

Ep #196 : Unblending: How to See Your Inner Critic Clearly



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In today's episode, I'm talking about unblending and how to notice your sneaky inner critical voice. What's it mean to unblend? Take a listen and find out.

Welcome to *Habits On Purpose*, I'm Kristi Angevine, a physician, Master Certified Coach, Internal Family Systems informed practitioner, and host of this podcast, where we explore the deeper psychology behind why we do what we do.

Hello, hello, everybody. Today, I'm going to teach you a really fun and simple tool for noticing your inner critic and getting some objectivity and space from this. And while this is particularly useful for an inner critic, aka your inner critical part, it works with other parts as well.

Now, this is a really near and dear topic for me, and it's important for me to teach because for a long time, I had a really negative inner running monologue. And I really didn't acknowledge it. I kind of wasn't even aware it was there. It was like background music that I didn't know was playing, but it weighed me down. And it would show up in all sorts of sneaky ways. I imagine you can probably relate to this. In the background, I would have a running, very harsh, negative inner commentary.

And what would occur in my life is I would procrastinate. I wouldn't speak up or I would stay quiet, even though I wanted to say something. I would not take risks. I might not email somebody. I wouldn't want to take action on ideas for fear that it would reveal my inescapable ineptitude to the world. And it would drive a lot of my second-guessing, as well as guilt over things that seemed really huge but in hindsight were really minutiae.

So, what I'm going to teach you today is something really practical, and it's similar to what you might do in meditation, where you notice your thoughts and feelings, and you observe them with a little bit of space. In meditation, that might sound like, "Oh, I notice I'm having a thought." It might sound like reminding yourself that you're separate from that thought or separate from

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the feeling that you notice. And in meditation, this gives you perspective and objectivity.

And that's the same thing I'm going to teach you today, but a different tool. Getting perspective and objectivity is the equivalent of being in the forest of trees and experiencing a thick jungle versus having the vantage point of a drone and observing the jungle or the forest, and also being able to see the entire landscape around the forest.

So, while the tool I'm going to teach you today is very simple and is commonly taught in many cognitive behavioral approaches, there's a fascinating complexity to how and why it works that can enhance our understanding of it that comes from the field of internal family systems. So, I'm going to teach you how to do the exercise. I'm going to tell you why this exercise is useful. And then, we'll get into some of the mechanics of how it works using the concepts and terminology from the internal family systems or IFS model.

Now, you can use this tool without understanding the how and the why it works, but if you're like me, you might love knowing the way it works, and it might actually make it easier to apply it when you have this understanding.

So, what is this exercise I keep talking about? I'm going to tell you what the exercise is and exactly how to do it, and then we'll elaborate on why it's important. This is called the “first to second person” exercise. And in this context, we're using it to detect your inner critic.

So, take out a sheet of paper or get out your computer or whatever you like to take notes on. It's key the first time you do this that you actually externalize things and that you don't just do it in your mind.

So, if you're driving down the road and you are going to be commuting for the next 3 hours and you really must try this before you get to a sheet of paper and before you get to your computer, totally fine. But ideally, you want to do this where you can actually externalize things from your mind.

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So, write down all the negative commentary that you hear in your mind that comes in the first person. It might sound like: I'm not cut out for this. I suck. I'm always struggling. Everyone else has it more put together than me. I am such an idiot. I'm never going to get it. I've failed. I didn't handle things like I should have. What you're looking for are thoughts that are in your mind that are first-person statements. They're a little bit critical, a little bit harsh, a little bit negative.

So, you write those down. And I kind of like to write them in a column on one side of the paper and then have a corresponding column next to them. What you do in this corresponding column is, with each statement, convert all of them to the second person. And notice how they sound. Consider how it would feel to have someone else telling these statements to you, and consider how it would be to say them aloud to another person.

So, it sounds like this. "Maybe I'm not cut out for this," turns into, "Maybe you're not cut out for this." "I suck," turns into, "You really suck." "I'm such an idiot," turns into, "You are such an idiot." See how they sound kind of harsh when you put them in the second person? Notice that you might actually physically wince when you imagine someone saying them to you or you saying them aloud to another person.

