

Quietening your



POCKET GUIDE

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ELIZABETH CASSON TRUST



Quietening your



Welcome to Quietening Your Inner Critic. One of a series of pocket guides created to support the wellbeing of occupational therapists in their first year of practice.

Year One: Thriving not Surviving is a grass roots initiative. Over the course of several months, we engaged with many occupational therapists in their first year of practice and asked a core question, "How has the first year of practice impacted on your wellbeing?" The answers have informed the pocket guide that you are now reading.

As an occupational therapist you will already have a range of excellent tools that you can use to support you. Think of this as an addition to your toolbox. A kind voice that reminds you to, 'Stop for a moment and take some time to focus on yourself because your wellbeing is important'. It is designed to not only make you stop and think but, as importantly, take action. All of the guides are designed so that you can dip in and out and pick the tools which resonate most with you.

The tools are designed to support your wellbeing but are not a replacement for specialist support if you are experiencing significant challenges to your mental health. If this is the case, you are advised strongly to seek support via your GP or through your occupational health department.

By reading the insights of other newly qualified occupational therapists we hope that you get a sense that others are having similar experiences. You are not alone. You are part of a community finding its feet and sense of identity, a process which can feel a bit like being on a roller coaster but ultimately is a great ride.

Introduction

As a newly qualified Occupational Therapist (NQOT), it is likely that your inner critic is having a ball right now. Inner critics thrive at times when we are taken out of our comfort zone, feel insecure or want to stretch ourselves and take on something new.

An inner critic voice is the self-talk we engage in saying things like, 'I'm not good enough', 'The other OT's in the team are better than me', 'Don't do it, you'll show yourself up', "If you ask lots of questions the staff will think you are incompetent".

A voice that, if left unchecked, will have a significant negative impact on you during your first year of practice. When listened to, your inner critic can have a detrimental impact to your well-being, convince you that your clinical knowledge is almost non-existent or that it's not worth trying something out because it is bound to fail.

It is therefore extremely important to develop your understanding of your inner critic. This includes the times at which it becomes more vocal, what it says and the impact it has on you. By doing so, this will help you turn down its volume and challenge it with more realistic thinking.

How to recognise your inner critic

- 1 **If you find yourself thinking words like 'should', 'can't', 'ought' you may well be giving your inner critic airtime.**

'You can't say that!'

'You shouldn't do this.'

'You ought to do that.'

'You're not doing it right''

- 2 **It focuses on problems not solutions**

'You're not going to get this to work.'

'This will not go well and you'll frustrate the patients'

- 3 **It can appear to soothe... then hits back**

'Have some chocolate you deserve it. It's been a hard day.'

And then, when you've eaten the chocolate, 'You see? You have no will power.'

What is an inner critic?

The inner critic is the name given to the negative and self-destructive thoughts we all experience to a greater or lesser degree. These thoughts have the ability to shape how you feel about yourself, how you believe others perceive you (i.e. colleagues) and how you behave. They are self-defeating, self-deprecating and impact negatively on your self-esteem.

The kind of inner critic statements other NQOTs have shared with us are:

'Are you sure that's the right thing to do/say?'

'That client can tell that you haven't a clue what you're doing.'

'Right now, my supervisor thinks I'm the worst NQOT they've ever met.'

Your inner critic states things about you that you wouldn't dream of saying to your closest friend. However, you can find yourself listening, believing and acting on what it says.

You may have had the experience of getting excited about a new role and considered putting yourself forward for it. However, as quickly as that thought enters your head, it's followed by a more negative one. Examples include 'Hmm, maybe not. I don't have enough experience', 'I'm not good enough to do that' or "I'll struggle because of my current inexperience".

