

useful, with each commenting on something they had integrated into their everyday lives. Some felt they had become more accepting of their feelings and no longer believed they had to change them. Others discovered that thoughts were not facts and that they could make choices and have some control over them. They appreciated the time for themselves that mindfulness provided, and believed it improved their quality of life and cultivated a sense of dignity.

Everyone struggled with the demands of the daily meditation practice and the participants found it particularly hard at times when the academic pressure was intense. Others said that it had improved their ability to focus and manage their exam anxiety better.

We now have access to several self-report measures for the assessment of mindfulness and we are interested how they will add to the evaluation of future groups.

Conclusions

Some students experience high levels of stress trying to cope with considerable academic and social pressures. We have many students who come to the counselling service with high levels of anxiety and depression. We believe that mindfulness groups have a place in higher education, as one way to address these issues – certainly it appears that those who attended our groups benefited. Group members actively sought out the group, as they are accustomed to experimenting with new and challenging ways to learn.

The value of a mindfulness group rather than an individual format is the reassurance of trying something new with the support of your peers and discovering others are struggling too and that you are normal and not alone. Of course, mindfulness is more a way of life than an eight-week course. We do not know to what extent participants will continue to practise mindfulness, but perhaps we have 'sown a seed'. ■

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Writing survival skills



Counselling and psychological theory is not only applicable to solving psychological 'problems', it can also provide tips and strategies for dealing with the ordinary challenges of university life such as the stress management skills described elsewhere in this issue. This article aimed at students explains why 'disarming the inner critic' is a crucial skill for writing essays as well as dissertations...

When there is no enemy within, the enemy without can do you no harm. (African proverb)

Haven't done anything on your essay or dissertation lately? Maybe you are just too busy, or your supervisor/tutor has not been very helpful, or you picked the wrong topic, or you never were a good writer? Maybe you are worried you will never finish your thesis despite all the years and all the money that you have tied up in this degree?

What I have found in talking with students is that pressure from the inner critic is what often blocks you from taking

action to get writing tasks done. In case you are unfamiliar with the concept, the 'inner critic' is the one who whispers in your ear that your degree is an amazing, superhuman feat that you are not capable of completing. Often this creates performance anxiety that shuts down your ability to engage in productive activity. Somehow, if you can free yourself of self-doubts and worries about how critical your committee is going to be, you may find that you have more energy available to work on your essay or thesis. So the real challenge is... how to manage the inner critic so that your own unique creative scholar shines out!

What is the inner critic?

The inner critic that I am referring to is the inner voice that we sometimes mistakenly believe to be our own. Typically, it develops when we are quite young to help us get approval and acceptance and to protect us from the bad things that might happen to us. It preaches all the 'shoulds' and all the 'shouldn'ts' that we grew up with. Often modelled after parents and social norms, the inner critic likes to criticise and correct us before others can. Sadly, most people's critic has long outgrown its usefulness and instead has become a constant nuisance and an insidious self-saboteur.

Here are some basic skills that you might consider adding to your writing survival kit: notice when you are under attack by your inner critic; name your inner critic and identify its strategy; confront the inner critic, and, by all means, get support from others when you need it.

Notice when you're under an inner critic attack

What are some of the signs that might alert you to an inner critic attack?

- Mental signs: self-criticism, excessive worry, procrastination, negative thoughts about your options, black and white thinking, confusion, feeling stuck.
- Emotional signs: loss of motivation, discouragement, feelings of failure, depression, low self-esteem, fear, feeling powerless.
- Physical signs: lack of energy, fatigue, sickness or injury.

Name your inner critic and identify its strategy

This step enables you to extricate your identity from that of the critic and to see it as something separate from yourself. Your critic is the one that bombards you with thoughts like:

- 'I'm not ready to write until I do some more reading.'
- 'I'm just not clever enough to do this essay/thesis/degree.'
- 'I know the tutor is going to reject my work/give me a bad mark.'
- 'I'll never finish.'

These thoughts emphasise your inadequacy or your incompetence. Underneath them, you are likely to find a more basic fear such as a fear of failure or a fear of rejection and abandonment. These thoughts reflect a way of thinking about your degree as the greatest achievement of your life, or your thesis as your 'magnum opus'. This thinking ignores the value of a degree as a learning process, and a postgraduate thesis as the way you 'grow into' being a creative scholar and gradually develop into an expert in your topic.

It is often helpful to get to know your inner critic by simply observing it for a week or so and writing down each of its criticisms. By becoming familiar with the message your critic is conveying to you, you take the first step in beginning to disarm it.

Confront your inner critic

Develop your own way of getting past your critic. A cognitive psychologist might advise you to counter each negative thought with a positive affirmation about your true value and your accomplishments. But there are many other creative ways of managing the inner critic. There are endless possibilities. One student wrote an ultimatum letter telling off her critic. She fired her critic; you might also consider offering it a new job description. Another student whose inner critic is affectionately named The Driver has learned to send it off to herd sheep in a different part of the country when it becomes troublesome. Another client has tamed her critic by drawing it and naming it Maynard. Another client

keeps a whistle handy and blows the whistle on the inner critic whenever it rears its head. Yet another client sends it off to a desert island. Or you might consider shrinking it to the size of a mouse (since if you are reading this, there have probably been times when your critic has taken on enormous proportions), dropping it by the tail into a big jar, and then putting the lid on very, very tightly!

These are some possibilities for managing your inner critic. It's up to you to find a resourceful way to face your critic and then get into action on your essay or thesis.

Get support when you really need it

Let's face it. There are going to be times in the course of your degree when the going gets rough. You may even become so self-critical that you reach an impasse. That is the time to seek support from friends or even from a counsellor who can help you refute the inner critic and reaffirm your own creative scholar. Assemble your own inner support committee of mentors and people who believe in you. One student has her grandmother chair this committee! Let this committee give you regular pep talks. Visualise your inner support committee members and take them with you to meetings with your supervisor, to your presentations, to interviews, and to other professional presentations. Imagine them cheering for you.

Managing your inner critic is a never-ending story but it does get easier with practice. Every time you disarm the critic, you take one step forward towards claiming the voice of your creative scholar. So why not make this your own Inner Critic Awareness Week! ■

This article has been adapted from Dissertation survival skills: disarming your inner critic by Dr Sally Jensen, a US dissertation coach and consultant who can be contacted by email at drsally@dissertationdoctor.com. Her Dissertation Doctor website at www.dissertationdoctor.com offers other useful tips for dissertation writers in particular.