

# Say goodbye to negativity

Instead of ignoring negative thoughts, we should learn from them, writes **Fiona Hoban**



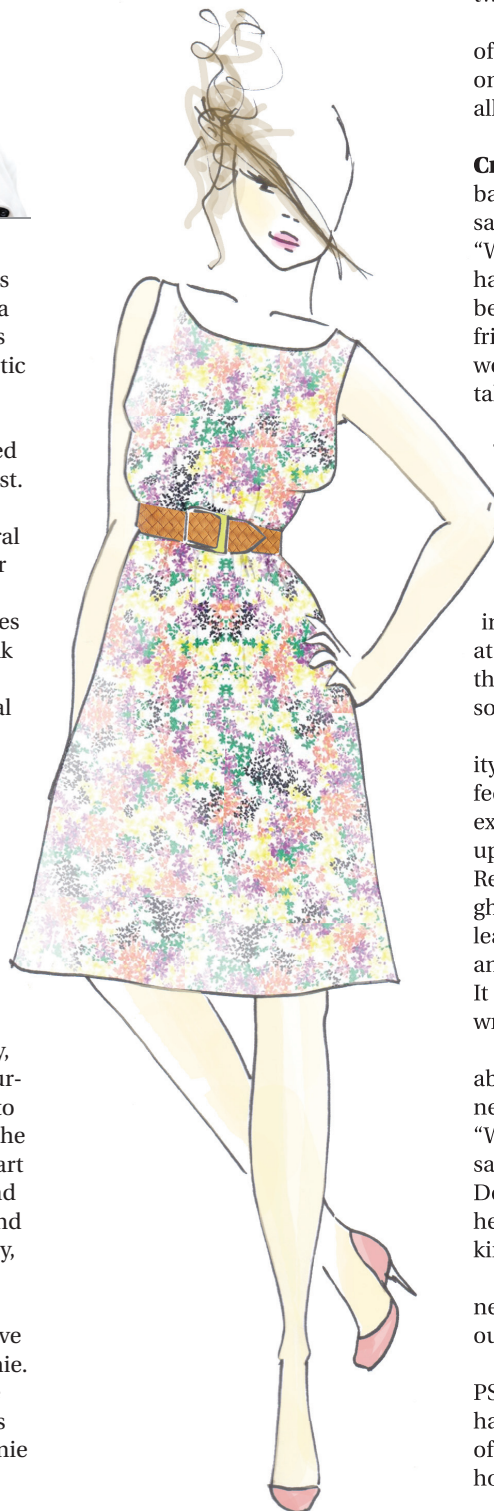
**W**hen was the last time you felt a little less than adequate, a little less than whole, a little less than what you *should* be? This is usually a sure sign that your inner critic is in the driving seat of your thought processes, pointing out what is wrong, or what might go wrong, with a distorted reminder of what went wrong in the past.

Our inner critic is a mix of internalised, learned behaviour from carers, authority figures, peers and general cultural influences. These all contribute to the rules for living – a set of (oftentimes) inflexible shoulds, oughts and musts. We tend to live within these rigid boundaries and demand that we, and others, adhere to them. Break the rules, push the boundaries and chances are you'll have the inner critic to answer to. How can we best deal with our inner critic?

**Challenge it.** Many cognitive behavioural therapists challenge negative thought processes; they examine negative thoughts and check them for proof, for probability, for validation. They might advise you to pull your inner critic into check by saying things like: So what? Who cares? Big deal. Why not? I'm not listening to you any more.

I'm not against challenging the inner critic *per se*, but sometimes it can lead us to treating the inner critic like the enemy that must be annihilated. In a way, it turns one part of yourself against another part of yourself. Is it really such a good idea to have inner conflict to deal with on top of an inner critic? I'm not convinced the inner critic is the enemy. It has our best interests at heart – all it really wants to do is save us from disapproval and disappointment. It wants us to reach high standards and win some love. So, rather than treating it like the enemy, see it as well-meaning ... but a bit daft.

**Lighten up about it.** Laugh at how daft it really is. Give it a name: Negative Nelly, Whinging Winnie, Awful Annie. Rather than getting drawn into believing the nonsense that your inner critic churns out, practise saying things like: "Awful Annie's in full flight"; "I see Whinging Winnie is alive and well"; "Welcome back, Negative Nelly."



**Know what it is and what it isn't.**

It's important to realise that the inner critic is not you. It's a particular train of thought, that's all. It's not fact, it's not truth – oftentimes it has no bearing in reality whatsoever. This helps create some space between you and the inner critic.

Eckhart Tolle, best-selling author of *The Power of Now*, says: "They're only thoughts, I wouldn't take them all that seriously."

**Create an inner carer.**

Counter-balance what the inner critic has to say with an inner carer. Ask yourself: "Would I offer what my inner critic has to say to a good friend?" (It has been said that if we treated our friends the way we treat ourselves, we'd have no friends left.) "Would I talk like this to a small child?"

If the answer is no, then ask: "What does my inner carer have to say about this? What would I say to a good friend or a small child?"

**Cherish it.** As I said earlier, our inner critic has our best intentions at heart – and I think it's fair to say that it ain't going anywhere anytime soon.

Will Self, author and TV personality, says: "You know that sickening feeling of inadequacy and over-exposure you feel when you look upon your own empurpled prose? Relax into the awareness that this ghastly sensation will never, ever leave you, no matter how successful and publicly lauded you become. It is intrinsic to the real business of writing and should be cherished."

Stephen Fry quotes an anecdote about a Don who was welcoming a new Fellow to Cambridge University: "We're delighted to have you here," said the Don, "But a word of advice. Don't try to be clever. We're all clever here. Only try to be kind, a little kind."

I suppose, to sum up, we too need to be kind – a little kind to ourselves.

PS – I'm just after realising that, having read through the final draft of this, I thought to myself: "God, I hope that's good enough." ✪