

IMPOSTER SYNDROME WORKBOOK

What to Do When One Critical Comment Makes You Question Your Whole Career

A Guide to Building Resilience

Struggling to absorb critical feedback without spiraling into self-doubt is a problem I see in my office almost every day. And when you know criticism can derail you for days, you might think the answer is to learn to stop caring so much.

But caring too much isn't always the primary problem. The bigger problem is that most of us don't have a reliable way to identify which parts of the criticism are valuable and which parts we can safely disregard. This workbook will walk you through how to do that.

If you'd like to understand more about why criticism can be so hard to let go of, you can read the article that accompanies this workbook: *What to do When One Critical Comment Makes You Question Your Whole Career*. Read the article here.

WHERE TO START

Start by choosing one piece of criticism you've had trouble letting go of. Write it below, as close to word for word as you can remember.

The criticism:

1. What is worth taking from this?

Criticism usually contains a mixture of facts and interpretation. Resist the urge to decide what the criticism means before you've separated them.

What are the facts?

Write what actually happened below.

Which parts of the feedback can you support with direct observation, objective data, records, outcomes, or other evidence?

What is interpretation?

Which parts are someone's opinion, assumption, expectation, or interpretation of what happened?

Now, before you draw a conclusion, put the criticism in context.

What does this tell you about your performance?

Did you miss something? Make a poor decision? Communicate unclearly? Fail to anticipate something you reasonably should have anticipated?

What does this tell you about your environment?

Were expectations unclear? Were you managing competing priorities? Was necessary information unavailable? Were different people expecting incompatible things?

What does this tell you about perception?

Even if you don't completely agree with their interpretation, is their reaction still useful? What can you learn from it?

BASED ON THE EVIDENCE, WHAT CAN YOU REASONABLY CONCLUDE?

2. Is this an event or a pattern?

One mistake can tell you something about one situation. A recurring problem may tell you something more. The next step is to figure out how broadly the evidence applies.

Has the same problem happened before? If so, how often?

What evidence suggests this situation may be an exception? What evidence suggests it may be part of a larger pattern?

BASED ON THE EVIDENCE

- [ ] This appears to be an isolated event.
- [ ] I don't have enough evidence yet to know.
- [ ] This appears to be a recurring pattern.

If it's a pattern, describe it as narrowly and specifically as you can.

3. Did you make the criticism bigger?

Follow the criticism as far as your mind has taken it.

What happened?

↓

What did you conclude from that?

↓

What did that lead you to conclude?

↓

What are you now afraid this says about your overall competence?

Where does the evidence end and the extrapolation begin?

We're not trying to prove that your larger fears are false. We're trying to identify what conclusions the evidence does and does not support.

4. What is the specific problem you need to solve?

Set aside the extrapolation and focus on the problem supported by the evidence.

What is a fair and reasonable way to describe the problem?

What, if anything, needs to change in the future?

What is one small thing you can do differently?

Keep the step small and specific.

EXAMPLES

- I need to block a full hour on my calendar before my next board meeting to anticipate likely questions and prepare strategic answers.
- Before my next leadership meeting, I'll write my main recommendation in one sentence and lead with it before giving the supporting detail.
- I need to schedule time with the person affected by my decision and acknowledge what I got wrong.

5. Is there anything left to learn?

You've identified what the criticism can reasonably tell you and what, if anything, you're going to do about it. If your mind is still spinning, ask yourself what it's trying to figure out.

What are you hoping more analysis will help you figure out?

Will continuing to think about this criticism actually answer that question?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, identify what information you still need and how you can get it.

If no, you've reached the limit of what this criticism can usefully tell you.

6. What to do if your brain keeps picking at it

It's okay if you still feel unsettled or wish things had gone differently, but continuing to replay and analyze the criticism won't help once you've taken what you need from it. Use this section to prepare a response you can use whenever your brain tries to reopen the question.

1. What do you wish had been different?

2. What larger conclusion are you tempted to draw that isn't supported by the evidence?

3. What is actually true about what happened?

4. What have you decided to do differently in the future?

Then put all four pieces together:

FOR EXAMPLE

I wish I had prepared differently for that meeting. That doesn't mean I'm bad at my job. I needed to prepare more thoroughly for this meeting, and I've decided to block off more time to prepare for the next one.

Now, when your brain brings the criticism back up, you can resist the urge to restart the mental spiral by using the phrase you wrote above to remind yourself that you've already reached a conclusion.

One last thing

Remember that you came into this criticism with an extensive track record. One difficult meeting, mistake, or piece of feedback doesn't erase everything you used to know and believe about your work.

It may give you some new information that you need to take seriously. But that new information belongs alongside the rest of the evidence, not in place of it.

If you're tired of trying to sort through this alone at 2 a.m., you can sign up for a no-charge, confidential consultation here.