

Introduction to the Punitive Critic

When the Punitive Critic mode kicks in, we're internally exposed to the narrative that there's some kind of punishment that's deserved. The Punitive Critic is usually heard in our system assigning blame to ourselves or others with damaging statements that, if heard in the external world, would probably be categorized as mean, nasty, and even cruel. When the hurtful, and sometimes debilitating messages of the punitive critic are externalized, they usually come out as behavioural actions that we can identify as belonging to our Emotional Child parts, or the parts of our personality reacting with Maladaptive Coping Modes. The Punitive Critic is often the internalized version of a childhood message we consistently heard during our formative years. Whether this message has been directly internalized in the exact wording we heard it, or if it's a child's interpretation of the way we felt at the time of its creation is sometimes, but not always, an important distinction to make.

In the case of it being the child's interpretation, the words we were exposed to might've been used with the intention of motivating us in some way. However, the tone and body language that came with the wording had the opposite effect, leaving us feeling deflated, criticized, and judged in a way that had us sitting with the experience of toxic guilt and shame. Both of our internal critic modes, be they demanding or punitive, are created as a result of the environmental influences we experienced as a child. In our formative years, we are like psychological sponges, we absorb everything that's happening around us, internalizing the things people say and do, and developing stories and beliefs about who we are, how life should be, and what other people represent in our overall understanding of the world we live in. When we are trying to change our current adult behaviours, the importance of our childhood experiences is often overlooked.

“If I sat next to someone who was speaking to me in the same way as my own internal Punitive Critic does, I would definitely not put up with their abusive language, so why the hell do I do this to myself?”

~ Steven Morris RP.

Our childhood shapes the beliefs we generate that ultimately dictate how we live according to, or in conflict with your own internal value system. Everything that happens to us in our early years influences our development. Some things do so in a positive way, some things have little to no impact, and some things influence us negatively. We are bombarded by meaning from family members, social activity groups, educational experiences, religious organizations, social media outlets, and news organizations, all of which play a role in the development of how we view the world. It is from these experiences that the internal critic learns the language it uses in its attempts to motivate behavioural change. This does not necessarily mean that the environment we grew up in was full of abusive and neglectful language, as the influential voices we hear around us can come from many different sources. Nor does it mean that the things our parents said to you are the same as the words our punitive critic uses, as its language can be a direct representation of the things we heard in childhood, or as is more often the case, it is a child's interpretation of the messaging we received.

For example, there are numerous occasions that I can recall when I received a message from the people in my environment questioning my ability to complete specific tasks. This message is not necessarily just put out there by parents, as it can often come from other family members, sports coaches, teachers, and community leaders. One of the most prominent people who told me I was “a loser,” or that I was not wanted, or needed, in our household was my older brother. This is a pretty standard thing that happens between brothers in life, and it has everything to do with sibling rivalry, rather than his accurate and damning assessment of my abilities. My brother and I often laugh about these things when we talk about them now, and I truly consider him to be one of my closest and best friends in my adult life, someone who I look up to and admire for the way he Lives the Life he Wants to Live.

At the same time, I also have some pretty vivid memories of different coaches and influential people in my life leaving me with the experience of toxic shame around who I was, and why I had failed to do what I thought I was supposed to do. My internal Punitive Critic developed the harsh judgments of my abilities, and who I was as a person, based on these early experiences. When our critics get activated by the story in your system, they jump into action in an attempt to change the direction of our behaviour. However, typically speaking, the impact of their words has a negative influence on our system which usually spirals us into a place of guilt and shame that, in turn, activates a coping mechanism that just wants to escape. Punitive critics use berating language that labels us, and those around us, in a way that leaves little to the imagination as to the opinion this part holds.

Much like the Demanding Critic, the only way to work with these self-deprecating parts of our personality is to re-educate their language from a space of self-compassion. Mindful awareness for the presence of these parts is the place we have to start, as this is the way to build a life worth living, and a life you want to live. Ultimately, creating a life of unconditional self-acceptance is the goal we are all striving for, in so doing, we live a life where there is nothing for you to escape from.

Next, let’s check in to see how you relate to this Mode in your own behaviours. Answer the questions below based on your personal experiences and the rating scale provided.

Never 0	Sometimes 1	50/50 2	Often 3	Always 4
Description				Score
I deny myself pleasure because I don’t deserve it, and I often call myself names that activate a sense of guilt or shame in my system.				
I can’t forgive myself for things I have done “wrong” and I am very critical of my actions, using labels that are “mean” or derogatory terms.				

Based on the scores you gave for the questions above, and the way you relate to the description provided on the previous pages, how Relevant is the Punitive Critic Mode to you in your life? Add the 2 scores together to obtain your prevalence score. On a scale of 0 – 8, 0 being not present at all, and 8 being present in my life every day, rate your experience of the Punitive Critic Mode below.

My Punitive Critic Mode has a prevalence score of ___/8.

On the next page, take the time to explore your experience of the Punitive Critic Mode, see if you can identify how you feel when this Mode is active, how you are thinking when this Mode is active, what you do when this Mode is active, and what situations you might need to be aware of that can activate this way of thinking in your personality system.

