

House-train your shitty thoughts

By

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Introduction

We ALL have critical, negative thoughts – they're not a big deal *unless you believe them*, and let them undermine you.

We're going to explore how to be at ease with those thoughts, how to neutralise them, and how to put them to use them for your benefit. The process I'm going to teach you can be used on any of your critical, negative, or unhelpful thoughts about yourself to take their power away (and I'll give you a short version at the end too!).

Bring your curiosity, let it be easy and if you have any questions, please ask me via donna@donnahigton.com.

Step 1: Identify the critical thought

What critical thoughts do you know you have already? Many of our critical thoughts are long-standing beauties we've been thinking for years, and we know exactly what they are. But if you don't know, talk about yourself - what you're like, what your flaws are, why you haven't got the things you want in life.

Keep an eye out for things like "I never..." (something bad) or "I always..." (something bad)

Some examples for you:

I'm not doing enough
I'm not good enough (or what I've done isn't good enough)
I'm too old, too fat, too pale, too dark, too red, stupid, ugly
I can't do that
I'm weird, lazy, wrong
I'll never succeed (if successful, it's all a fluke and soon it will all end because I suck)
I'm a bad person
I should/shouldn't...
I'm a failure
No one likes me

What's the one critical thought that dogs you the most?

Exercise:

Make a little list of your critical thoughts and highlight the one you want to work with through this process. (You don't have to list every critical, negative or unhelpful thought you've ever had, just list a few that come to mind now. You can work with other thoughts as they come up in future.)

You can do them all if you want to, but pick one to start with. You could start with

the one that comes up the most often, the one that is bugging you most right now, or the one that catches your eye.

Important note: in the beginning, don't work on deeply dark and painful thoughts. You *can* use this process with them, but I wouldn't start there – learn the process first. And of course, if you have deep trauma to process, please get the help of a professional to deal with those thoughts.

Step 2: It's just a thought

We take our thoughts very seriously, but they are just thoughts! We have so many random thoughts throughout the day. The trouble with critical, negative, unhelpful thoughts is that we take them as gospel, and take them seriously. And then we judge ourselves for having a thought.

Which is what our brain does...have thoughts. Many random thoughts.

Don't worry so much about your thoughts.

Just because you think it doesn't mean it's true. Even if you think it a lot, that doesn't make it true. Even if you've been thinking it for decades, it doesn't make it true. Thoughts we think over and over become beliefs...but that still doesn't mean they're true.

Thoughts and beliefs are not facts.

The more you can understand this, the more the thoughts will lose their power over you. With thoughts you deeply believe, it can be difficult to see it as 'just a thought', so if you have a thought like that, don't worry. Just move on to the next step.

In some forms of meditation, you learn to see thoughts like clouds, letting them drift by without attachment to them. Observing them, but without needing to go into them. Start thinking of your thoughts as clouds that pass by rather than something to grab onto and worry over like a dog with a bone.

Exercise:

Remind yourself that the thought you identified is *just a thought*.

Take it deeper: Meditate (or do nothing) for 10 minutes (more if you can) and practice seeing your thoughts drift by.

If you don't do this a lot, you'll notice a lovely sequence of thoughts that say "this is stupid" "am I doing this right?" and "I can't see how this will help".

Notice them, let them drift on, like clouds.

Step 3: Find the positive intention of your critical thoughts

Believe it or not, every part of every body has a positive intention. Our inner critics actually want the best for us. Their intention is to protect us, inspire us, make us the best we can be. They often fail dismally in meeting this intention, but it's helpful to know that their underlying intention is positive.

We've picked up from the wider world how to get the best from ourselves is to nag and criticise. We've picked up that to protect ourselves, we don't let ourselves do anything or go anywhere. We've picked up that to get more done, we need to give ourselves a hard time.

If you look at your childhood, and your work life, and the wider world in general, these are the examples that are most visible. It doesn't mean that it's right. It doesn't mean it's the best way to treat yourself.

Examples:

Critical thought	Possible positive intention
I'm not doing enough	To help you get shit done (in my case, it's normally a particular project that's not getting done)
I'm not good enough	To help you be better or to hold you back to keep you safe
I'm too old/too stupid/ too whatever	To protect you from doing something you might fail at
I can't do that	To protect you from failure
I'll never succeed	To protect you from failure
I am a failure	To inspire you to do better
I'm weird	To help you fit in with the tribe so that you're safe and not left out
I'm lazy	To be more a productive member of society
No one likes me	To protect you from getting hurt or to make you a better person so everyone will like you.
I'm a bad person	To inspire you to be a good person

Ok, you may not care about any of those things, and the way the inner critic is going about it is not working to *do* those things, but that's their intention – like an overprotective mother's intention is to keep you safe, not destroy your confidence.