Now, the next step is to take a moment and consider an alternate statement for each one, one that's more neutral, more objective, and perhaps even a little kinder.

So let's take, "I'm never going to get this." We convert it to a second-person statement and it is, "You're never going to get this." A more neutral or impartial statement might sound like, "This is hard, but we can break this down into smaller steps." Or, "It's possible you can get this." Or, "Maybe it just looks differently than I originally thought." Now, your alternate statements can be in second person or first person, whatever feels more natural to you.

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So, write down first-person negative statements, convert them to second-person statements, notice how they feel, imagine hearing them from someone else or saying them to someone else, and then find an alternative neutral statement. All right, simple enough, right? So, why do this?

Like I said in episode 102, inner work is not just indulgent or avoidant of, quote, "real work." Inner work is actually the most effective, most foundational work that you can do to assist you in doing the work that you want to do out in the world. But why do this exercise specifically?

Number one: so often, we don't recognize our thoughts as thoughts. We experience our thoughts as mere observation of the world around us and ourselves, and we assume that the words going through our mind are simply objective, rational, and true. When you do first to second person, it helps you see what you're telling yourself that you presume are simply observations of reality. So, in this way, this exercise is a narrative finder.

Number two: we don't recognize the tone of our thoughts. We sometimes don't realize how harsh or negative or rigid, or mean they are. We also might not notice if they're entitled or pitying. Imagining someone outside of you saying these thoughts to you reveals the tone really fast.

Number three: it helps identify an inner critic that might be stealthy. Oftentimes, when we read about inner critics, it's common parlance to describe it as a voice or running narrative that's in the second person. It sounds like, "You suck." "You're dumb." "No one likes you." "You're such an idiot." "You can't hold a conversation with anyone." And this might be in your own voice, or it could sound like a parent, a sibling, a schoolmate, or this amalgamation of cultural messages.

But for some of us, we don't hear the second-person voice that is more easy to distinguish. Or we do hear a second-person voice, but there's also another voice that's just as negative, but it's in the first person. And it sounds like, "I suck. What is my problem? Why on earth did I say that? I

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have no idea what I'm doing. Everyone else can handle it. What's wrong with me?"

And the first-person thoughts are so intimately close that we can mistake them for being the true us. They're like a lens through which we're looking that we can't see is there because it's totally clear. And it's always there, and we're not far enough away from it to see it, just like contact lenses or a really clean windshield. First-person I-statements are more likely to be experienced as reality when they are simply virtual reality goggles.

So, check out this example. Say you're sitting in a coffee shop and you're enjoying your drink, you're reading, and an acquaintance of yours, let's just make up a name, Jill, walks in. You go to say hi to Jill, and you and Jill have some back-and-forth small chat, and in walks another acquaintance who we'll just call Stephanie. And these names are just made up, by the way, so forgive me if there's any Jills or Stephanies out there.

So you say, "Oh, hey, Jill, do you know Stephanie?" And they both share, "Oh, yeah, we see each other all the time at work." And in that moment, you realize that they both work at the same place. And you feel this wave of embarrassment and self-consciousness because you know that they work at the same place, but you forgot. And Jill and Stephanie, they chuckle, and Stephanie asks how you're both doing, and the small talk just keeps going.

But you're pretty sure that Jill and Stephanie have a flash of an expression that goes across their faces that betrays that they both think you're weird and dense and dumb for not knowing that they work together and for introducing them when they already know each other. And it was so brief that you conclude that they're now just being diplomatic, but behind the friendliness, they secretly think that you're stupid. And in your mind, you're thinking, "What the hell? Of course, they know each other. I am so dumb. How embarrassing. Oh, fuck. They hate me. They're only being nice because we're in public. And later, they're going to go talk about what a dumbass I am."

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And in the moment, you feel terrible. And yet, you hide it with small talk and eventually excuse yourself from the conversation with some fake excuse that you have to get going when you really don't. Now, the lived experience is first-person commentary in your mind and intense feelings of embarrassment and anxiety.

