

**Criticism: Any Fool Can 'Dish It Out', But Can You Take It?**

By Susan Blayer, LCSW, MDiv, LCC Psychotherapist

No one I know likes to be criticized. As Benjamin Franklin once said, "Any fool can criticize, condemn and complain, and most fools do." We may spin webs trying to reason why the critic wants to put us down. We tell ourselves that they are wrong, that something is wrong with *them*, not us—only to find upon closer inspection that this was merely a way to protect ourselves from the ego-deflating nature of being critiqued.

Having someone share a negative feeling about us or our performance brings on negative emotions—*anxiety, frustration, anger, disappointment*. We can start to feel self-conscious, insecure and defensive. Subsequently, we can get into trouble by reacting from these emotional states. Many people struggle with being able to hear and digest criticism without overreacting or causing interpersonal conflicts. Winston Churchill has weighed in on the matter: "Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things."

Certainly, if we are to be our best, learning to accept criticism is important. At our jobs, performance evaluations can hold us back or help us succeed. In personal relationships, the impressions we make can either create distance or foster intimacy. We tend to react poorly to criticism because admitting our imperfections is a bitter pill to swallow. The act of accepting and admitting breaks our denial, leaving us with a call to action to change ourselves. Facing our flaws and the areas we need to improve is hard work, so we tend to avoid the pain of change.

It is possible, however, to embrace criticism, no matter how much the truth stings, or how rudely it may be presented to us. In his book, *The Power of Positive Criticism*, renowned psychologist and bestselling author, Dr. Hendrie Weisinger, explores his belief that we do this by changing our thoughts. Using what academics have termed "cognitive appraisal" (the mental processes that help us define what is happening to and around us), Weisinger contends that we can harness the transformative power of criticism by reframing our negative perceptions of it. He writes, "To get the power of positive criticism, you must first befriend it. This does not simply mean remaining non-defensive when someone criticizes you...so you can hear your critic's message productively. These skills are necessary, but insufficient. Befriending criticism...requires a re-psycholization—and internalization of the belief that criticism is a requirement for you to be successful."

In other words, to change your thoughts, you must first agree that criticism is a good, nourishing thing, essential to your own growth. It is based on a personal philosophy that says, "I am always seeking to better myself, and criticism is an important means to that end." Next time you feel the sting of someone's negative feelings, try reevaluating the comments through the lens of befriending the criticism. Putting aside the hurt and offense, what lessons about yourself are there to learn? If you never had to admit it to anyone or do anything about it, what would resonate as being true about the critique? Many people I have worked with have found this reframing to be a helpful first step in transforming negative critiques into constructive feedback, which can be used to increase self-awareness and personal progress.

*Mrs. Blayer counsels children, teens and adults at Advent (NYC), Woodside, and Mineola sites. Contact Lutheran Counseling Center at 1-800-317-1173 or e-mail us at [Center@lccny.org](mailto:Center@lccny.org) for more information or to set an appointment at any of our NINE counseling sites. Visit our website at [www.lccny.org](http://www.lccny.org).*