Unlike external criticism (which is often more about them than you), which can sometimes be the other person just being an arsehole, we're going to assume a positive intention from our inner critic.

I've been doing inner critic work with clients for years, and the inner critic most often feels demonised, misunderstood and under-appreciated. It is not some Machiavellian, evil part of you that wants to bring you down – it wants to help. (Even if the way it chooses to help is wildly unhelpful!)

Once you recognise the positive intention of the thought, you realise those thoughts aren't trying to undermine you, they're trying to help you. So instead of trying to stop thinking negative thoughts, you look to understand where the thoughts come from, and how you can achieve that positive intention in a different (and probably more effective) way.

Exercise

Find the positive intention of your most critical thought. Remember: it is most often to keep you safe and protect you, or to help you be the best you can.

Step 4: Let the thought talk and feel your feelings

Our critical thoughts have had years to bed in and take root. Ignoring them, demonising them, and fighting with them are all ineffective ways of dealing with them. We need better ways.

Get to know that thought and the part of you that believes that thought – find out where they come from (sometimes they just disappear when you realise it's the voice of a schoolteacher you had zero respect for when you were 13).

Find the fear hiding behind the criticism or negativity – what is this thought trying to protect you from or help you do? Dialogue with love – listen to understand, be curious, open, interested.

For example:

A regular critical thought of mine is: you haven't done enough. So let that thought talk: You haven't done enough. Look at the to do list. There's so much on it. This is just not good enough. There's so much to do, and you haven't done enough of it. You always do this. You will never succeed if you keep working like this. (This is the ultimate fear of this thought.)

Letting the thought talk will bring up some feelings. There may be shame, frustration, anger. Let yourself feel those feelings. Just give yourself a couple of minutes to feel. You don't have to do anything but feel. If it helps, notice where the feeling is, does it have a size, a shape, a colour?

But don't intellectualise the feeling too much. Just feel it. It might be uncomfortable, you might find yourself wanting to cry. Feel free. Stay with it if you can. I find myself getting fidgety, distracted, wanting to do other things and not feel the feelings.

The feeling is already there – listening to the thought has just brought it to the surface. If you allow yourself to feel the feeling, it can clear. You don't need to do anything. Just feel.

If it doesn't feel safe to feel the feelings, trust yourself to know what's right for you,

and move on to the next step (or explore that thought that's so painful with a therapist).

Exercise

Let that critical thought talk. If it starts to repeat itself, stop. You only need to give it a minute or two (don't let it rant for hours and send you spiralling into depression!) Let yourself feel the feelings brought up by letting the thought talk – just for 1-5 minutes.

Step 5: Bring your inner wise self in to the conversation

Bring your inner wise self to the conversation – she won't get defensive, angry or argumentative. Your inner wise self is unconditionally loving and supportive.

If you find yourself being triggered by the conversation, or getting argumentative with that thought, you may want to step away for a while and come back to it later.

The point of this conversation is again to understand the part of you that believes your critical, negative, or unhelpful thought. So be curious, open, non-judgemental. Imagine you are having a conversation with a friend who is spinning out, and you are the voice of love, reason, kindness and compassion.

I like to do this on paper – I find it easier that way, but you can also speak the imagined conversation out loud, or think it through in your head. If you've never done anything like this, it can sound a little odd, but give it a try. Imagine the part of you that believes the critical, negative, or unhelpful thought is talking to another part of you that is wise and calm and loving...and just see what happens.

(And have fun with it!)

Example:

Wise self: I hear that you are really frustrated by this

You bet your butt I am – look at all these things that need doing!

Wise self: there is quite a list. Does any of it need to be done this instant?

No. You know, I just want to help you get it all done.

Wise self: I know. Thank you for your interest in our success. And it'll get done. All in perfect and divine time, right?

If you say so.

Sometimes the conversation will be a little longer, but it doesn't need to be long – you just want to understand, love, and soothe that part of you. Once this part of me felt heard in her frustration, and felt acknowledged in her desire to help, she relaxed and I was able to let go of the stress I'd been feeling over not doing enough.

Exercise:

After you've let the negative thought talk, and felt your feelings, take a deep breath or 3. Bring your wise self into the conversation with the intention to understand, love, and soothe the stressed part of you that is believing that critical, negative or

unhelpful thought.

