

Making lemonade from lemons: Transforming criticism from a pain to a positive

Others criticize you. You criticize yourself. Here are the three steps to prepare yourself for criticism, face criticism in the moment, and break free of past mistakes and embarrassments to feel better about yourself and your work in veterinary practice.

Preparing for criticism: Your circle of excellence

- Think of a moment of time when you were at your personal best, when everything was going just the way you wanted it. Imagine yourself back in that situation.
- See what's around you right now—the shapes, the colors, the objects, the people.
- Hear the sounds you hear right now. Notice what you're saying to yourself.
- Notice the feelings inside you. Remember them.
- Imagine a circle in which you will create that image of your most capable, competent self. Make it colorful, vivid, clear, bright, and life-sized.
- Now step into that circle. Align your posture to match the image of you in your picture. Discover how the world looks from that perspective. Feel the feelings inside that competent, excellent self. Memorize that feeling.
- Step outside that circle.
- Make the image even brighter and more colorful. Make it more focused and more relevant for you, and step in again.
- Try to feel those good feelings even more intensely.
- Repeat a few more times.
- Imagine that you can pull up that positive energy anytime, day or night.
- Leave an even brighter image of you at your best out there as your future goal. Memorize that good feeling when you look at it, and remind yourself that you can have the feelings that come from your circle of excellence whenever you choose.
- Take a few moments to think of a time each day or each week when you want to have this "excellent" resource. It's yours, and no one can take it away from you.

Handling criticism with tact and confidence

- Connect with your sense of competence and excellence—your circle of excellence.
- Repeat back what you think the other person has said to verify the accuracy of the complaint. Figure out whether it's just a misunderstanding that can be clarified.
- Have your circle-of-excellence self make a picture of yourself now being criticized. Your "best" self will now put two pictures side-by-side in your mind's eye. The first picture is an image of what the new behavior or response might look like if you implemented the criticism. The second is a picture of what you recall having done. Compare them.
- If you don't have enough information to build an accurate image of the preferred behavior, ask questions like "What could I do to improve or do things differently?" This requires the critic to come up with alternatives to fix the problem.
- Imagine you're stepping into your new picture and seeing yourself as a competent person. See yourself implementing the suggestions as you continue to feel safe and secure. Maintain an open mind to see whether the suggestions have merit or new possibilities. Imagine putting your own stamp of approval on these suggestions.
- Decide your future course of action. You may give the suggestions a worthy effort before making any decisions. Thank the person for the valuable feedback and proceed to use your own judgment.
- If no suggestions are made, you can ignore the criticism as undeserved or mean-spirited. Your response could be, "If you can't suggest any positive alternatives, it's difficult for me to know what to do differently." Keep asking questions for clarification. Then don't give it a second thought, and say "Thank you for your feedback. I'll consider the ways I can put your suggestions to use."

Reimagining past criticism

- Think of a situation in which you experienced criticism. Please avoid the most traumatic event of your life.
- Make a 30-second movie of that situation in your mind's eye.
- As you watch this film in your mind, let yourself feel the emotional effects of that experience. Pay attention to your body sensations. Give those feelings an arbitrary rank of 10 on a discomfort scale of 1-10.
- Now change an aspect of the movie—something that happened, something that was said. After each change, check to see how much the stress of the criticism has been reduced.
- Run the movie twice as fast.
- Run the movie backwards.
- If the voice in your movie is loud and fast, reduce the volume and slow it down to a drawl. If it's high pitched and screeching, change it to a baritone.
- Think of your favorite sitcom. Pick out a memorable scene and insert this into the middle of your movie, and run your movie to the end.
- Run the personal movie in your head with circus music in the background.
- Now run the original movie again and find out how it feels now.

When a memory of criticism hurts you, you can become stuck with only one way of seeing it—the way that makes you feel bad. Humor is a way to break out of that trap by looking at it from a different angle. Objectivity and perspective can let you find the humor in the situation. Look for the humor, celebrate it, and move on. Don't let your past mistakes ruin today's possibilities.