

## Episode 4: Living our best life: why we all need to tame our inner critic. Reflections of a new podcast host.

### Intro 0:05

Welcome to the psychology of case management podcast: the show that helps you use psychological ideas to strengthen your relationship with your catastrophically injured clients and their professional networks, so you can achieve more for your clients and feel more fulfilled in your role.

### Shabnam 0:20

Hello, and welcome to today's episode. I'm Dr Shabnam Berry-Khan. And thank you so much for tuning in today. Today's episode is a solo chat: a more personal, open - and more vulnerable - conversation than the episodes I've previously recorded with guests. It's about my reflections on creating this podcast, the challenges I faced in myself, and what I learned about myself in my professional roles. And that critical mindset-rejigging I had to do, because I have an inner critic, and it has really got in the way of me trying to live my best life at times, and it reared its ugly head in my treating psychology work, and the case management work I do.

So, when it reared its ugly head again, when I decided to commit to the podcast venture, I really felt I had to do something about it. Because it's natural to feel overwhelmed, of course, and to feel that avoidance of doing something new that might be might feel purposeful or meaningful to you. Whether... I mean, that could take on lots of different forms, really, can't it, in the work we do? It might be about taking on a new or slightly different type of client. It might include liaising with new referrers, trying to get a better work/life balance, trying out a new venture, as I have done with this podcast (which I almost didn't do, by the way).

### 1:52

So, I hope this episode offers you a space to think about your own journeys, personal or professional, and how *your* inner critic can affect you in your life, and whether there might be scope to tame your inner critic, as I have had to do with this podcast. I should probably start off, though, by saying that I don't particularly enjoy putting myself 'out there', as I'm by nature an introvert, I suppose. And that might seem kind of hard to believe, since I'm doing something, you know, usually perceived as extroverted. But it's really because I connect with the *why* I'm out here, doing this. I love promoting the idea that understanding our... I suppose, our humaneness in our personal injury jobs will absolutely make us the best we can be in our jobs. Almost, I want to give us permission to feel our way through the minefield of catastrophic personal injury, and that it will navigate... being human will navigate us better in joining our clients and their families, because they themselves are recovering from a major blow in their lives, which they know litigation and rehabilitation is just the beginning for them.

And I'm really passionate about this double-focus idea on professionals as well as clients, and how that then creates a space for us to kind of 'hold ourselves' as a significant factor, or part of the equation of maximising rehabilitation and settlement outcomes. I do believe that we need to be nourished in the journeys that we are taking with our clients. After all, that is what we are trying to do for them. It's the only way we have a chance of kind of moving beyond this being a sort of 'survival' approach. So we can thrive within this unchangeable injury context. And when we do, we can feel so alive because we have made space for ourselves in our lives.

### 3:53

So, when I finally decided to create this podcast to showcase my passion for psychological ideas and the catastrophic personal injury world, it triggered a whole barrage of self-doubt, worry, panic, and – oh, gosh! - masses of discomfort, all enough to make me stop. But for many reasons, I didn't stop. So when I said earlier that I remember... remembering *why* I wanted to do this was massively helpful, there was of course

more to it. There had to be: the idea was born during a global pandemic, when I had limited childcare, fewer hours to do my clinical work. Oh, God, we moved house! In fact, we moved town to be supportive to my elderly father, so he could actually live with us, since he developed health issues after Mum passed away three years ago, all alongside running a busy service.

My biggest overarching strategy had to - without a doubt - be to learn to tame that inner critic. I can't say I've mastered it. But I think I can say with some confidence, I am less offended by it now. But it's come with a lot of effort and dedication to get to this stage. And this is what I wish to share with you today, really. And of course, I wouldn't be a 'real psychologist' if I didn't link all of my current ways of thinking to my upbringing. And, of course, they will, that will be the same for anyone who perhaps recognises an inner critic in themselves.

5:33

In my case, I grew up in the '80s. I was a brown child to brown parents, who had a history of political displacement - lots of trauma, therefore - which meant they instilled in us, as children, a constant set of threats and needing to safeguard ourselves with education and a professional job. Because without that, in that era, you were open to a lot of criticism and even abuse. It was very pressured, but that was a reality for us. And emotional security was then meant to be a consequence of these achievements, not really something that you could work on independently, or need to work on independently. And of course we know now that a happy, secure child is an achieving child, and not the other way around.

