

Meet Your Inner Critic

A short clinical guide to the voice you live with

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Before you start

This material is heavier than it looks on the page. Begin here, even if you think you do not need it.

1. Put both feet on the floor and notice the contact.
2. Take one slow breath in. A slower breath out.
3. Place a hand on your chest. Notice your own warmth under your palm.
4. Say to yourself, silently: I am here. I have time for myself. I can stop at any time.

Come back to these four steps any time during the guide if the work tips into too much. Closing the guide is also a valid response.

i. The four types of inner critic

In my clinical work with midlife women, I see roughly four recognisable critic types. Most women have a mix of two or three. One usually dominates. Recognising which one is loudest in you is the first move from a fog of negativity into a specific voice you can work with.

The Judge

The critic that measures everything you do against an impossible standard. Whatever you produced, it could have been better. Whatever you said, you should have said it differently. Whatever you achieved, someone else would have done more. The tone is appraising. Often cold rather than cruel.

Where it learned it: a high-achieving parent. A demanding school environment. A cultural script that tied your worth to output from the moment you could read.

The adult signature: chronic dissatisfaction with completed work. Inability to celebrate finishing. Already onto the next thing to improve before you have noticed what you just did.

The Underminer

The critic that erodes confidence in slow doses. Not the catastrophic verdict. The constant low hum that says who do you think you are, you are not really qualified, they are going to find out. Often paired with imposter feelings.

Where it learned it: a parent or sibling who diminished you. A teacher who singled you out. An early experience of being told you were getting above yourself.

The adult signature: self-doubt that arrives before you have done anything, especially when you are about to do something visible. Often quieter than the perfectionist but more disabling.

The Comparison-Engineer

The critic whose primary job is to position you against other women. She is younger. She is thinner. She has not had children. She has had more children. She succeeded earlier. She succeeded more easily. She is more loved. She is more accomplished. The voice is constant, and it does not run out of women to compare you to.

Where it learned it: a culture that taught women to compete with each other. A mother who compared you to siblings or cousins. A school system that ranked you. Social media that has industrialised the comparison.

The adult signature: cannot enjoy your own life without measuring it against someone else's. Feels worst after scrolling. Feels worst at events involving other women.

The Inner Taskmaster

The critic that treats you like a problem to be managed. Wake up earlier. Be more productive. Sleep less. Eat less. Want less. Need less. Do more. The voice is not cruel but is relentless. There is no rest in its presence.

Where it learned it: cultural script around women's worth being tied to productivity. A parent who modelled this. A profession that demanded it. A decade of motherhood that required it.

The adult signature: cannot rest without guilt. Cannot stop without anxiety. Feels worst when given a free afternoon. Identifies more with what she does than with who she is.

A fifth possibility - your own critic

If none of the four quite fit, or yours is a blend with a flavour of its own, name it and describe it in your own words. It belongs here just as much.

Name it:

Describe it - its tone, what it goes for, whose voice it carries:

2. Observing your critic

Now that you know the four types, the next step is to catch your own critic in the act. Over the next two days, each time you notice it arrive, capture a quick entry. A single sentence per field is fine. You are not trying to record every instance, and you are not trying to write it well. The point is the pattern, not completeness - what it says, when it comes, what it sounds like.

Watch for these moments - the critic often arrives:

- Just before risk or visibility: a meeting, publishing something, an email you have rewritten three times.
- During rest.
- During pleasure.
- During transition: late afternoons, Sundays, the moment before bed.
- When you ask for something.

Two ways to capture

You can fill the fields in this PDF directly, on your computer. Or, if it is easier to catch the critic on your phone in the moment it speaks, copy this template into your Notes app and jot entries there:

Time / day:
Situation (who was there, what was happening, what you were doing):
What it said (exact words):
Tone:
Where in the body:
Whose voice it reminds me of:

Here is what one filled entry looks like:

Time / day: Tuesday, around 7am
Situation: dressing for work, alone at the mirror, running late
What it said: "You look tired and older. That top is trying too hard."
Tone: flat, matter-of-fact, as if it were simply stating a fact
Where in the body: a pull inward at the stomach, shoulders dropping
Whose voice it reminds me of: my mother, getting ready to go out

Use whichever method you will actually keep up. Four blank entries follow.

