When My Inner Critic Shows Up

I like to start with one ordinary moment. Maybe you finally sit down and your mind starts listing everything you should be doing. Or you get home from a conversation and suddenly you're reviewing every word you said.

In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), we call this skill **defusion**. It's the practice of hearing a thought as something your mind is saying. Giving a familiar pattern a name can help you catch it in the moment and give yourself a little room to choose what you do next.

What does yours sound like?

"I should have handled that better." **The Replay**
"Everyone else can manage this." **The Comparison Voice**
"I haven't done enough to sit down." **The Moving Finish Line**

What does your critic actually say? Write it the way it sounds.

What could you call this pattern? Use a name that sounds like you.

Try saying it once

"Oh, there's the _____ again."
"I'm noticing the thought that _____."

If a nickname feels forced, "I'm noticing I'm being hard on myself" is enough.

Try It in a Real Moment

Pick one moment this week. A moment you only catch afterward counts, too. Download this PDF, type into the boxes, and save a copy to bring to session.

Here's how it might go. I sit down with my tea and hear, "You should really finish the laundry first." There's the Moving Finish Line. My mind keeps listing chores. I want to give myself a few minutes of rest, so I stay seated and finish my tea.

What was happening, and what did your critic say?

What did you call the pattern? What did it urge you to do?

What mattered to you in that moment?

What did you do, or what could you try next time?

What did you notice that you want to bring to session?

If you catch yourself repeating the label to feel better, see what happens when you let the thought hang around and take one small step toward what matters.

Sources

The prompts and examples in this handout are original practice material informed by the ACT model and research on cognitive defusion.

Hayes, S. C., Luoma, J. B., Bond, F. W., Masuda, A., & Lillis, J. (2006). Acceptance and commitment therapy: Model, processes and outcomes. *Behaviour Research and Therapy, 44*(1), 1–25.

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Describes defusion, values, and committed action within the ACT model.

Masuda, A., Hayes, S. C., Sackett, C. F., & Twohig, M. P. (2004). Cognitive defusion and self-relevant negative thoughts: Examining the impact of a ninety year old technique. *Behaviour Research and Therapy, 42*(4), 477–485.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2003.10.008

An experimental study of a defusion exercise for negative thoughts about oneself.