



Reducing Excessive Self-Criticism Journey

Dr. Pinkie Feinstein

Step 24: Self-Criticism and the Superego

This step, and the two that follow it, address one of the most significant and elusive aspects of excessive self-criticism. It is an aspect that, as will be explained here, is well known within common and widely accepted psychological theories: the fact that excessive self-criticism functions as a force that “punishes” us.

This aspect is not easy to identify for those who are not familiar with it or do not recognize it, because it describes a relatively dramatic and intense connection. However, without recognizing and understanding that this is indeed how excessive self-criticism operates, and that this is a central part of what makes it “excessive,” it is not truly possible to deal with it effectively or to create change in the complex relationship a person has with this part that they have developed within themselves without being aware of it.

The concept of the “superego” entered human culture through the work of Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalytic psychology and what is now commonly referred to as dynamic psychology. This is a form of psychology in which the therapeutic style is longer in duration and based on conversations aimed at reaching the depths of human conflicts and pain, in order to enable processes of change and healing at those levels.

The term “superego” is generally defined as an unconscious part of the human psyche. This part serves to “supervise” thoughts, sensations, and emotions, as well as choices and actions, so that the person does not cross boundaries that they are supposedly not allowed to cross, both on the level of thought and on the level of behavior.

To a large extent, the superego can be understood as having aspects of a “highly developed conscience,” or a sophisticated control system whose role is to prevent the instinctive and “wild” parts of the person from gaining excessive freedom that could supposedly endanger the person and their environment.

According to the conventional understanding, the superego attempts to neutralize such situations by creating a sharp experience of pain, through feelings of guilt, shame, and a sense of inner conflict. This occurs when the superego identifies that a person has thought

or acted in ways that do not align with the rigid set of values that it holds as boundaries that must not be crossed.

It is commonly assumed that the superego develops in early childhood as a form of internalization of the accepted values of the family and environment. The child learns to become their own “educator” in an unconscious way, and thus learns to limit themselves and even to cause themselves pain when they act, or even think, in ways that are considered “unacceptable” or “improper.”

It is also commonly assumed that opposite this “superego” stands what is known as the “id,” which contains the instinctive, wild, animalistic, and boundaryless aspects of the person. These parts are perceived as potentially acting in immoral or insufficiently regulated ways, especially in relation to sexuality and aggression.

This is the conventional theory: two unconscious parts exist within the person, engaged in a kind of “competition.” On one side stands the freer, more instinctive part, and on the other side stands the “cultural,” “mature,” and “responsible” part, which creates experiences of pain and punishment when the person “slips” into expressions that the superego considers socially or otherwise dangerous.

The Psycho-Creative approach expands this theory and also brings its foundations into conscious application, not only unconscious. Here we are referring to excessive self-criticism that is clearly noticeable and felt at the conscious level. Moreover, there is also a real capacity to moderate its level of influence and the nature of its involvement in daily life.

We also expand the scope of what excessive self-criticism is concerned with far beyond the limitation of sexual and aggressive impulses. We present excessive self-criticism as a force whose purpose is to broadly restrict the free spirit within the person.

It reduces initiative, creativity, imagination, originality, autonomy, and uniqueness. Excessive self-criticism seeks to influence the person to be as little different from others as possible, keeping them within a narrow space of what is considered “normal and acceptable” in the social environment in which they live.

At the same time, excessive self-criticism, as described here, operates in a way that is very similar to what is attributed to the superego, in that it also creates within the person a sense of “punishment” or an experience of “I deserve to be punished now.” It causes the person to feel that they are not good, that they do not deserve love, affection, belonging, respect, or appreciation. Under its influence, a person may feel small and insignificant, weak, and lacking the ability to positively influence their life.

Similar to the action of the superego, a person tends to believe excessive self-criticism more than is warranted. From this comes its great power to influence the person and generate those unpleasant feelings. When this component is unconscious, as traditional

psychology often describes the superego, a person has less ability to deal with the negative reactions they experience when it becomes active.

In contrast, within the Psycho-Creative approach, a person learns how to become as familiar as possible with the way their self-criticism operates, to identify it in real time, and even to create a positive internal stance toward it, whose purpose is to counter the negative, harsh, and absolute messages of excessive self-criticism.

Within the Psycho-Creative approach, we turn excessive self-criticism into a kind of “inner entity” whose characteristics, modes of operation, and various forms of appearance can be described. With this “entity,” as we learn, there exists an ongoing and often highly conscious relationship. This is a relationship that we have much more ability to influence and guide than we usually realize, directing it toward new, more pleasant, and more constructive directions.

Moreover, we even “use” the presence of excessive self-criticism to teach ourselves to rise above our habitual patterns, which are often tied to excessive criticism, and to cultivate greater courage to change, to develop, to create, and to connect with our passion and the realization of our dreams.

This is the major difference between the Psycho-Creative approach and what is described as the superego in modern psychology. We view excessive self-criticism as a significant challenge, as a representation of our quiet fears. This representation allows us to take ourselves into processes of transformation and change that we might not have been willing to pursue if not for the burden and repeated “punishment” created by excessive self-criticism.

The greatest transformation that can be described in relation to excessive self-criticism, and one that is usually not emphasized in discussions of the superego, is that the very existence of excessive self-criticism is itself a kind of message to the person. A message that tells them how far they are from their freedom, from their authentic expression, from their creativity, and from their self-love.

Thus, those “punishments” that come from excessive self-criticism, similar to those attributed to the superego, become, in this approach, a kind of catalyst for personal development. The results of this development can be measured, among other ways, over time, as a noticeable reduction in the influence of self-criticism. This reduction can be recognized at the conscious level, and it likely also creates, at a deeper level, a reduction in the activity of the superego itself.

Questions for Self-Reflection (preferably in writing):

1. What are the most important things in your daily routine?
2. Which elements of your routine could be approached with more flexibility?
3. What happens to you when your routine is disrupted by something unexpected?

4. In what ways can you gently challenge your routine and introduce more adventure and surprise into it?
5. Can you recall a situation in which your routine was significantly disrupted and it ultimately turned out for the better?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share or write about what you read in this step? Experiences, insights, questions, feelings?