Entry 1

Time / day

Situation - who was there, what was happening, what you were doing

What it said, in its exact words

Tone

Where you felt it in the body

Whose voice it reminds you of

Entry 2

Time / day

Situation - who was there, what was happening, what you were doing

What it said, in its exact words

Tone

Where you felt it in the body

Whose voice it reminds you of

Entry 3

Time / day

Situation - who was there, what was happening, what you were doing

What it said, in its exact words

Tone

Where you felt it in the body

Whose voice it reminds you of

Entry 4

Time / day

Situation - who was there, what was happening, what you were doing

What it said, in its exact words

Tone

Where you felt it in the body

Whose voice it reminds you of

3. Which type is yours?

You gather this over the two days of observing in Section 2. With your entries in front of you, read them through once, slowly, then work through this section. First, name which type is loudest. Rate how strongly each voice runs in you, from 1 (rarely) to 5 (constantly).

- The Judge:
- The Underminer:
- The Comparison-Engineer:
- The Inner Taskmaster:
- Your own:

The one with the highest score is the dominant critic in your system. The others are co-running with it. Some women have one clear winner. Others have two or three running together.

Which is your dominant critic?

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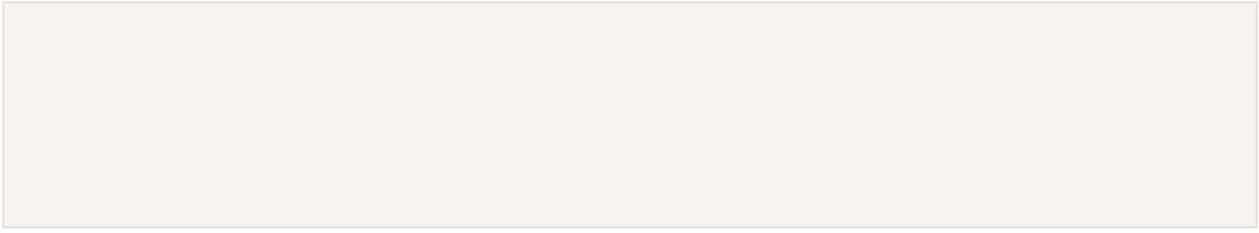
What does it say to you most often, or what images does it show you most often? If it uses words, write the line in its exact words, not a paraphrase. If it works in pictures, describe the scene it shows you.

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In what situation does it arrive most often?

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What does your body do when it arrives? Tightness in the chest. A pull inward. A flush of heat. The shoulders coming up. The jaw locking. The breath going shallow. Specifics matter.



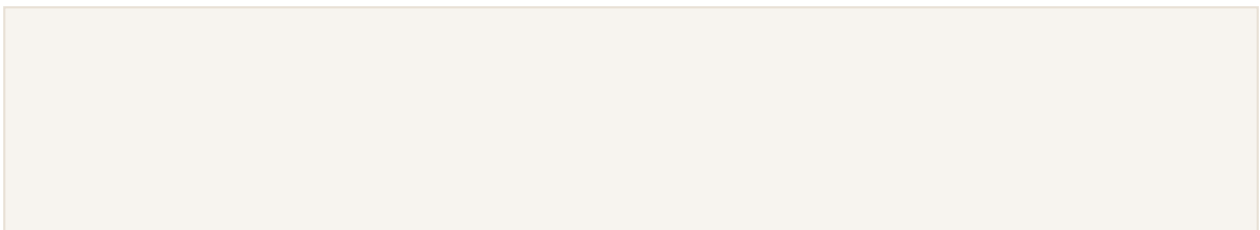
4. The first step toward the inner ally

The critic does not soften through argument. What changes the relationship, slowly, is the building of a different voice beside it - a voice trained on warmth, accuracy and care. This voice is sometimes called the inner ally.