Often, this will bring up new insights, new understandings, and sometimes a realisation that there is a lot of old conditioning and belief patterns that are getting in your way. Whatever comes up, it's OK – you are human. Humans have old conditioning and belief patterns. Humans have random thoughts and fears.

One time, when I worked on this “haven't done enough” thought, I uncovered a fear that I would get into trouble for not doing my work. I'm self-employed. But I picked that up as a kid, when you'd be in trouble for not doing homework, and as an adult working in jobs with bosses who would get cross if you didn't do a job quickly enough and it threatened your livelihood.

So although as a self-employed person, it makes zero sense, I can see where it came from. And now I know it's there, I can do the work to understand, love, and soothe the part of me with that fear of punishment. So if this conversation brings up new thoughts, that's OK. You can deal with those thoughts. (And remember the new thoughts are still just thoughts.)

Step 6: What is that thought the Guardian of?

This is my favourite step. Our negative, critical and unhelpful thoughts are the guardians of our success and wellbeing.

Shitty thoughts most often come up when we're not feeling great, but instead of taking them at face value, let's assume that our internal communication isn't always perfect, and there is actually a message within this shitty thought.

Like a full bladder can tell you it's time to pee, a frustrated or mean thought can tell you it's time for self-care, or a reworking of your priorities, or you need some self-love.

Is this their true purpose? We get to decide, and I've chosen to believe that inside the shittiest of thoughts is a helpful message.

If a client turns up to a session with a lot of self-criticism going on, I always ask how their self-care is. It's one of the top warning signs of poor self-care. So, often it will be about self-care or self-love...but sometimes it's something else.

For example, my main critical thought is “I haven't done enough today/this week/this century”.

This thought is the guardian of my priorities, because it almost always comes up when a particular project is being ignored – working on my next book often falls to the bottom of the priority list, even though this is very important to me.

So this thought will come up to remind me to make time to do the things that are

the most important to me. This thought is also the guardian of my self-compassion and kindness – it sometimes comes up when I’m being too hard on myself, like a hangover from when I was a kid and hadn’t done my homework or an adult with a demanding boss.

In these times, the thought is from a part of me that is scared of being punished, getting detention, or losing a job...which reminds me to be kind and compassionate and generous to myself.

Example 2: The thought “I can’t do this” could be a guardian of a couple of different things.

First, it could be the guardian of your self-care. When we’re feeling tired and worn out and overwhelmed, life seems so much harder. Once you have taken care of yourself, your confidence will return and you’ll feel able to take on the world.

Second, it could be the guardian of your self-belief. Whenever you think “I can’t do this”, maybe you need to give yourself a pep talk to remind yourself that you *can* do it. Third, it could be the guardian of giving yourself the time and space to learn. If you can’t do something the first time you try, that’s normal!

You get to decide what your shitty thought is the guardian of. Let it be easy, trust yourself to know the answers. And if an answer doesn’t come instantly, give yourself some time to think about it. Take a few minutes. If an answer doesn’t come, go away and do something else while you mull it over. Let yourself reflect and muse over it. An answer will come.

Exercise:

What is your main critical thought the guardian of?

Step 7: What if that thought just isn’t true?

Take another look at your negative/critical thought. What if it wasn’t true? Imagine the thought is just not true at all. Often, it isn’t true, and just taking a moment to imagine it isn’t is enough to help you realise that thought is a lie.

Even if you believe the thought is true, just imagine for a second that it wasn’t true. You may find that your thought isn’t as true as you thought it was.

Imagine the opposite is true. Imagine that you are doing enough, that you are totally good enough, that you’re not too old or stupid or whatever, that you can do it, that you will succeed, that you’re not a failure or lazy, that lots of people love you, that you’re a great person.

Our brains are excellent machines – if we look for evidence that we are not enough, we’ll find it. But this works both ways. If we look for evidence that we are enough,

we'll find that too.

What would change in your life if that critical, negative thought wasn't true? What would change if the opposite was true?

Exercise:

Take a couple of minutes to imagine that your critical, negative, unhelpful thought is not true.

Step 8: Choose a new thought

We're starting to understand our old, critical thought – it's having a positive purpose AND let's start thinking what we want to think, what we want to believe. This won't make the critical thought magically disappear, but it will give your brain a new neural pathway to travel.

Remember, thoughts we think a lot become beliefs, so why not choose some good thoughts?