Anyway, such is life! So I, at school, was diligently working as hard as I could, doing everything I could possibly do. But somehow I just couldn't get anything beyond average grades. And I guess I really needed that emotional scaffolding to thrive. And, without that, my inner critic got quite strong and told me that I was not good enough, that I would not make anything of my life, that I was a failure, and that any emotional upset was, I guess, a sign of weakness. So not really a great start. But I know at the same time that it's not uncommon to have that.

7:00

So, with that in mind, here's what I have done to try and tame my inner critic over the years. So, when faced with an opportunity and accomplishment or a meaningful moment in my life, I've been able to be a bit more balanced. Because, ultimately, it's okay to want to thrive in caring professions like the one we do. We don't have to always sacrifice ourselves, so we end up depleted, with nothing other than lots of criticism and a sense of sort of negative regard.

So, what did I do? Okay, so here we go. First off, I did a really painful exercise of noticing the quality and tone of every assault on my needs, every achievement, upset and right that was impacted by the "Yes, *but...*"-type statements, or the "Well, it was okay, *except...*" Or my favourite: you know, "I got lucky"-type statements. Once I started noticing, they were coming in thick and fast, and I was really surprised how automatic some of them were, and how I couldn't sometimes even accept that some of these statements were doubting or discouraging my hopes and dreams. It can be that sort of overwhelming.

I also listened out for the type of tone the statements had. They were usually shaming or berating, perhaps even scolding, like being told off by a parent or a teacher. This is where the sort of 'shoulds' and the 'oughts' and the 'must' statements came from, for me. You may have your own ones, I'm sure. And what those 'should' or 'must' statements do is that they kind of create a standard, highly-regarded sort of moralistic level of things that we ought to be living our lives by. And from them, we develop really unhelpful beliefs about ourselves that can be quite core to how we see ourselves: "You're bad, you're not good enough, you're unloveable," or in my case, "You're not clever enough." Sometimes they're attached to emotional baggage, like "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

So, a lot of these sort of... the tone of our statements can be self-critical, they could be minimising or denying us the pain that we're experiencing. Or they could just be lashing out because there's no one else to put the emotions on. One of the podcast 'thought captures' I had when I was looking to do this was "Well, no-one is doing this... probably because it's not worth it. Why are you doing it?" Ouch! Obviously, that's one that's been successfully challenged. So what I was then trying to do was sit with a concept of

balance, and fairness: something I afford everyone else, it seems, but never really allowed myself to think about. I mean, there is good in everyone. Not everyone is entirely bad, or wrong, or unhelpful.

So what was my goodness? What was my worth? And this invokes a protective and encouraging mindset that builds resilience and confidence in the face of critical others, or self-criticisms or, indeed, life stresses. Sadly, like many our childhood experiences may not have allowed us to develop that inner nurturer. So we are burdened with the, you know, some might say, unfair job of having to train it in ourselves as adults.

I find now that when I'm doing podcasts, and I'm thinking, "Gosh, this is a topic I'm not that *au fait* with," I have to remember: this is not an opportunity for me to trigger... to have that sense of "I'm not clever enough" triggered. I have two PhDs; I might not know exactly what the guests might be talking about. But I know enough to have a decent conversation. And that's what it's all about.

11:09

So, another technique that kind of extends on that otherwise solo voice in your own mind, is to think about people that you know, who know *you* well, and care for you. And thinking about the kind of things they might say to you. These might be family members, friends - good friends - mentors, peers, your own children, perhaps. What compassionate thing would they say to you when you are feeling burdened by your inner critic? If you don't have access to this type of group, I sincerely recommend you getting something of a committee together, even if it comes in the formal sense of, say, therapy or supervision.

Honesty about your value comes from a 'pot' that needs to be replenished and filled, and invested in. And using relationships that you have can be part of that sort of 'replenishment scheme' that you have built in. There's a statistic in psychology that says for every negative comment you feel or receive, you need something in the order of 10 positive comments to counteract that. Now while I don't agree necessarily with the proportions, I think I wholeheartedly agree with the sentiment of it.

