Map Your Inner Patterns · Individual parts map · About 4 minutes

When Your Inner Critic Has Useful Information

Keeping a specific concern while leaving a character attack behind

“I left one invoice out.” Listen to how quickly that sentence can become a judgment about the person who says it.

“I should never be trusted with anything.”

These sentences may arrive almost together. The first identifies a mistake. The second makes a sweeping judgment about the person who made it. When they become tangled, correcting an invoice can feel like defending your right to be taken seriously at all.

This is a common difficulty with self-criticism: there may be useful information inside a way of speaking that makes the information harder to use. Rejecting the attack does not require overlooking the error.

Consider Amira, a fictional event volunteer. She sends an organizer a materials total, then discovers a missing invoice. Her first thought is that she is incapable of handling responsibility. She is embarrassed and wants to hide the whole exchange. Meanwhile, the organizer still has the wrong figure.

The work in front of her is fairly specific. She needs to check the total, send the correction and acknowledge any inconvenience. Whether the mistake reflects overload, an unclear process or a simple oversight may become clearer afterward. “I ruin everything” helps with none of those questions.

Respond to what can be checked

A useful response to the critic might be: “You are pointing to a mistake I need to fix. Calling me untrustworthy goes beyond what happened.” This does not have to become a long inner dialogue. Naming the missing invoice may be enough to recover the practical task.

Parts work can help someone become curious about a critical response.[1] Perhaps the criticism is trying to prevent another error. That possibility is worth exploring when it fits, but you need not assign every harsh thought a protective motive. Sometimes its origin remains unclear while its effect is obvious.

Kristin Neff's account of self-compassion allows for acknowledging faults and taking action without contempt.[2] Applied here, kindness gives Amira a less punishing way to face the mistake. It does not send the corrected figure for her or guarantee that the organizer will respond warmly.

Embarrassment may linger after she has put things right. She does not have to eliminate it before the correction counts. Nor does feeling better mean the external task is finished. The organizer needs the actual update, even if Amira has gained a valuable insight about herself.

When the same problem returns

Repeated mistakes deserve more than a nicer sentence. The workload may need changing. Training, assistance or a clearer checking process may be necessary. If someone else is treating you harshly, their conduct also deserves attention; everything should not be relocated inside your relationship with your critic.

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For a brief exercise, compare Amira's two opening sentences. Which gives her something she can act on? Which claims to know her whole character? Keep the useful detail and see whether a next step becomes visible. You can consider the example without applying it to your own life.

An overlooked invoice lets us hear the concern beneath the critic's sentence.

The invoice can go back into the total. The part of you that wanted to do careful work has something to do now.

Companion reading · The Parts of You That Disagree

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Map Your Inner Patterns · Individual parts map (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] IFS Institute. (n.d.). The Internal Family Systems model outline. Source.

[2] Neff, K. D. (2003). Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. Self and Identity, 2(2), 85–101. https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860390129863 Source.

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