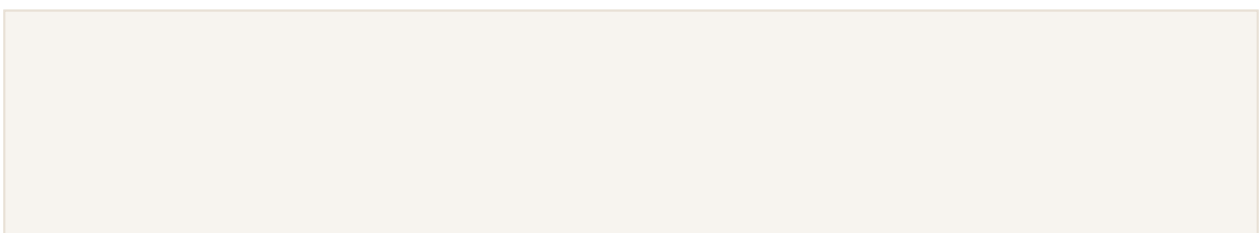
The inner ally is not positive self-talk. It is not affirmations. It is not pretending you are doing well when you are not. The ally is a part of you that can stay with you while you are struggling, without flinching, without fixing, without abandoning you. Most women have rarely been spoken to this way by anyone.

The full work of growing the ally happens in the full course. The first step you can take now is to begin sketching what this voice would be like, and then to feel it in the body.

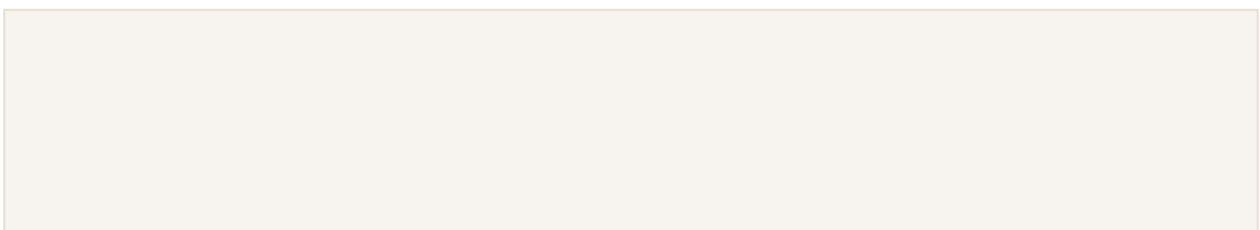
1. If you were going to grow a voice beside the critic - one that knows everything you have been through and wants you to live well - what would that voice sound like?



2. What quality of tone would it have? Warmth. Steadiness. Dry honesty. Compassion without sentimentality. Something else?



3. Whose voice in your life has ever spoken to you the way you would want this voice to speak? A grandmother. A teacher who saw you. A friend. A therapist. A character in a book. Sometimes it is no one specific - just a felt sense of how you would want to be addressed.



4. Now imagine this presence beside you right now. Not in front, where you would have to perform. Beside you, the way someone trusted sits.

Take a slow breath. Notice the moment of imagining it beside you. Then move your attention through your body, slowly.

- Where do you feel the presence first? The chest. The space behind the eyes. The shoulders. The base of the spine. Somewhere else.
- What softens when it arrives? What steadies?
- What happens to your breath? Your jaw? Your shoulders? The muscles around your eyes?
- What is the temperature of this presence compared to the critic's presence? The pace? The closeness?

Write what you notice. A few words about each is enough.

This is the felt sense of the inner ally. Building it begins exactly here - in the qualities you have just sketched and the body's response to the presence you imagined beside you. The voice we develop in the full course is grown out of this somatic recognition.

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