Here are a few questions to help you get to a good new thought:

What does a person who has what you want think?
What is the opposite of that horrid thought?
What thought will support your success in this area?
What is the best thought you can think about this?

Examples:

<i>Old thought</i>	<i>New thought</i>
I haven't done enough	Look what I did today. I rocked xyz. And I always get so much done, I'm super productive!
I'm not good enough	I'm magnificent (or if that's a step too far, try I'm getting better every day or I'm doing my best)
I'm too old	Life gets better every year (this was one of Louise Hays favourite affirmations and I love it!)
I'm too fat	I'm gorgeous, and I'm getting fitter every day (if that's something you want to be) or I am learning to love my body
I'm weird	I'm uniquely fabulous daaaahling or I am learning to accept myself
I can't do that	I can do anything – everything is figure-outable, and if they can, I can or maybe I can do it.

If those replacement ideas don't appeal, that's fine – find new thoughts that work for you.

I'm not going to ask you to repeat your new thought 200 times a day (although you can if you want to) or write it out like lines from school (again, you can if you want

to). Sometimes if the thought is the opposite of our shitty thought, they end up arguing in our heads, so that can be counterproductive.

Here's what I do: I choose a different thought, and if I LOVE the thought, it gets added to my Masterplan book. My coach suggested I assume it's slowly sinking into my brain, and basically don't really think about it again unless I have a flick through the book. Lazy, easy, and it works!

Hold it all lightly. Let it all be easy.

You don't have to find the perfect replacement thought immediately, you may just find a slightly better thought. That'll do. With practice you'll find higher quality, more fabulous thoughts.

Exercise

Find a new thought to try on. If you love it, add it to your masterplan for life!

Wrap Up

Here's the full process:

- Step 1: Identify the thought
- Step 2: Remind yourself it's just a thought, not a fact
- Step 3: Find the positive intention of the thought
- Step 4: Listen to the part of you that believes that thought – with curiosity and compassion, and feel your feelings
- Step 5: Bring your wise self into the conversation
- Step 6: What is that thought the guardian of?
- Step 7: What if that thought just wasn't true?
- Step 8: Choose a new thought to play with.

You'll find a full worksheet to do the process at the end of this guide.

It is worth doing the full process on your most critical thoughts.

If you do, let it be easy, take 10-20 minutes to do it, don't make it complicated.

But also you can simplify the process:

1. Identify the thought.
2. Be curious and compassionate about it
3. Don't let the thought stop you doing anything!

As I said before, this process will not magically make your thoughts go away.

But you will get to the point where you hear "You haven't done enough" and instead of feeling guilty, feeling like a failure, feeling bad, you wonder what project you've let slip and schedule it in your calendar.

The critical thoughts won't set off a whole landslide of self-loathing, but a moment of curiosity and a reminder to do your self-care, work on your self-belief, do a little self-love.

Do you need to do the process more than once on the same thought?

You can do the process again on the same thought – because it might change, new things might come up, it might be a guardian of something new.

This happened for me on my "haven't done enough" thought – for years it was all about reminding me of my priorities...and then suddenly it was also about being kind to myself.

But you don't need to do the process every time you have the thought. Trust your own wisdom here – if you feel the need to do it again, do.

If you notice one particular critical thought keeps coming up even after you've done the process, don't worry. That's totally normal. Many of our critical thoughts have been running in our minds for many years. Simply make them the guardian of something good, so when you see that thought, you think "Ah, I need to do self-care/self-love/self-belief work".

Do I need to do it on every shitty thought?

In short, no. We have a lot of thoughts each day. I would do the process on my most unhelpful thoughts, and the loudest shitty thought. You do not need to do the process on every single critical, negative, or unhelpful thought you have. You can if you want, and if it feels good to you, do.

But do not use this process to make life harder for yourself. Cherry pick the thoughts that bother you the most, do this process on them, and then come back to it any time you feel you need it.

Can I use this process for shitty thoughts about others?

I developed this process to use on my shitty thoughts about myself. It is not designed for use on thoughts about others, about world events.

However, some of the steps can be useful, and most of them are relevant.

The steps I think will be less helpful are steps 3-5. There may not be a positive intention of a thought about another person, and if the positive intention is to make them be better – well, that's not your job!

Talking to the thought could lead to a rant about the other person or the situation, which may not be helpful.

But you could remember these thoughts are just thoughts, find what they are the guardians of, challenge them, and choose new (more helpful) thoughts.

But if you're interested in a process you can use for thoughts about others, I would (and do) use The Work by Byron Katie.