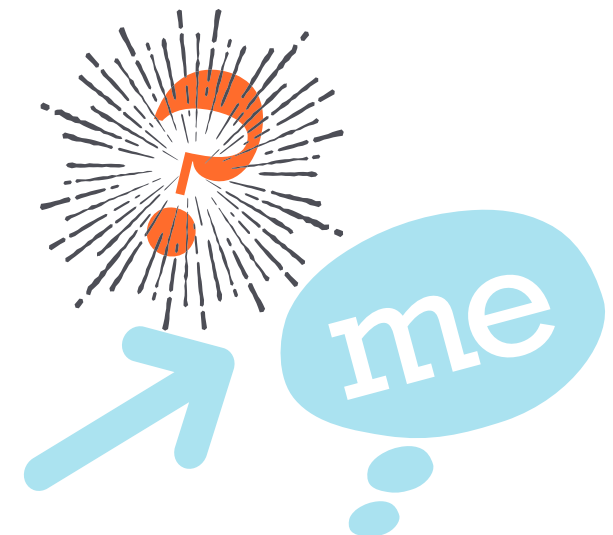
Some people know their inner critic so well they come to accept it and believe what it states: 'you are not good enough', 'it's best not to raise your head above the parapet', 'there's no point in trying because you know it won't work'.

Where do these thoughts come from?

These thoughts often stem from experiences we have internalised as children. They may be things we were told by our parents, teachers and other significant people in our lives. Another source of fuel are the messages we are constantly bombarded with via the media. As a consequence, we can find ourselves in a constant state of comparison and find ourselves wanting.

Whilst the function of your inner critic may seem destructive, it is important to understand that it is actually driven by a desire to protect you and keep you safe. This is why it becomes more active when you think about stretching or challenging yourself.

Think of it like a panic button being hit. You are about to leave the safety of the familiar and head into the unknown, your inner critic is naturally conditioned to steer you away from such situations.



Here are some questions to reflect on

How comfortable do you feel criticising yourself?

How often are you afraid of failing? (If so, is your inner critic dial set on, 'don't try because you will fail?')

Do you hold back from sharing your thoughts, knowledge, expertise because you don't want to be perceived as showing off?

Do you hold back from sharing your thoughts for fear of being rejected or wrong?

Can our inner critic be a source of motivation?

You may believe that your inner critic is helpful because it provides motivation. For example, you are writing a report and your inner critic tells you that this "is not good enough". Now, is that helping you to improve the report and motivate you to do better?

Definitely not. When spoken by your inner critic it sounds like this, 'I'm afraid this isn't good enough and I don't want to look a fool! It makes us hang on to the report for longer than necessary, engaging in endless polishing, when it would have been better to have sent it in.

This source of motivation is founded on fear and anxiety: the fear of failure; the fear of not being good enough; the fear of being found out.

The inner critic therefore can hold you back: 'I need to read another book before I'll know what to do', 'I need to talk to yet another person before I make that recommendation.'

However, realistic thinking IS helpful. If we take the above example, you've rushed the report off in twenty minutes (in between meetings), it helps to pause and do a reality check: 'Have I given the work the time and consideration it deserves?' Or if you have spoken to two people who have advised differently, consider whether a third conversation is appropriate. This is an important distinction to understand.

What are we trying to achieve?

In essence, you are working to create a space to challenge your thinking and to ask two questions:

1. 'Who is talking right now?'
2. 'Is there any truth in what is being said?'

By doing this, you are recognising your inner critic for what it is and are starting to question what it states. As a result, you are transforming this into a more adult conversation: You are not just taking self-critical thoughts as truth but are also starting to challenge the assumptions.

Challenging the inner critic, and moving away from harshness, therefore leads you into a more self-compassionate space. For instance, self-compassion will improve your flexibility to carry out interventions: your mindset focuses less on the chance of failure/ mistakes and more on the learning experience itself. In Occupational Therapy, every patient is different. Trial and error with interventions, to identify what works well for them, is frequently needed. Shifting thinking away from fear of failure is therefore essential, not everything works for a patient first time!

Like anything, quietening your inner critic takes time and practice. Think of it like building a muscle: it's highly likely that your inner critic muscle is strong and healthy and now you need to counterbalance it, bringing more balance into the relationship. You need to turn down the strong shouting voice of your inner critic, which is used to taking centre stage, and shift the spotlight into more realistic thinking.

Recognising your inner critic triggers

We all have triggers which send us into inner critic thinking, so it's beneficial to know where your inner critic shows up most often.

Over the coming days, make a conscious effort to recognise when your inner critic appears and the types of negative self-talk that goes on in these situations. Use the text box to keep a note of the situations and see what stands out. Are there any specific triggers or similarities?

