



Reducing Excessive Self-Criticism Journey

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Step 21: Loss of Identity Within the Crowd

This step, and the two that follow it, deal with the human need to belong, a need that is profound and often underestimated, the need to be part of the consensus. This need exists in every person, even in those who see themselves, or present themselves, as original, individualistic, rebellious, anarchistic, solitary, or opposed to conventional ways of life.

Every person has a deep need to belong, to be accepted, to be perceived as “okay,” to receive recognition, to be part of the group, to be wanted, to be liked, to be “one of us.” Often there will be groups or circles that a person prefers not to belong to, and they may even define themselves as someone who is not connected to them at all.

Yet even then, in their own way, they will carry within them the need to feel that they are seen correctly, that they are accepted, that they are noticed, that they are wanted, that they are allowed to be “part of the tribe.”

This need is usually hidden from view. We do not notice how many of our actions, choices, and feelings are connected to the need to belong, to be accepted, to receive approval from our environment. At times, we do not realize that we are making decisions whose deeper motivation is the desire to feel part of a broader social story that includes many others besides ourselves.

Often we will also avoid situations in which we might feel alone, not because of the loneliness itself, but because of the feeling of not belonging, a state in which it seems to us that we do not fit in, that we are not “part of what is happening.”

Excessive self-criticism is especially active in this area, and in many ways it can be assumed that this is also where it was born. The child’s need to be protected and nourished is a basic survival need. A child cannot exist without the physical and emotional support of their parents and family, and their dependence on them is absolute. Therefore, they strive, with all their might, to be “worthy” and “deserving” of the good things that their environment provides.

For this purpose, they develop within themselves a system of self-criticism whose role is to monitor their actions and thoughts, and to direct them so that they align with what they

perceive as appropriate or acceptable. In this way, they learn to continue belonging to the family structure and later also to the social structures of kindergarten, school, and the wider community.

In this space, excessive self-criticism operates around the question of our alignment with the consensus that we have adopted within ourselves as “right,” “moral,” or “appropriate.” Every time we feel that we have deviated from it, in thoughts, emotions, or actions, the criticism arises within us and activates strong, painful, and disturbing warning signals that do not allow us to move too far away from what we perceive as the “right and appropriate” consensus.

“What will the neighbors say?” “What will people say if I say or do this?” These expressions are rooted more deeply than we are aware. They represent the basic need to be “okay,” not to be pointed at, not to be perceived as “strange” or “different.” And at a deeper level, the real fear is the fear that others will see us as we truly are, with the full range of our authentic emotions and feelings.

And so, מתוך these fears, maintained continuously by excessive self-criticism and based on an early belief that we must belong at any cost, we tend to arrive at a state that can be called loss of identity within the crowd.

The need to be “like everyone else,” the fear of rejection or exclusion from the tribe, the fear of ridicule or unpleasant responses from others, all of these create within us an inner mechanism that constantly asks: “What should I do in order to continue belonging? How should I behave so that people will not think certain things about me? How can I hide what I do not want to be seen in me?”

This mechanism uses excessive self-criticism as a kind of inner police force that constantly examines us and asks whether we are walking on the “correct” path in a social, familial, or group sense, even when it seems to us that we are very independent and that “we do not care what others think about us.”

The truth is that we do care, even when it seems that we do not. There is no person who does not wish, consciously or unconsciously, that others will think good things about them. And even if we pretend that we do not care, we will still feel a certain relief when we know that not everything that truly happens within us has been exposed.

And so, a very wide range of freedom, enjoyment, spontaneity, self-discovery, pleasure, and adventure may move away from us simply because, in some internal way, they are perceived as contradicting the need to “continue belonging.”

A person who comes to paint after not painting for many years, if they are not equipped with an open approach or appropriate guidance, will ask themselves, consciously or unconsciously, “What should I do so that something beautiful will come out, something that can be called a painting?” They will move the brush and then feel pain, fear, and

disappointment: “I do not know how to paint, I have no talent, what was I even thinking?”

What is hidden within this inner dialogue? The need to belong, to be “okay.” Behind the desire to create a “beautiful” painting lies another desire, to be approved, to be told that the painting is “worthy,” “good,” and “valuable.” That others will feel comfortable seeing it and perhaps even admire it. Deep inside, the thought is: “It will not be acceptable for me to create something that is not truly considered a painting. It will not be acceptable to simply decide that I can paint without receiving approval that I am capable of it.”

At this point, excessive self-criticism enters and stops the person. It convinces them to put down the brush, tells them that it is “not good,” that it is “not worth it,” and creates unpleasant feelings of not belonging, as if someone who paints in this way is not part of the social consensus.

In the end, that same person, who internally longs to paint and needs it, but who grew up with internal assumptions that prevent them from doing so, loses their identity within the crowd, without the crowd having done anything. The entire drama takes place within them, a drama that began in childhood, within a social environment that limits the possibilities for different and authentic expression.

Such an environment exists thanks to the ongoing activity of excessive self-criticism. Yet when we learn to reduce it consistently, we can gain moments of the return of identity, a renewed permission to act, to experiment, to play, to discover. Permission to be who we truly are.

How encouraging it is to know that it is possible to change this situation, to reduce self-criticism, and to reclaim our natural essence, while updating the excessive need to belong to the consensus, a need that in many cases actually distances us from ourselves.

Questions for Self-Reflection (preferably in writing):

1. Are you aware of the natural aggressive aspects within you?
2. What is your relationship with these parts? Do you resist their existence? Are you angry at them? Do you not understand what to do with them?
3. Are you open to the possibility that part of your being is to attack yourself almost routinely and daily through excessive self-criticism?
4. Do you have difficulty with the idea that you carry self-directed aggression through excessive self-criticism? Does this description feel exaggerated to you?
5. What might happen if you were able to channel your natural aggression into expression of release, initiative, and new action?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share or write about what you read in this step? Experiences, insights, questions, feelings?