power of its' insults have been in direct proportion this vulnerability. Your inner critic is just trying to help you become more aware of who else you are inside so you can take better care of all of your selves.

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is just trying  
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