The situations and my negative self-talk:

A playful way of recognising your inner critic

Choose one of those situations to work with.

Sit quietly for a few minutes, close your eyes and imagine yourself in that situation.

- Where are you?
- What are you doing?
- Is anyone with you or are you on your own?
- How are you feeling?

In this situation my inner critic says to me...

We are going to use the comments you have written above as the basis for a visualisation.

This is designed to give you a quick way of recognising and becoming more playful with your inner critic, robbing its voice of its power. Read back over the comments you've written and think about the following:

If you pictured someone or something saying those words, what would they look like*? It may be a person, a cartoon character, an animal, a shape

- **What colour is it?**
- **How big is it?**
- **Is it wearing anything? If so, what?**
- **Does it have gestures or movement?**
- **What words would you use to describe it e.g. bossy, mean, overpowering, people-pleasing?**
- **What kind of voice does it speak with - squeaking, moaning, harsh?**

*Resist the temptation to visualise your inner critic as someone you know. If a person close to you comes to mind, think about the traits they personify and create a characterisation of those.

Now draw it in the box with the following:

Draw it, describe it, give it a name

You have now created a quick way to recognise your inner critic and more importantly, to change the 'I' statements which are so easy to believe (I am not... I am too... I should...) into 'you' statements said by who/whatever you created in the visualisation ('You are not...', 'You are too...', 'You should...').

How does that shift feel? When you imagine such statements being said as 'you' statements, they are infused with less certainty and power and are easier to challenge and question.

What is my inner critic trying to protect me from?

As we discussed earlier your inner critic is, in its own way, trying to keep you safe. It has your best intentions at heart by recognising that you are at risk of subjecting yourself to some kind of harm. Maybe it doesn't want you to fail, or to put yourself under too much pressure. But it tends to dominate and hold you back and place negative judgements on yourself. Left unchecked, these judgments can become so embedded that you perceive them to be true.

It is helpful to become curious about what specifically your inner critic is trying to protect you from. Strip away the nastiness and see what lies beneath by asking yourself 'what am I concerned about in this situation?' You can then respond to what you discover in a more self-compassionate way and focus your energy in a more constructive way by addressing those concerns.

For instance, if your inner critic is telling you to avoid talking in an MDT meeting because you will be too nervous. Thank it for its concern and reassure it: Thank you for looking out for me. I may get nervous but that's OK. Everyone feels nervous sometimes.

You can then focus your energy on methods which reduce your nervousness, which is more constructive to your confidence than not making a contribution to the meeting.

I've got this covered, I've spent time preparing for this so I will know what to say.

I have the evidence from assessments which I can show the team, I will be fine.'

When I loved myself enough I stopped trying to banish the critical voices from my head. Now I say, "Thank you for your views" and they feel heard. End of discussion. Kim McMillen

A final recap

In this pocket guide, we have covered three approaches to quietening your inner critic:

- **Starting to recognise its voice.**
- **Developing a visualisation as a shortcut for recognising it.**
- **Developing positive coping strategies for reducing the inner critic's volume when it shows up.**

Wouldn't it be wonderful if it were that easy? But as you no doubt know, it's not. This will be ongoing work. The more you utilise these tools, the more effective you will become at both recognising and turning down the volume of your inner critic.

Given its focus on keeping you safe from harm, your inner critic will always have a voice in your life. Hopefully though, as you start to do this work, it will become a more balanced voice that doesn't go unchallenged.

Reflection

This page had been included so that you can use it in your CPD File to evidence your learning

Date:	Impact on my practice
Description of what you have done	
	Follow-up actions or further development.
Summary of my main learning points	
Relevance to my practice	

Resources to Explore

There is a wealth of resources available on the internet to support well-being. Here are just a few that you might wish to explore further. They have been chosen because they are varied in their approach to well-being.

Becoming Who You Are

Hannah Braime is a creative coach who blogs about self-care and personal growth and has developed a range of resources which can be downloaded or purchased through her website.

<https://www.becomingwhoyouare.net>

Brené Brown

Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston. She has spent two decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy and is an internationally renowned author and speaker. Her website contains a wide range of resources including podcasts, blogs, downloads and guides.

