

Faculty and Employee Assistance Program Newsletter

Handling Criticism

Submitted by Teresa Culbertson

Criticism is never easy for us to deal with. We may receive a lot of praise, but we never forget that one piece of criticism that may come with it. There are many ways we react to criticism -- becoming defensive or angry, and even feeling devastated. Why is criticism so hard to hear?

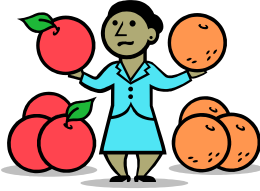


In a recent article on criticism (Trespicio , 2009) Del Mar, California-based psychologist Leon Seltzer, Ph.D says, "When your buttons get pushed, you regress to a childlike state. Those buttons connect you to what I call your inner Charlie Brown, that self-doubting part of you that questions whether you're really as attractive, capable, or smart as you like to think you are." We all have some insecurities and doubts, and criticism can often bring those to the surface.

There are ways to deal with criticism that help to reduce the negative feelings that arise:

- **Pause for a moment:** If you start to feel upset and angry about what was said to you, take a moment to relax and think about what happened. Try not to react too quickly or too defensively. Often we make more of criticism than it actually is, so it is helpful to be realistic about the situation.
- **Turn it into a positive:** Though it is rare to feel positive about a criticism initially, after you have had some time to absorb what happened and how it is making you feel, try to find something helpful about the comment. For example, if someone criticizes you for incorrect grammar usage in a paper you wrote, take that opportunity to learn from your mistake.
- **Don't take it too personally:** We sometimes deal with criticism that is unwarranted and out of line. In these situations it is best to remember that the person giving the criticism could be having a bad day or dealing with their own negative emotions, and the criticism has nothing to do with you. If you have evaluated the criticism and cannot find a way for it to be helpful to you, let it go, knowing that the other person might have just been letting off some steam.

- **Understand that we are all different:** We often share differing viewpoints, so do not expect everyone to see things the way you do. If someone criticizes your opinion, try not to take it as a personal assault. The world is full of people that think, look, and act differently, which makes things far more interesting than it would be if we were all alike.



- **Consider the emotional aspect:** Why do you think the criticism bothers you so much? Does it remind you of something that happened in your life? Sometimes certain comments can take us back to a time and place of weakness. Seltzer says, "When your emotional equilibrium gets thrown off, you need the adult you to soothe the child you. Talk to yourself as the good parent you'd want to be to your own children." Terri Trespicio takes this notion further and says to use this same approach to see the child within the person who spoke ill of you (Trespicio, 2009). Consider what you might have done to trigger an old security of the person giving the criticism. When the exchange is viewed as two children lashing out, it is easier to gain perspective and compassion.

Though it is never easy to deal with critical comments or feedback, there are ways to make it work in your favor. Another thing to consider is to remember that we can always learn from others, but what is most important is to believe in yourself and your convictions. Selzer says we should move toward internal, rather than external validation. Trespicio notes that by coming into your power and standing accountable for your actions, you'll be able to counter negativity with more aplomb in the future.

*Trespicio, Terri. (May 2009). *Coping with Criticism, Body + Soul*. 68-71.

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