But if we could press pause and everyone in the coffee shop froze but you and, say, a wise friend or a coach, we could look back and see that in the moment of making an introduction to people who actually work together and already know one another, a part of you comes in, comes online, and offers you thoughts like, "I am so dumb. They hate me," et cetera.

And when we convert those thoughts to second person, we can see them more clearly. You are so dumb. They clearly hate you. Later, they're going to talk about you behind your back. What an idiot. You can't do anything right. And although your lived experience isn't you hearing it in second person, when you think those thoughts like, "I'm dumb," and you believe it, it's the equivalent of telling yourself you're dumb, just like somebody else saying you're dumb. And when you convert it to second person, it helps you with a few things. It helps you see that automatic, harsh, mean way you treat yourself in the moment. It's likely not how you would talk to someone else unless you were really disgusted or mad at them.

The second-person exercise helps you create space and perspective. Second person helps you retrospectively appreciate your thoughts as thoughts and not as purely objective observations. Now, Internal Family Systems or IFS calls this process of getting space from your thoughts, emotions, or the parts that are present and online "unblending."

Now, you can understand unblending by thinking of what happens when you drop a drop of food coloring into water or milk, or what happens when you put on sunglasses and you see the world through that lens. When your thoughts are so intimately close, otherwise known as when a part of you is blended with you, you see the world through that part's eyes and you

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experience the world through that part's lens, with that part's values, that part's thoughts, that part's emotions.

When you unblend from this part, what's happening is you're separating yourself from the part, just like separating molecules of dye and milk. And I don't know if that's even possible. Those chemistry people out there can tell me if I'm just making up a terrible analogy. Or, just like taking off a pair of sunglasses.

So, try it. Write down critical thoughts you have of yourself. Perhaps think back to an incident where you felt really terrible and think back, what were you telling yourself? What thoughts were in your mind in the first person? Write them in one column, and then in another column, write down the second-person version. And just contrast the two. Notice how when you put them in second person, a lot of the comments really sting.

When you see first-person thoughts and second-person thoughts, it's easier to access compassion and curiosity. And these are, frankly, the silver bullets for almost all of our struggles.

So, now let's just go a little deeper into the mechanics of what's going on when you notice your thoughts as thoughts, when you notice a part of you is being critical, and when you notice that you are blended with a part. And along the way, you're going to hear how it helps with perspective, compassion, and curiosity.

When you notice and get space from your thoughts, it might sound like, "Oh, a part of me is thinking XYZ." And when you do that, you get space from those thoughts and space from the feelings that those thoughts invoke.

But here's the question: who is getting space from those thoughts and feelings? Who's getting space from that part? What's present when the part separates from you? To explain this requires that we visit the concept of Self with a capital S, which is perhaps one of the harder concepts in IFS to really understand and, frankly, to accept.

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Self with a capital S is a state of being where we feel things like clarity, compassion, playfulness, curiosity, and calm. It may also be characterized by confidence, feeling creative, and feeling connected. Self is who you are when you are most you. It's your seat of consciousness that's unfettered by cognitive distortions and limiting beliefs. Self is the birthplace of inner wisdom, of knowing and intuition, and it's the core wise version of you that can compassionately, confidently navigate anything. It's your authentic you.

So, to use the language of parts, when parts step back, when we get distance from thoughts, our inner critic, feelings, emotions, parts, Self with a capital S, spontaneously emerges. Meaning, when you get space from a critical voice and can see it as a part of you or a cluster of opinions as opposed to objective reality, you can gain access to feeling curious, calm, and clear. You gain access to this authentic you.

Now, the analogy that I really love is one of clouds and the sun. When the sky is cloudy, you can't see the sun, you can't see the blue sky. But they're there. When the clouds move, you can see the sky and the sun.

So, imagine that your critical thoughts or the part of you that's critical are the clouds. And Self with a capital S is the sky or the sun. Self is always there, but it can be obscured by the presence of parts or when parts are blended. When you get space from the critical part, then you can access the state of being where you are calm, have curiosity, have compassion, have clarity, have perspective, which is analogous to the clouds parting and seeing the sky or seeing the sun and having access to both.

