

# **The Criticizer, the Criticized, and the Compassionate Observer**

**(by Dr. Kristin Neff)**

“This exercise is modeled on the two-chair dialogue studied by Gestalt therapist Leslie Greenberg.

In this exercise, you will sit in different chairs to help get in touch with different, often conflicting parts of yourself, experiencing how each aspect feels in the present moment.

To begin, put out three empty chairs, preferably in a triangular arrangement.

Next, think about an issue that often troubles you, and that often elicits harsh self-criticism. Designate one chair as the voice of your inner self-critic, one chair as the voice of the part of you that feels judged and criticized, and one chair as the voice of a wise, compassionate observer.

You are going to be role-playing all three parts of yourself – you, you, and you. It may feel a bit silly at first, but you may be surprised at what comes out once you really start letting your feelings flow freely.

**1. Think about your “issue,” and then sit in the chair of the self-critic.** As you take your seat, express out loud what the self-critical part of you is thinking and feeling. For example “I hate that fact that you’re such a whimp and aren’t self-assertive.” Notice the words and tone of voice the self-critical part of you uses, and also how it is feeling. Worried, angry, self-righteous, exasperated? Note what your body posture is like. Strong, rigid, upright? What emotions are coming up for you right now?

**2. Take the chair of the criticized aspect of yourself.** Try to get in touch with how you feel being criticized in this manner. Then verbalize how you feel, responding directly to your inner critic. For example, “I feel so hurt by you” or “I feel so unsupported.” Just speak whatever comes into your mind. Again, notice the tone of your voice? Is it sad, discouraged, childlike, scared, helpless? What is your body posture like? Are you slumped, downward facing, frowning?

**3. Conduct a dialogue between these two parts of yourself for awhile, switching back and forth between the chair of the criticizer and the**

**criticized.** Really try to experience each aspect of yourself so each knows how the other feels. Allow each to fully express its views and be heard.

#### **4. Now occupy the chair of the compassionate observer.**

Call upon your deepest wisdom, the wells of your caring concern, and address both the critic and the criticized. What does your compassionate self say to the critic, what insight does it have?

For example, “You sound very much like your mother” or, “I see that you’re really scared, and you’re trying to help me so I don’t mess up.” What does your compassionate self say to the criticized part of yourself?

For example, “It must be incredibly difficult to hear such harsh judgment day after day. I see that you’re really hurting” or “All you want is to be accepted for who you are.” Try to relax, letting your heart soften and open. What words of compassion naturally spring forth? What is the tone of your voice? Tender, gentle, warm? What is your body posture like – balanced, centered, relaxed?

#### **5. After the dialogue finishes (stop whenever it feels right), reflect upon what just happened.**

Do you have any new insights into how you treat yourself, where your patterns come from, new ways of thinking about the situation that are more productive and supportive? As you think about what you have learned, set your intention to relate to yourself in a kinder, healthier way in the future. A truce can be called in your inner war. Peace is possible. Your old habits of self-criticism don’t need to rule you forever. What you need to do is listen to the voice that’s already there, even if a bit hidden – your wise, compassionate self.”