

# Are You Oversensitive to Criticism?

## Objective

To help you identify situations where you are oversensitive to criticism and develop strategies for countering that pattern.

## You Should Know

Nobody likes to be criticized, but some people let their fear of criticism dominate their lives. In some cases, that fear can keep them from trying new things, taking risks, and getting close to others. It is painful to be oversensitive to criticism and it is often based on an internalized negative self-view. Perhaps you were shamed or overly criticized as a child and still experience yourself as “small” in relation to others, especially those in authority. For instance, if you have a performance review at your job, do you tend to hear only the negative parts and tune out the positive? Do you shut down, or lash out, when your partner offers a constructive suggestion to you about a particular behavior?

If you are already aware that you tend to magnify what might be a mildly negative appraisal of you into a huge personal attack, that’s a positive thing. Awareness is the first step toward change! In life, it might not be possible to avoid people’s criticisms of you, but you can learn to react and respond in more helpful, less damaging ways. This worksheet offers you an opportunity to reflect on the situations that trigger your oversensitivity and learn better coping skills.

## What to Do

On the lines below, write down five situations when you notice you are oversensitive to criticism. Specify who the people involved are and what the situation is. Then note in each case what the consequences are of your oversensitivity (isolation, low self-esteem, irritability, avoidance, etc.).

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Next, repeat this statement three times aloud: “Criticism can help me in life.” How does that feel? Yes, criticism, when it is given in a constructive and well-meaning way, offers you the opportunity to improve in different areas of your life—at home, on the job, and in your community. Learning how to lower your reactivity to criticism can take time.

Be kind and patient with yourself as you think about and practice the following strategies:

- Notice objectively what someone is saying.
- Notice your “automatic” negative, self-critical voice and ask it to soften the volume.
- Think this affirmation: “I am seeking improvement not approval.”
- Be assertive—if you feel you’ve been wrongly criticized, step back, take a breath, and say so.
- Be proactive—if you’ve made a mistake, approach the other person before they approach you. Ask what you might have done differently to improve the situation.
- Let go. Interrupt your ruminating and obsessing with reassuring statements and/or an activity.
- Open yourself up to the value of another’s criticism, even though it may feel hard.
- Learn to listen with an open mind.
- Try not to become defensive in the moment. If you feel the urge to snap back, step away and rethink your response.
- Forgive yourself. Repeat phrases such as “I did the best I could,” “My intentions are positive,” “I can’t always be perfect,” “I let that person down, but I forgive myself,” “I’m going to make mistakes sometimes; everyone does,” “I’m not a bad person just because I made a mistake,” etc.
- Practice self-compassion. Change your inner talk to match what you would say to a friend or loved one whom you care about.
- Take a deep breath. Breathing is always a good strategy when you find yourself caught up in anxious thoughts.
- Try to understand the other person’s perspective.
- Directly ask for constructive criticism.
- If you find yourself getting upset, postpone the conversation until you’re calmer.
- Ask for specifics if you receive a vague or fuzzy critique.
- Think about what you might get out of learning to do something differently, including learning a new skill, instead of talking yourself out of it.
- Thank the person offering you feedback, even if it was not constructive or helpful.
- Resist the urge to offer a “counter critique” if you are upset or angry.

If you find that these strategies aren’t working for you and that you continue to suffer from oversensitivity to criticism that might be causing you anxiety, depression, anger, guilt, or shame, consider working with a therapist or other mental health professional to better understand and overcome this pattern.

## More to Think About

1. Which three of the above strategies are you willing to try in the coming week or so? Pick at least one that feels “very hard” to do to push yourself out of your comfort zone a bit.

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2. Write down three things you can say to yourself next time you notice you’re reacting to criticism with oversensitivity.

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3. Pick one situation from your list in the beginning of this exercise. Write down how you would like to approach that type of situation differently in the future.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?

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