

Inner Critic & Shame Patterns

Self-Assessment

How does your inner critic show up — and what might it be protecting?

Important: This is an educational self-reflection tool. It is not a clinical assessment and does not constitute a diagnosis of any mental health condition or disorder. Results are intended to support self-awareness and curiosity — not to replace professional evaluation. Any clinical assessment or diagnosis should be conducted by a qualified mental health professional.

Before You Begin

Most of us have an inner critic. It might show up as a voice that questions your decisions, compares you to others, or insists that whatever you've done isn't quite enough. It can feel harsh, relentless, even cruel — and it's natural to want it gone.

But in Internal Family Systems (IFS), the inner critic is understood as a **protector** — a part of your system that developed its patterns for a reason. It learned early on that if it kept you in line, kept you small, or kept you vigilant, it could prevent something worse from happening. Beneath the criticism, there is almost always something more vulnerable: shame, fear of rejection, or an old wound that the critic is working hard to keep out of view.

This self-assessment is designed to help you notice **how** your inner critic operates — not to grade you or measure severity, but to bring awareness to patterns you might normally push past. There are no right or wrong answers. The goal is curiosity, not correction.

Read each question and tick any options that feel true for you. You can tick as many as feel relevant.

Part 1 — How the Critic Speaks

Notice the tone, style, and language your inner critic tends to use. These patterns often feel so familiar they can seem like “just the way I think.”

1. When you make a mistake or fall short of an expectation, what does the internal voice tend to say?

- Something blaming: “You always do this. You never learn.”
- Something minimising: “Stop being dramatic. Other people have it worse.”
- Something predicting: “This is going to go badly. You’re going to be found out.”
- Something shaming: “There’s something fundamentally wrong with you.”

2. How does the critic’s tone tend to feel?

- Cold, detached, factual — like it’s stating an obvious truth
- Harsh, punishing, aggressive — like being told off
- Anxious, urgent, warning — like it’s trying to prevent a disaster
- Quiet but persistent — a low hum of doubt that doesn’t stop

3. Does the critic’s voice remind you of anyone from your past?

- A parent or caregiver
- A teacher, coach, or authority figure
- A peer or sibling
- It doesn’t remind me of anyone specific — it just feels like “me”
- I’m not sure

Pause here for a moment. What do you notice in your body as you read back your answers? Any tightness, heaviness, or impulse to move on quickly?

Part 2 — What Triggers the Critic

The inner critic doesn't usually appear at random. It tends to activate in specific situations — moments where something feels at stake.

4. In which areas of your life does the critic show up most?

- Work or professional performance
- Relationships — how you show up with others
- Appearance or body
- Parenting or caregiving
- Creative or personal projects
- Social situations — how you're perceived

5. What kinds of moments tend to activate the critic?

- After receiving feedback or criticism from someone else
- When comparing yourself to others
- When you're about to take a risk or try something new
- When you're resting, slowing down, or doing “nothing”
- When someone else seems disappointed in you
- When you express a need or ask for help

6. When the critic activates, what happens next?

- I push harder — work more, try to fix it, prove myself
- I withdraw — pull back, go quiet, avoid the situation
- I people-please — focus on making the other person okay
- I numb out — scroll, eat, drink, or distract
- I get defensive or irritable
- I freeze — can't decide, can't act, stuck

Is there a pattern in when the critic appears? Does it show up more when something specific feels at risk — approval, belonging, control, being seen?

Part 3 — What the Critic May Be Protecting

In IFS, the critic is never the whole story. It's a protective part — and protective parts are always guarding something they believe is too painful or too dangerous to feel. These questions explore what might be underneath.

7. When the inner critic goes quiet — even briefly — what tends to surface?

- Sadness or grief
- A feeling of emptiness or not knowing who I am
- Fear of being rejected or abandoned
- Shame — a deep sense that something is wrong with me
- Vulnerability I don't usually let myself feel
- Nothing — another part steps in before anything surfaces

8. Which of these beliefs feels most familiar — even if you know, intellectually, it isn't true?

- "I'm not enough."
- "I'm too much."
- "If people really knew me, they'd leave."
- "I don't deserve good things."
- "I have to earn my worth."
- "It's not safe to be seen."

9. How do you tend to relate to your inner critic right now?

- I believe it — it feels like the truth
- I fight it — I argue back or try to override it
- I try to ignore it — push through and carry on
- I'm exhausted by it — I've been living with it for a long time
- I'm starting to get curious about it

Whatever you noticed here, it's worth acknowledging: these beliefs are carried by parts of you that learned them young. They aren't the final word on who you are.

Reading Your Patterns

Read through the profiles below and notice which description resonates most strongly — or where you recognise a familiar pattern. You may see yourself in more than one.

The Perfectionist Protector

Your inner critic is relentless about standards. It monitors your performance closely, anticipates where you might fail, and pushes you to work harder, prepare more, and leave no room for error. Resting feels dangerous. Good enough never is. Beneath this pattern, there is often a younger part that learned very early that approval — or safety — depended on being exceptional. The critic isn't cruel for its own sake; it's terrified of what happens when you fall short.

What would it mean for this part if “good enough” really were enough? What does it believe would happen?

The Comparison Trap

Your critic speaks most loudly when you're looking at other people — their success, their confidence, their seeming ease. It builds a case that you're behind, that you're not measuring up, that something about you is missing. This pattern often protects a part that carries deep inadequacy or a belief that worth must be proved through achievement or visibility. The comparing isn't casual; it's a system scanning for evidence that confirms what a wounded part already believes.

When you compare yourself to someone, what is the feeling underneath the comparison — before the story starts?

The Shame Guard

Your inner critic doesn't just evaluate what you do — it evaluates **who you are**. The voice tends toward global statements: not “you made a mistake” but “you are the mistake.” It may keep you quiet, invisible, or compliant, because being seen feels risky. Beneath this pattern is often a part carrying profound shame — a belief, installed early and reinforced often, that there is something fundamentally wrong with you. The critic is guarding that wound by making sure no one gets close enough to see it.

If the shame could speak — not the critic, but the part underneath — what might it want you to know about what happened to it?

The Pre-emptive Protector

Your critic is future-focused. It warns you about what could go wrong, rehearses worst-case scenarios, and tries to talk you out of anything that involves exposure or risk. It might sound anxious rather than harsh — but the effect is the same: it keeps you small. This pattern often develops when past experiences taught a part of you that stepping forward leads to pain, humiliation, or rejection. The critic is trying to save you from a repetition it hasn't yet realised is no longer inevitable.

What risk is this part most afraid of? And what might be possible if you could take that risk with support?

What Now?

This assessment isn't a verdict. Whatever patterns you recognised, they developed for good reasons — and they can be met with something other than more criticism.

In IFS, the goal is never to silence the inner critic. It's to understand what it's protecting, build a relationship with it, and gradually help it trust that you — from a place of Self-energy — can handle what it's been guarding. That process doesn't require perfection. It requires curiosity.

If you'd like to explore the IFS perspective on the inner critic in more depth, the article **IFS for the Inner Critic and Shame: Meeting the Part That Says You're Not Enough** offers a fuller framework for understanding these patterns and what can shift when you approach them differently.

Ben Carey Donaldson is a certified IFS practitioner. He is not a licensed psychologist, psychiatrist, or medical doctor. Resources on this site are educational in nature and are not a substitute for professional mental health care.