So, when you do the first to second person exercise, you're giving yourself a chance to unblend from parts and access your true Self. And here's the brilliance of doing this. When you can do it with an exercise on paper, you actually learn two additional things. You learn the difference of what it feels like when you're blended with a part versus when you're connected to your true, wise, calm Self. And knowing this difference helps you notice when other parts are present.

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You can tell the difference between parts as opposed to Self being present when you feel anything other than these qualities that start with the letter C. If you're not feeling curious, calm, creative, clear, connected, courageous, or compassionate, that means there's the presence of a part. And when you know how to unblend using an exercise on paper, you actually learn how to do the process in the real world off the page, which is where real change and where all the magic happens.

So, when you're in everyday life, you can start to notice, am I feeling more of this Self energy, these qualities of Self with a capital S that start with a C? Or am I feeling something else? If I'm feeling something else, I can use the language of parts and say, a part of me feels tense. A part of me feels sad. A part of me feels disappointed. A part of me is thinking I'm such a loser. A part is overwhelmed. A part is running my to-do list right now and second guessing. And the simple act of naming a part can start the process of getting space from that part, which is the equivalent of removing goggles and seeing the world through a different lens.

Now, a word to the wise: Self with a capital S is not superior to parts. Parts are not a problem. Therefore, the absence of parts and 100% embodying or connecting to this thing we're calling Self with a capital S is not actually the goal. The goal is simply to notice and create space so there's room for both. And ultimately, to create this collaborative vibe between the parts of ourselves and between Self with a capital S, like you might have between a great coach and a great team, where neither can exist in a vacuum, but they collaborate together.

Now, the next caveat is, distinguishing parts from Self is not always totally straightforward, which is why this exercise is really useful and makes it really practical. But if when you're doing it, it doesn't feel super easy to you, that is totally normal.

First of all, this is a new way of approaching your mind and emotions that no one taught us in school. And secondly, sometimes parts of us have qualities of Self with a capital S. A part that's angry might have lots of

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confidence and clarity. But the difference is a part can feel indignant and wronged and pissed off, but Self with a capital S won't feel those things. It'll just feel confident and clear.

Or an anxious part might seem really curious because it asks tons of questions. What am I going to do next? How is this possibly going to work? What's that mean? And an anxious part might actually fuel a certain flavor of creativity of thinking about all sorts of things and putting things together. But an anxious part is going to have an agenda and scarcity and be in a hurry and have some angst, versus Self with a capital S, that curiosity and creativity won't be fueled by this inner angst or agenda or scarcity.

And additionally, and this is kind of mind-bending, some parts of us just seem like who we are, intrinsic to us as a person, and intrinsic to our personality. It sounds like, "I'm just a type A person." "I'm just really detail-oriented." "I've always been perfectionistic." "It's just the way I am to see the worst-case scenario."

Parts, when we are fully blended with them, they are reality makers. And parts that we've had for decades can seem like just who we are. But the truth is, they're actually a distinct part different from these Self qualities. And the fun and the challenge is in detecting them.

So, to review, unblending is the process of noticing thoughts, noticing emotions, or noticing a part of you is present and getting space from it so that you can access more of your wise, calm, compassionate, authentic Self. Self with a capital S is a state of being that Internal Family Systems describes as your true you that you experience when your parts have pulled back and given you some space. Using the first to second person exercise gives you the space to notice your critical part, and it also works with other parts, too. Learning the skill of unblending and practicing it regularly is a skill you can cultivate in all areas of life, and it has no downside. And then also remember, parts can be challenging to distinguish from Self, and parts are not superior to Self with a capital S.

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So, I invite you to try this exercise today and become your own parts detector. And while you're at it, notice how you can shift from this insidious flogging from your inner critic to having more of a middle road neutral perspective.

Until next week, I will see you soon.

Thanks for listening to *Habits On Purpose*. If you want more information on Kristi Angevine or the resources from the podcast, visit HabitsOnPurpose.com. Tune in next week for another episode.