

Common Critic modes for Christians

When we are growing up a parents, our church community, siblings, or schools all shape the way we think about how to live life. The messages were hear, spoken or unspoken, can be internalised and get repeated in our thoughts. Take a moment to notice.



- When you make a mistake, what do you say to yourself?
- When you evaluate how well you did in a performance task whose measure do you use?
- When you think about what it is to be a good Christian, or a strong Christian, or a faithful Christian, where did you get that idea?

For many Christians these internal “voices” are not questioned. In fact we might have competing internal voices and also have new thoughts about ourselves all competing internally. In Schema Therapy, we encourage you to start to notice this internal monologue and identify this part. It’s the part of ourselves that evaluates, criticises, comments, and judges. Some common internal monologues that Christians have are the Guilt-Inducing critic, the Demanding critic, the Pharisaical critic, or the Demanding critic.



A **Demanding Critic** often has a feeling of pressure and expectation and focused on achievement, improvement or efficiency. It's often driven by an Unrelenting Standards schema (and possibly a Failure schema) where we have internalised messages that we should constantly achieve unrealistically high standards and that anything less is not good enough. It can feel like the part of us that helps us achieve or persist, but it can also be exhausting.

A **Pharisaical Critic** is a form of demanding critic. This critic mode is particularly focused on living up to certain Christian standards. This critic mode is often berating and focused on lapses or imperfections and lacks any compassion. It often evaluates our performance as Christians and pushes us to try harder in a quest to be good enough (there is often a Defectiveness schema and an Approval/recognition Seeking schema related to this critic). It can feel like the part that helps us be godly, but the constant fault-finding robs us of joy.



A **Guilt-inducing critic** is focused on motivating by avoiding guilt. It focusses on others and how they respond to us. This mode says that you have to be self sacrificial in a way that means you don't matter, where you discount your own normal needs and feel it's wrong to express how you feel, or act spontaneously. It punishes you with feelings of guilt. This mode can be an internalisation of a person or community that used guilt to control behaviour (This can be related to a Self-Sacrifice schema, a Subjugation schema or an Enmeshment schema). It can feel like a godly other-person centredness, but it doesn't allow for a healthy balance of needs and desires in a relationship.

The punitive critic mode is a very harsh, toxic and annihilating mode. Its message is that you as a person are unworthy, shouldn't exist, are fundamentally worthless and unloveable. It's often an internalisation of an abusive parent or an abusive culture and carries with it incredible shame. It is often fuelled by a Defectiveness schemas, Mistrust/Abuse schema and a Punitiveness schema



How does a Critic Mode play out?

Sarah grew up in a very conservative church, where there were very rigid rules and the leaders had high levels of authority. One leader in particular used to call out people in the congregation who had sinned and there developed a culture of fear. Sarah developed a very strong Pharisaical critic, striving to be the “godly Christian wife” and when she failed, her Punitive critic would berate her in the tone of voice that the leader had used.

Philip came from a non-Christian family, but his parents were immigrants and very committed to their children doing well. He developed a very strong Demanding critic that pushed him to achieve in high school and university, but was now crippling him with work expectations. He tried to fit in long quiet times before a 14 hour work day and felt like he was constantly failing, spiritually and at work.

Jack and his mother went to church together as his father was not a Christian. He was able to help his mum deal with the challenges of living with his dad and they would often pray together about his parent's marriage problems. As an adult Jack found himself reviewing all of the conversations he had after social interactions, trying to decide if he was being kind. He was often acutely aware of other's facial expressions and felt guilty if there was a request at church to help and he couldn't volunteer. He had a strongly developed Guilt-inducing critic.

Some people have a very distinct critic mode, or a blend of critics, or different critics for different occasions.

- What critic modes do you identify?
- What are their key messages in your voice in your mind? What does your critic criticise you for?
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- Where did you learn your critic? Was it one person, a group of people, your culture, a church or a minister who was very influential? Does your critic have a distinct sound?
- When does this mode get activated?
 - in social situations
 - at church
 - when I am reading the Bible/doing my quiet time
 - when I'm learning a new skill
 - listening to a sermon
 - when I'm with other Christians
 - when I fail or don't succeed how I'd like to
 - all the time
 - with certain people
- Is there ever a time when your therapist activates your critic mode?
- Are you in workplaces or relationships where that critic voice is echoed? Or churches?
- How do I feel when this critic mode takes over?

Building your Healthy Adult mode

The gospel provides us with a new narrative about ourselves, with a loving, heavenly father, who has forgiven us because of Jesus. This reality can become our new internal voice, our Healthy Adult mode (HAM). As we start to take notice of our internal critic we can apply to gospel to this internal voice.

- We can catch the "I'm stupid" and remind the vulnerable part of us that "I'm loved"
- We notice the critic telling us we have failed and can speak back, that "I am forgiven"
- We can speak God's loving words to ourselves
- We can learn how to strive or motivate ourselves from a place of being accepted

It is important to notice how our critic can twist the bible to keep us feeling defective, unloveable, ashamed, guilty and not good enough. Some church cultures breed critic modes. In some church cultures, berating ourselves can be seen as a sign of humility. We might think we are being humble when really we are speaking words that are not true. Ray Ortlund helpfully reminds us that "you don't make yourself more forgivable by beating yourself up before going to God."

It is important to address your critic mode in therapy and build a HAM voice that can become your internal voice. This mode can strive for Godliness, but from a place of already being forgiven, not earning forgiveness. Romans reminds us that "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death."

This side of us can be caring for others, while also valuing ourselves. Christians can get nervous about these ideas. They can be seen as "selfish". But God says we are valuable. In fact, we were important enough for Jesus to die for. We are instructed to "treat others as you treat yourself", but if you have a critic who devalues/criticises/berates you, that can't be what God intended. Imagine if you treated others the way your critic treats you? There is an assumption in that verse that we care for ourselves and that guides how we care for others. Sometimes, because of the way other's have spoken to us, we have to learn how to care for ourselves as part of this command.

Tools in starting to address your critic mode/s

1. The first step is to start to notice your critic mode and where you learnt it. In Schema Therapy we have powerful tools to help under the power of those early messages.
2. As you work with your therapist it might be helpful to find a verses in the Bible or key themes from your faith that contradict your critic message. Write them down here:



3. Are there any people in your life who treat you with compassion and kindness? Sometimes our critic stops that from happening, sometimes we are in very critical relationships/workplaces/ churches that keep the critic message alive.
4. Are you able to take in their kindness and compassion? What gets in the way?
5. Can you write a letter to your younger self helping them to see themselves the way that God sees them?