


From Inner Critic to Inner Coach Meditation

 Compassion

 Meditation

 15 min

 Client

 No

As humans, we have two evolved safety systems - the threat defense system and the attachment/affiliation system (Neff, 2003). The threat defense system, also known as the fight/flight/freeze response, is triggered quickly when our brains detect danger, leading us to either turn towards the threat to attack it, run away from it, play dead in the hope that the threat will pass, or show our bellies and hope the threat will be alleviated. Such behavioral responses to danger are very helpful in the wild; however, for humans in our modern-day world, these responses often make things worse. This is because the threats we usually face are not physical but psychological: threats to our self-concept. Our minds get confused between our thoughts and representations of ourselves and our actual selves, leading us to react as if our very existence is under siege.

Consider, for example, receiving some negative feedback about your performance at work. Your threat system might respond with *fighting*, beating yourself up emotionally, using punitive language to cut yourself down; *fleeing*, becoming anxious and fidgety, trying to escape from your inner pain by numbing yourself with food or alcohol; or *freezing*, getting stuck in a cycle of self-doubt and rumination. These responses to the threat to our self-concept are, in a way, a “double whammy” because when we criticize ourselves, we become both the attacker and the attacked, which only reinforces the negative affect.

Thankfully, we possess a second safety system, the attachment/affiliation system (also known as the caregiving system; Neff, 2003). Because of this system, mammals have the innate capacity to be soothed by warmth and affection, de-activating the threat defense system and instead cultivating a sense of calm. This warmth and affection can come from one’s caregiver or oneself. This system is all about being gentle, kind, and understanding, accepting that one is not perfect, and understanding that there is potential for learning and growth in every mistake one makes (Neff, 2003).

Research has revealed different effects of responding to ourselves with criticism (defense threat system) versus kindness and support (caregiving system) on our body. The caregiving system gives rise to a release of oxytocin, which strongly increases feelings of trust, calm, safety, generosity, and connectedness. It facilitates the ability to feel warmth and compassion for ourselves. The threat defense system, on the other hand, gives rise to a release of cortisol and adrenaline, adding a significant degree of cardiovascular stress to the body (Neff & Germer, 2017).

This tool aims to help clients differentiate between their threat defense system (i.e., their “inner critic”) and their caregiving system (i.e., their “inner coach”) and learn that they can let go of their habitual defense response and instead tap into their inner coach and respond to themselves with support and encouragement.



Author

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Goal

The goal of this tool is for clients to (1) become aware of and familiar with their inner critic, and (2) experience the difference between their inner critic versus their inner coach speaking to them in the context of challenging life experience.



Advice

- After completing the meditation, practitioners should inquire further about the client's inner coach. What did it look like? How did its voice sound? In what tone of voice did it speak in? The idea here is to reinforce and strengthen this part of the client, as our clients' inner coaches often go largely unnoticed.
- Clients may have difficulty "buying in" to their inner coach during the meditation, perhaps because this part of them has been dormant for a long time, and saying words of encouragement and support to oneself is a foreign experience. Check-in on the extent to which the clients believe in their inner coach, and if they do not yet believe in this part of themselves, remind them that for a long time, they have been listening only to their inner critic, giving little (if any) attention to their inner coach, so it makes sense that this voice and these words seem unnatural. Reassure the clients that, over time, as they continue to practice accessing and listening to this part of themselves, their inner coach will become more familiar and more "real." You might even add some neuroplasticity psychoeducation by saying that this is helped by new neural pathways being laid down in their brains every time they bring to mind their inner coach.



References

- Neff, K. D. & Germer, C. (2017). Self-compassion and psychological wellbeing. In J. Doty (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of compassion science*. Oxford University Press.

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We all have an inner critic. It is that voice inside our head that berates us and beats us down when we make a mistake or fail in some way (e.g., “You are a failure,” “You can’t do anything right,” “You are a loser”). This inner critic is thought to be there to help us, though more often than not, these words do more harm than good, leading us to self-doubt and, in some cases, self-hatred.

Thankfully, we also have an inner coach within us. This is the voice inside our head that encourages us and offers us words of support when things go wrong (e.g., “You’ve got this,” “You can handle this,” “You are more capable than you think!”). The only issue is that our inner coaches are often far less vocal than our inner critics. Some of us may have even lost touch with our inner coach altogether. This meditation is designed to help you tap into your inner coach, to become more familiar with it, and to learn how to listen to it over your inner critic in times of need.

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- To begin this meditation, find a comfortable sitting position, either sitting in a chair or on a cushion on the floor. Sit relaxed but upright with your shoulders back. Bring your attention to your breathing. Notice your breath flowing in and out of your body. Feel the rise and fall of your chest and belly as you breathe. No need to change your breathing in any way... observe it as it is at this moment.
- [10 secs]
- Now, from this place of presence, I’d like to invite you to bring to mind a recent time where you were critical or judgmental of yourself, maybe because you made a mistake, said something you should not have to someone, or messed up in some way or another.
- Bring this difficult situation to mind now and recall this moment as vividly as you can. Remember where you were, who you were with, if anyone, and what you were doing. See if you can put yourself back into this very moment as if you could travel back in time.
- From here, I’d like you to notice what your mind says to you about you in this situation.
- If the words that you are hearing are critical or judgmental, your inner critic is here. What is your inner critic saying exactly? And how is it speaking to you? What is its tone of voice?
- Allow your inner critic to talk to you about how it typically would.
- Notice how you are feeling right now.
- Notice what you want to do in response to this situation. Maybe you want to leave, maybe you want to run and hide, maybe you feel like giving up.
- [10 secs]
- OK, now I’d like you to imagine a different scenario. Imagine that I have a magic wand, and with one swoop, I can replace your inner critic with an “inner coach.” This inner coach speaks only words of encouragement and support. It says things like, “It’s OK, I’ve got this. Mistakes happen - they’re a part of life. I can handle this setback.”



- Imagine this now - you are in the same difficult situation, but it is your inner coach that has shown up instead of your inner critic.
- What could your inner coach say to you right now to encourage and support you?
- If you have trouble coming up with something here, you might like to think of what you would say to a friend or a loved one who found him/herself in the same difficult situation.
- Now, notice how you are feeling right now.
- Notice what you want to do in response to this situation.
- [10 secs]
- OK. Let's leave this visualization now and return to the breath. Become aware again of your breath flowing in and out of your body. Become aware of your body, sitting here in this room. Become aware of my voice and any other sounds around you. When you are ready, you can open your eyes.

Reflection

- What impact did your inner critic have on how you felt and your behavior at the time of this challenging situation?
- Did anything change when you brought in your inner coach? If so, what?
- Was there any resistance or difficulty in letting go of your inner critic in the second part of the practice?
- Could you allow yourself to indulge in your inner coach, or did it feel somewhat alien to you?