So, for me, my replenisher, my champion is definitely my husband, who is not a psychologist, but has just been a supporter and his "Go get 'em" kind of comments have been so welcome at times. Another way to fill that pot, and minimise the effects of that critical pot is to have a sort of set of 'go to' statements that help you remember your worth: "This is my loving but supercritical father talking, not me," or, in my case, "So, I didn't realise the sound of the first 12 episode recordings for this podcast were, frankly, crap, but I know it now and I'll get it sorted."

With practice, the volume gets turned down on those critical, over-the-top comments. And anything that might have a kernel of truth in them, and can make you wobble, becomes sort of *proportionally* relevant. And it's not... because it's not the whole of who you are.

13:35

So, the next shift I've done in the past to try and reduce that inner critic is to start to think about how people see me today, and how they've seen me over the years. I'm often amazed to hear the things about me from other people. They just kind of seem untrue, but they aren't untrue from the viewpoint of those people. I guess this is where journaling can come into its own, and keeping a record and capturing those moments. So when I'm wanting to approach someone big or important for the podcast - or it's a topic of value to you, as the audience, but I know very little about it - I do myself a massive favour and draw on my positive pot, which then becomes a mixture of old and new experiences. But the chances are, the good stuff is still true.

So I guess my question to you is: "What have people said about you over the years that is positive, and that can really tone down that inner critic?" If this feels tricky to do - and for some it really can be - may I suggest that you think about people who you like: what is it about them that you like? The chances are, if you like them, they probably like you back. Why? What's so good about you? May I invite you to think about that? If that's still tricky, perhaps notice what you like in them as being an image of yourself. I think that's kind of a marketing idea, where they say that by being your authentic self and doing what you enjoy and feeling comfortable, etc., your own values are mirrored by those you attract. So are the people you like, then, just reflections of the person you are? It's a thought in helping you maybe see yourself in another light.

And of course, once you've done all of this lovely, amazing work, I highly, highly invite you to just let yourself soak it all up with this sort of amazing alternative version of yourself that the inner critic will want to challenge, but won't be able to, because it will feel and can feel very real and honest. Because it's a wonderful truth about you, too. However big or small, however old or new, however frequent or rare. No ifs or buts, no matter how up or down you are in your life's journey. Allow yourself to find comfort, strength and confidence in knowing that you are basically a very decent person!

16:12

I suppose my final point is more practical. Having done all of this sort of mindset stuff, just make sure you've got space in your diary, so you can allow yourself to feel the joy of the thing that you have been taming your inner critic for. This may need to be negotiated with your family, of course, if that is a structure in which you exist, so that there is a containable place for the thing that you've trained your critic for: to exist and to thrive in probably what is already a fairly busy schedule.

I know that was the case for me. So I really had to think about that. And I really enjoy doing this, and I could spend hours and hours doing it. But I've had to learn also to calm the excitement. It's something about balance, and kind of keeping things in proportion. Or it could just be like leaving a party on a high rather than as it's winding down. Because you'll be really excited about the next party that you've been invited to. It will take some kind of control to just get that balance right.

So, in my own therapy, through my relationships, including with that of my outspoken wonderful five-year-old, I do now feel that I have a better set of strategies to cope with that inner critic. And this podcast, I think, for me, will always be testament to the benefits of really trying to manage that inner critic. I am now - despite still not finding this a very natural thing to do - speaking on a niche subject of passion from my side. And I'm doing that with peers, with friends, to peers and friends, and of course, wider colleagues. And I'm getting some really lovely feedback, which makes me feel just wonderful. Mainly because my interest is not just of interest to me, in my head: that there are people out there in the real world who find this topic interesting, too.

And yes, I still wobble. And yes, recording this episode in particular made me wobble even more. But I think I've come to the conclusion that I think we probably all, deep down, want to do something. And even if it's imperfect, it's better than not doing anything at all.

18:43

So, I will close today's episode by saying that I really believe psychology works - PsychWorks - for ourselves, too, as much as it does for our clients and our families that we work with. My journey to creating this podcast is my evidence for why we need to focus on ourselves and our mindsets as much as our clients' practical and emotional needs. Because we also deserve to live a life, a life that is as close to that we would like to live, had it not been for the upbringing and challenges that we have faced, and maybe still do face on a daily basis. But with balance, with keen interest and a sense of sustainability.

Thank you so much for listening. I look forward to next time. Bye for now.

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