

Interviewing the Inner Critic

Chairwork can be used to explore the content, triggers, and functions of self-criticism or the 'inner critic'. Interviews can also help establish the fears and vulnerabilities which may be driving the critic's attacks. The following guide provides a semi-structured interview schedule for working with the inner critic which takes inspiration from the Voice Dialogue approach (Stone & Stone, 1993), Internal Family Systems Therapy (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020), and Schema Therapy (Young et al., 2003).

Process of dialogue:

1). The facilitator asks the client to put their inner critic in a chair and move it somewhere in the room that feels appropriate.

Facilitator: "Imagine that this chair holds your inner critic. [Introduces a second chair]. Where in the room should we put that part of you? Where feels right?"

2). The facilitator helps the client begin to separate from and concretise their inner critic by asking about its salient features, such as its gender.

Facilitator: "In a moment I'd like you to move into that chair and be your inner critic, so I can ask that part of you some questions. Before you move, tell me – would you say your inner critic a 'he', a 'she', an 'it', or something else?"

3). To help guide the start of the interview, the facilitator might ask the client to identify one or two areas it tends to comment on.

Facilitator: "Is there anything your critic likes to talk about? What does it tend to focus on?"

4). The client changes seats and adopts the perspective of their inner critic. The facilitator then asks the critic questions in a curious and non-judgmental manner. An interview schedule for interviewing the critic is provided below.

1). Establish typical targets for the critic: "Nice to meet you. So, Matt tells me you don't like this dress sense. Can you tell me more about that?... What else irritates you about him?... What else?... Are there other things you tend to pick up on?..."

2). Choose a focus or key complaint for the interview: "So, what's bugging you the most about Matt at the moment?"

3). Explore the concerns and anxieties that lie behind the critic's key complaint: "Oh, so you really don't like the way he writes. What concerns you about that?"

4). Explore the developmental origins of the critic's anxieties: "I see, you're concerned that people might humiliate Matt for the way he writes. Did that ever happen to Matt in the past? What did he go through?"

5). If appropriate, identify and honour the reasons for the emergence of the critic and its intentions: "So, if you weren't around when Matt was small and his Dad judged him so harshly, then he might've gotten really hurt, or completely rejected. You've really tried to help him..." Alternatively, "What would've happened to Matt if you weren't around when his Dad used to judge him and make fun of him?"

6). Explore role models for the inner critic: "Tell me, do you sound like his father at all? Where did you get your training?"

[Optional] - Explore whether the inner critic would like a different role in the client's life: "Do you like doing this job? Would you like to be doing something else?"

[Optional] - Ask what helps the inner critic settle: "Are there other parts of Matt that help you settle when you worry about rejection? Are there parts in him that help balance you?"

[Optional] - Further concretise the inner critic: "If I could see you as you really are, how would you appear?"

7). Invite the client to return to their original chair and focus on their newfound separation from their critic: "Thanks for speaking with me, critic. I'd like to speak to Matt again. [Client returns to their former chair]. Do you feel differently here in the centre? [Client nods]. Take a few moments to notice what that's like – to be in the company of your critic [gestures to the second chair] and yet separate from it."

Facilitation notes:

- Individuals may find it easier to be interviewed as their critic after a period of 'inner critic monitoring' (e.g., keeping a record of their inner critic or self-critical thoughts for a few days).
- If the client feels threatened by the idea of embodying their inner critic, they may prefer to relay its responses in the third person (e.g., "I'd like to ask your critic how long it's been around for. Can you do that for me? [Gestures to the chair holding the critic]. What's it saying in response to that question?").
- Not all inner critics are driven by anxiety or vulnerability. More contemptuous types of inner critic (sometimes referred to as 'killer critics'; Stone & Stone, 1993) are sometimes

driven by a desire to harm or annihilate the client. Interviewing killer critics should be approached cautiously and require a different style of facilitation.

References:

Schwartz, R., & Sweezy, M. (2020). Internal family systems therapy (2nd Ed.). Guilford.

Stone, H., & Stone, S. (1993). Embracing your inner critic. Harper San Francisco.

Young, J., Klosko, J. S., & Weishaar, M. E. (2003). Schema therapy: A practitioner's guide. Guilford.

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