Exercise

Do the worksheet on your most critical thought if you haven't already. If you have, try it on a new thought.

Take it deeper: For the next month or so, do the process regularly. Either whenever you notice a particularly juicy thought, or 2-3 times a week if you work better to structure. Doing this helps you learn the process, so in the future when you need it,

you'll remember to do it.

The house-training process in action

Here's an example of this process all the way through on a thought I had when I was ill with a migraine lately. (When you're ill, down or exhausted, negative thoughts come up more and have a field day. It's all good though – you just take it through the process.)

Step 1: Identify the thought

What exactly is the critical thought you're having (it can have several different guises)?

I have failed at life. (*Wowzers.*)

Step 2: Remember it's just a thought

Just because you think it, doesn't make it true.

And you don't need to go down a self-loathing rabbit-hole because of it.

Let it go by, like a cloud in the sky.

Step 3: What is the positive intention of the thought?

What is this thought trying to do for you? Protect you, inspire and motivate you, save you from making a mistake?

This thought is trying to motivate me to be the best I can be.

(Like I said, just because that's the intention, that doesn't mean it's working...and for this one, it's not!)

Step 4: Let it talk

Let that thought have free rein. Let the part of you that believes the thought talk.

Look at all the things you haven't done. You've been in business for a zillion years and you're not Jeff Bezos. You haven't written book three – what the heck have you been doing. And you're not exactly threatening JK Rowling. It's pathetic. I'm ashamed.

(Ouch! Remember – you're listening to understand, and it's just a thought, so don't take it too personally.)

Let yourself feel the feelings that come up. This thought brought up a lot of shame and guilt for me, and it hurt my heart to feel the feelings! But again, you don't stay

there in the feeling...just feel it for a minute or two and then move on.

Step 5: Bring your wise self into the conversation

Converse with the thought from the perspective of your wise self – be calm, cool and curious

Wise me: I hear that you're really disappointed. What is it that you want?

Failed At Life me: I so want you to succeed, to be more financially successful, to be able to hold your head up and say "look what I did".

W me: so it's about greater financial success and appearance? (no judgement)

FAL: yes. What else is there, frankly?

W me: And yet there is so much we have done. Written 2 books, persevered at something we love and believe in. Do you see the success there?

FAL: Yeah but you could do so much better.

W me: That's true AND there is greater potential than ever. We're working on getting to the next level.

And things keep getting in the damn way!

Yes. Lol. Life is slowing us down so that we can build those strong foundations.

Frustrating isn't it?

Yes, and also it does make sense...but I find it so hard.

I know sweetheart. I love you. And thank you for being the guardian of so much GREAT STUFF – my power AND trusting life (see step 6). Gosh, you're awesome!

Thank you.

Step 6: What is that thought the guardian of?

This thought is the guardian of my inner power (my choices bought me to this point and I have the power to change my life) AND trust in life.

Step 7: What if that thought wasn't true?

Ha – it's not true!

Step 8: Choose a new thought

What would you rather think and believe than that critical thought?

I keep choosing the life I want, and moving towards better and better.

Within 10 minutes, this incredibly depressing thought got turned around, because I realised what it was the guardian of, and I loved that.

When I first did the process, I skipped step 5 – conversing with wise self. I was ill with a migraine and didn't feel up to the conversation, but I'd realised what the thought was the Guardian of, and felt better so that was good enough for me.

I came back to it a couple of days later to have that conversation.

This is how easily the process can dismantle an old, powerful critical thought!

Worksheet House-train your critical, negative, and unhelpful thoughts

Step 1: Identify the thought

What exactly is the critical thought you're having (it can have several different guises)?

Step 2: Remember it's just a thought

Just because you think it, doesn't make it true.

And you don't need to go down a self-loathing rabbit-hole because of it.

Let it go by, like a cloud in the sky.

Step 3: What is the positive intention of the thought?

What is this thought trying to do for you? Protect you, inspire and motivate you, save you from making a mistake?

Step 4: Let it talk and feel the feelings

Let that thought have free rein. Let the part of you that believes the thought talk.

Feel the feelings this brings up – just for a minute or two. Just feel.

Step 5: Bring your inner wise self into the conversation

Converse with the thought from the perspective of your wise self – be calm, cool and curious

Step 6: What is that thought the guardian of?

Is it the guardian of your self-care, your priorities, your self-love, your self-belief?

Step 7: What if that thought just wasn't true?

Step 8: Choose a new thought

What would you rather think and believe than that critical thought?
