




# Counseling Someone With A Harsh Inner Critic

In working with others, you might come across people that wrestle with a harsh and critical voice that influences how they view themselves and how they live their lives. You may see people stuck in patterns of overfunctioning, underfunctioning or hiding from others. These strategies are attempts to dismantle, cover or hide from the voice of the Harsh Critic.

As we care for others, we also want to keep in mind that we do not need to rush through the pain and connect to God's healing or hope. We want to take time to consider the impact of formative losses.

Following are steps to help someone process the origins of the Harsh Critic, help them understand its purpose, and grieve the pain which started the voice.

1. Have clients consider a critical voice that surfaces when they are anxious or overwhelmed, such as “you’re not good enough” or “you are not important.” Maybe you have heard them mention this voice and can guide them. Then have them recall an early or significant loss in their life, ideally around the time they first heard this voice. The loss could be something they experienced as sad or difficult or painful. It may facilitate the process to ask generally about childhood memories. It may be any kind of loss: a move, rejection in friendship, change in school or bigger losses such parents’ divorce or death of a loved one.
2. Take time to explore details of the loss. Ask how old they were, if they remember where they were, what they were wearing, who was with them, etc. Recalling sensory details brings them closer to the emotional experience where healing takes place in conjunction with articulated memories.
3. Ask the client to consider how they felt when the event occurred, asking them to describe the emotions and the physical sensations, if possible.
4. Enter into the pain of the loss by expressing how you feel as you hear their story. Convey compassion for the hurt in words and affect.
5. Validate the loss as significant. Some people may have been criticized or shamed for struggling in this experience so validation is important.

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6. Ask if they got a message from this experience of loss and ask them to articulate the message. This articulation is crucial as it allows them to integrate the emotional experience with rational process. Reflect back what they share with compassion. This is an important moment because this is where they get “felt” as they share the deep hurt and allow themselves to be seen. Staying with the client in this place is important because it validates the pain of what happened. Relief is felt in their sharing the experience with us.
  7. Help them to grieve and process the subsequent damage that this Harsh Critic has caused and take time to consider the hurt.
  8. Ask the client how it feels to share this experience of articulating a painful message about themselves with you. This is important because it allows the client to make explicit the implicit experience of receiving comfort by sharing with a trusted other.

Ultimately, we want to support our client as they feel the pain that gave birth to the Harsh Critic and the damage it caused. This place of recognizing and grieving is important and hard. As difficult as it is for our client to stay in the hurt, it can be hard for us to tolerate the pain, but this is a crucial part of the path to healing. Our accompanying them in this place provides implicit comfort and validation. Too quickly interjecting words to comfort may interrupt and minimize the importance of grieving. We can trust that God is at work in this difficult place. It is through seeing that life’s brokenness and our self-redemptive strategies lead to pain and death that we can see our need for true redemption from someone more powerful. It is here that we can taste the hope of the resurrection. When our clients have grieved their loss and their broken attempts to heal it, then we can then point them to Christ to receive comfort in their sorrows and to find the acceptance of who they were created to be in him. By His stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:5 NJKJ).