



Reducing Excessive Self-Criticism Journey

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Step 25: The Shamed Child

To be a shamed child, scolded and “not okay.” This is one of the central experiences that excessive self-criticism creates within a person.

Is there a reason why you might find yourself falling into such experiences, in which you become a shamed child, scolded and “not okay”?

Is there any logic that can justify arriving at such experiences, with all the discomfort that accompanies them?

Excessive self-criticism is an internal creation of the human being. Although it exists within each individual, it carries a kind of universality. It can be said that excessive self-criticism has a certain “success” in creating a quiet form of control over large groups of people, through the cultivation of a punitive mechanism within them. This mechanism ensures a particular form of behavior, choices, and decisions, and also avoidance of various things that excessive self-criticism “demands” that a person stay away from.

Are you willing to acknowledge that there are moments, occurring very quickly, filled with pain and confusion, in which you are suddenly transported back to childhood, to moments in which you were small in the face of a world that was unclear, and at times rigid and arbitrary? These are moments in which you adopted, without knowing it, a narrative absorbed from the general atmosphere, a narrative that led you to feel ashamed and scolded.

Moreover, the great paradox of such moments, precisely because they are such an embedded part of the existing human social structure, is that although the experience of shame and of being “scolded and not okay” necessarily makes a person feel “unworthy,” and therefore to a large extent also “not belonging,” there is within them a component that actually creates a sense of belonging.

This is how it works: if the unpleasant experiences associated with excessive self-criticism are common and familiar, and if they ultimately occur in everyone, then part of belonging also takes place there, in the space where a person participates in what others are also experiencing. Every person is exposed, from time to time, to scolding and to the

feeling of shame that accompanies self-criticism when it becomes excessive and is not itself regulated or balanced.

This is one of the quiet and difficult to understand reasons for the continued existence of excessive self-criticism among many people, and for its transformation into something perceived as “normal.” It is based on the widespread internalization of a form of belonging through the negative experiences it generates. Of course, this is a low-quality form of belonging that does not serve the person well, but it is still a form of belonging.

Often, a person will do almost anything to preserve what they perceive as a way to belong.

From another angle, a person finds it difficult to stand up to excessive self-criticism and prove to it that it is exaggerated, unnecessarily painful, and disproportionately punitive. This is partly due to a deep and unconscious fear of behaving differently from “the herd,” and thereby leaving oneself isolated and without belonging.

We maintain excessive self-criticism, limiting and restrictive, partly because of the feeling that in this way we continue to belong to a community, to any social space that is important to us, consciously or unconsciously, to remain connected to.

This part of the story should not be taken lightly. It is a large part, perhaps even too large. It is difficult to grasp how far we are willing to go in order to maintain what we perceive as belonging. Sometimes to the point of being willing to hurt ourselves and harm ourselves if that is what is required to continue feeling part of the “tribal fire.”

To a large extent, this is a broad social and cultural question that ultimately reaches the individual. Is there any educational or developmental value in using tools such as shame, or in creating the experience of “I am not okay”? Have we paused even for a moment to examine the cost of this mechanism, and whether it truly serves a meaningful purpose in relation to the pain it creates?

This question is highly significant for the learning process here, regarding excessive self-criticism and the recognition of it as excessive. In places where there exists, to some degree, a perception that experiences such as “I am ashamed of myself” or “I am not okay” are an inseparable part of the social, familial, or community landscape, a distorted norm is created regarding the legitimacy of excessive self-criticism.

When we do not stop to ask about the very questionable value of creating shame or the experience of “I am not okay,” we effectively allow this element, which exists widely in the human environment, to continue operating and influencing. When such a phenomenon receives quiet legitimacy, it becomes difficult to recognize that it is an unreasonable and exaggerated response that should be reduced as much as possible, and that its widespread use carries a significant cost.

When a person feels, as a result of some unpleasant event, like a “shamed child,” they experience themselves as being punished. They experience themselves as unworthy and “not good enough.” These feelings have no ability to generate meaningful motivation for change or valuable learning. They diminish the person, their sense of self-worth, and their ability to understand themselves, their actions, and their thoughts. They focus the person within an atmosphere of fear and lack of value.

Such feelings compete with a person's ability to take responsibility for mistakes and to correct them through change and learning. They distance the person from the ability to improve and develop, because improvement cannot take place in an atmosphere of fear, but only in an atmosphere of responsibility combined with empathy toward human weaknesses, which we all share.

We do not need ourselves, or others around us, to be ashamed. We need ourselves and others to stand with courage in front of their difficulties, pains, and mistakes, with the understanding that even then they are loved and worthy of respect and trust. A mechanism such as excessive self-criticism, in fact, comes to teach us to stop using this method within ourselves, and from there also in relation to others.

We all make mistakes from time to time. We all sometimes miss the right thing to say, and sometimes get carried away in a certain mood into actions we later regret. We all have missed and will continue to miss better paths under certain conditions. We all have missed opportunities and will miss more in the future. This is almost inevitable, and to a large extent even necessary, otherwise no learning process could take place.

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This is the point at which it becomes important to recognize how continued cooperation with excessive self-criticism disrupts a person's possibilities for growth and development. Mistakes are not only events in which we “missed” or “were not attentive.” Mistakes that we are aware of and feel the pain of are central learning events. In fact, they are not missed opportunities, but rather significant opportunities for change that could not have occurred otherwise.

Excessive self-criticism is what causes us to miss the great opportunities that come together with our mistakes.

In such moments, after a mistake or an experience of failure, there is a certain kind of pain, a pain that comes to signal things within the emotional space that require attention, now, after the “mistake” has occurred. That mistake holds special value in these moments because it draws attention, evokes emotional experience, and allows the person to observe something that could not have been observed otherwise.

In these moments, if the pain of the "error" deteriorates, through the intervention of excessive self-criticism, into an experience of exaggerated shame or into the feeling of "I am not okay," then, in effect, the lesson that could have been learned from that mistake is missed.

Instead of moving through the experience of pain with self-compassion, listening, and learning the emotional story that was revealed in those moments, the person is drawn into an unnecessary drama of shame and damage to self-worth. At that point, they can no longer recognize what the mistake was trying to tell them. Instead, they unconsciously choose a "real mistake," which is the prevention of the healing and transformation process that the original mistake was inviting.

If this happens, if we find ourselves being "punished" by excessive self-criticism, with strong feelings of shame or of "I am really not okay," we may come to understand that what is happening within us is a kind of childhood experience. A habit that was embedded within us years ago, through which we learned to belong to our environment, among other ways, through such experiences, just as others did. Now, here, it is time to dismantle and dissolve this mechanism, which is no longer valid, no longer necessary, and no longer helpful.

If this occurs, it is worth pausing, breathing, observing, and for the first time recognizing that the shame is completely exaggerated and unnecessary. In its place, we can turn inward, as much as possible, with understanding, listening, empathy, and a genuine desire to learn, to grow, and to change. Not through punishment, but through healing the pain and wrapping it with love.

Questions for Self-Reflection (preferably in writing)

1. What immediate feelings arise within you when you hear the word "**shame**"?
2. What is your current perspective on the role of shame in human life in general, and in your own life in particular?
3. Take a moment to observe this experience of shame. What do you find within it? What emotions and sensations are present? Where does it take you right now?
4. Can you now recognize the importance of reducing the activation of shame by excessive self-criticism and protecting yourself from spending too much time in that emotional place?
5. Can you now embrace the shamed little girl who still lives within you and tell her that there is absolutely no reason to be ashamed?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share or write about regarding what you have read in this step? Experiences? Insights? Questions? Feelings?