

Appreciation: More Powerful Than Criticism

By: Yancy Wright



What is keeping us from experiencing more joy in life? People are told that life has its “ups and downs,” and many of us believe that joy is surely not meant to be felt all the time. Yet, recently I’ve started an inquiry process that centers around this one question: **regardless of the ever-changing circumstances of my life, is there a shift that I can make internally that would allow me to feel joy all the time?**

I started my search by reviewing my past. By wondering about my upbringing, I realized that I learned from a young age how to master self-criticism, judgment and criticism of others. I grew up in an environment where boys and men were taught to be tough. The fastest way to thicker skin was to both endure and dish out condemnation and disapproval. I remember feeling confused about the purpose of this consistent criticism, as if there was an unspoken agreement that it was a form of endearment. Putting someone down was meant to show them that you cared and wanted to see them improve. The ability to be critical was often accompanied by a feeling of pride around being a critical thinker. Yet, I also watched this intended endearment or critical thinking get spiraled into hurt feelings, disconnection and resentment in my family. I remember watching my Grandfather put my father down and my father treat me similarly. I now see how my own thoughts have been regularly flooded with criticism of myself and others.

I realized that my learned predisposition to criticism was the number one habit robbing me of the ability to

feel consistent joy. With further research, I found a range of scientific evidence to back this up. Criticism was designed as a shortcut to help early humans evaluate, store and review information for survival and safety. Yet as our society has evolved, our brains have over-learned criticism of ourselves and others. This unhealthy form of criticism has been identified as a key component of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, substance abuse, physical health conditions, and even suicide based on research in the US, Canada, Israel, and Europe¹.

- Self-criticism derails people’s social environments. It propels them to generate interpersonal stress and it interferes with the ability to experience positive, enjoyable life events².
- Research is showing that our higher-order cognitive controls become impacted and limited by criticism³.
- The inner critic cannot operate at the same time as creative flow. The area of the brain responsible for criticism and self-monitoring is deactivated at the height of creative expression.
- During creative flow, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), the part of the brain charged with self-monitoring and impulse control, goes quiet. The DLPFC holds our inner critic, that voice of doubt and disparagement. As a result, with this area deactivated, we’re far less critical and far more courageous, both augmenting our ability to imagine new possibilities and share those possibilities with the world⁴.

A habit of criticism of self and others stems from our childrearing and social influences. According to a 25-year study⁵ of infants, children learn how to behave by passively imitating parents and other children. These habits get stored in the unconscious part of the brain and shape adult behavior. Those deeply stored preferences, feelings, intuitions, and gut reactions become unconscious guides for the present. Like me, many people have learned a predisposition to critical—rather than appreciative—ways of thinking about self, others and even life.

So, if it’s emerging that you might be one of these people, and you notice that unhealthy criticism is hurting both your self-esteem and your relationships with others, how do you reverse it?

¹ Shahar, G. (2015). *Erosion: The psychopathology of self-criticism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

<https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-11-642>

² Shahar, G. (2015). *Erosion: The psychopathology of self-criticism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

<https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-11-642>

³ The Effect of Criticism on Functional Brain Connectivity and Associations with Neuroticism <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0069606>

⁴ Kotler, S. (2014) *The Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance*

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-playing-field/201402/flow-states-and-creativity>

⁵ *The imitative mind: Development, evolution, and brain bases*. Cambridge University Press; New York: 2002

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2440575/#R36>



The antidote to criticism is appreciation. Appreciation leads to joy and daily practice can help sustain lifelong joy. If you want more joy in your life, it is important to overcome unhealthy criticism by developing a practice of authentic appreciation. Generating a state of awe and wonder opens the doors (and windows, closets and dusty attic) to appreciation.

- A one-time act of thoughtful appreciation produced an immediate 10% increase in happiness and 35% reduction in depressive symptoms⁶.
- Appreciation lowers blood pressure. Negative emotions create a chain reaction in the body—blood vessels constrict, blood pressure rises, and the immune system is weakened.⁷
- Appreciation is a much better motivator. 80% are willing to work harder for an appreciative boss, and 70% said they'd feel better about their efforts if their boss thanked them more regularly⁸.
- Appreciation increases mental strength by reducing stress and has been linked as a key to overcoming trauma. A 2006 study found that Vietnam War Veterans with higher levels of gratitude and appreciation experienced lower rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder⁹.
- Grateful people report feeling healthier than others, noticing they experience fewer aches and pains¹⁰.
- Sleep improves with positive emotions of appreciation and gratitude, activating the parasympathetic branch of the nervous system, initiating the relaxation response.

⁶ Seligman, Martin E. P.: *Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions*, University of Pennsylvania
<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2005-08033-003>

⁷ UC Davis Health Feature, *Gratitude is Good Medicine*
https://health.ucdavis.edu/medicalcenter/features/2015-2016/11/20151125_gratitude.html

Stephanie Cooper, *Expressing Gratitude Can Benefit Your Health*, 2022
<https://www.innerbody.com/ways-to-cultivate-gratitude>

⁸ Glassdoor Team, *Employers To Retain Half Of Their Employees Longer If Bosses Showed More Appreciation*; Glassdoor Survey
<https://www.glassdoor.com/employers/blog/employers-to-retain-half-of-their-employees-longer-if-bosses-showed-more-appreciation-glassdoor-survey/>

- Criticism activates the sympathetic branch, often referred to as the fight-or-flight response. Appreciation and gratitude have been shown to reduce the time required to fall asleep, increase sleep quality and sleep duration¹¹.

So why aren't we moving away from criticism and thriving in a life of appreciation and gratitude? As a teenager I felt challenged to appreciate myself and others. Thinking it would make me appear or feel weak, I was scared that somehow by appreciating someone they might think they were better or more important than me. **Self-appreciation** felt especially awkward, for fear of inflating my own ego (i.e., getting too full of myself).

Try this appreciation practice as a way to begin shifting away from self-criticism. Each evening write down 5 things you appreciate about yourself and when you feel comfortable, share 5 things you appreciate about another. Tell them you are working on creating a habit of appreciation. Even if they are small, find a way to move beyond the critical voice. Consider joining the appreciation challenge at:

<http://foundationforconsciousliving.com/appreciation>

It has taken years of practice to cognitively restructure my internal self-talk, to generate self-appreciation and allow others to appreciate me without brushing it off. By practicing appreciation daily, I have opened the doors to giving and receiving more appreciations to and from others with more ease. My relationships are stronger and more loving. A life based in appreciation now feels so much better than one guided by criticism. When I fall out of practice, I simply recommit to appreciating. This practice of appreciation opens a deeper level of presence and awareness of myself, others and my surroundings bringing much more joy in my life.

Yancy Wright, is a visionary leader with an ability to take individuals and teams into realms they never thought were possible. He created <https://www.casaalternavida.com> to inspire transformation and growth for individuals, groups, and companies looking to deepen their integrity with themselves, each other, and nature. **This article was inspired by the amazing work of Katie and Gay Hendricks** <https://hendricks.com>

⁹ Kashdan T. et al *Gratitude and hedonic and eudaimonic well-being in Vietnam war veterans* <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16389060>

¹⁰ Hill P. et al. *Examining the Pathways between Gratitude and Self-Rated Physical Health across Adulthood* <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23139438>

¹¹ Nancy D. et al. *Effects of Constructive Worry, Imagery Distraction, and Gratitude Interventions on Sleep Quality: A Pilot Trial*
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1758-0854.2011.01049.x>