<https://brenebrown.com>

Jen Gash

Jen Gash is an occupational therapist and personal coach and her website contains information about coaching, a series of blog posts related to personal development and links to other occupational therapists working as personal coaches

<https://otcoach.com/about-us/>

Lynne Goodacre

Lynne Goodacre is an occupational therapist and personal coach who blogs on a regular basis on topics related to personal development and well-being. She has created a mini-series of free eBooks which can be downloaded from her site.

<https://www.lgpersonaldevelopment.co.uk>

Greater Good Science Centre at University of California, Berkley

An extensive online resource comprising blogs, podcasts, videos, tools and educational programmes informed by research. The tools are focused on creating a happier life and more compassionate society. Well worth checking out.

<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu>

Gretchen Rubin

Author of The Happiness Project, and internationally renowned author this website contains a wide selection of blogs and podcasts about creating a happier, more productive and creative life.

<https://gretchenrubin.com>

Kristin Neff

Is one of the world's leading experts on self-compassion. Her website contains a range of exercises and tools focused on developing self-compassion and a comprehensive list of recommended reading

<https://self-compassion.org>

Life Coach on The Go

Life Coach on The Go is an online resource providing a wide range of self-coaching tips, tools, articles and resources. <https://lifecoachonthego.com/about/>. It is merging with the Fierce Kindness Blog <https://fiercekindness.com/page/2/>.

Mind Tools

Provides access to several thousand resources including articles, videos and podcasts to support you in learning management, leadership and personal effectiveness skills.

<https://www.mindtools.com>

On Being

The On Being Project is a non-profit media and public life initiative making radio shows, podcasts and tools for 'the art of living'. It explores the intersection of spiritual inquiry, science, social healing, community, poetry, and the arts.

<https://onbeing.org>

Positive Psychology

A community of practitioners who have built an online science-based resource of courses, techniques, tools and tips to help you put positive psychology into practice every day.

<https://positivepsychology.com>

Tara Mohr

An expert on women's leadership and wellbeing, author of *Playing Big: Practical Wisdom for Women Who Want to Speak up, Create and Lead*. Tara Mohr also developed the global *Playing Big Leadership Programme* and is a Certified Coach. Her website includes a range of resources and blogs.

<https://www.taramohr.com>

TED

Several of the people mentioned in the pocket guides have given TED talks. A place where you can explore short powerful talks of 18 minutes or less from some of the worlds most inspiring thinkers on a wide range of topics from science to business to global issues.

<https://www.ted.com>

Tiny Buddha

The sites feature blogs, articles and insights on a wide range of personal development topics. Whilst it has it's root in Buddhism it is not a site about religion. <https://tinybuddha.com>

End Note

The Year One: Thriving Not Surviving pocket guides have been funded by the Elizabeth Casson Trust. We would like to extend our thanks to the Trust and to everyone who has contributed to the project. Without the insights that have been shared by the occupational therapy community, with honesty and compassion, this resource would not have been possible.

The Project was led by Dr Lynne Goodacre (an occupational therapist and personal coach) and Rob Young (a writer and artist who helps NHS leaders to communicate).

The project team comprised: Andrew Bates, Stephanie Exley, Joanna Hunt, Bethany Morgan-Davis, Deborah May, Ryan McClure, Rebecca Power, Siobhan Scanlon, Paul Wilkinson, Katy Williams. All of whom were in their first year of practice as occupational therapists.

We would like to also thank Jessica Salmon for her support in editing the resources and Paul Baker for his design work.

The Elizabeth Casson Trust is excited to have commissioned this work by Dr Lynne Goodacre and Rob Young and is proud of, and grateful to, the first-year occupational therapists who committed their time and energy for the success of the project. The Trust aims to further the profession of occupational therapy and offers a range of support and development opportunities.

Please visit our website (elizabethcasson.org.uk) and follow us on Twitter (@elizabethcasso1) for more information.

This is one of a series of pocket guides which includes:

- **Becoming Your Own Cheerleader**
- **Building Your Network of Support**
- **The Book of Blogs**
- **Finding Perspective in Tough Situations**
- **Finding Balance**
- **Questioning Your Inner Critic**
- **Treating Yourself with Compassion**

All are available freely from the Elizabeth Casson website.

