

## Module 8: Dealing with Inner Critic voices or dysfunctional beliefs

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Even in the module system of couple therapy, Inner Critics play a role. (We use the terms *dysfunctional beliefs* and *Inner Critic voices* synonymously.) They have their own field in the second row of the Mode Cycle Clashcard (see Figure 3 in Module 2).

For **Externalizers**, the outwardly directed critical voices are, so to speak, embedded in the displayed behavior on the front stage (the so-called Coping mode). They give outward direction to the initially diffuse anger rising from the body. For **Internalizers**, however, the critical voices are directed against the self. These voices create strong internal pressure and tension, burdening the relationship too. If someone is strongly stuck in ideas, judgments, or accusations, the therapy process is blocked and must be addressed.

**Note:** This module can also be applied to any other “intrusive third instance,” such as alcohol abuse, dominant (religious) values, constantly ringing smartphones, children sleeping in the marital bed, or the mother-in-law. The goal is always to strengthen the bond between the partners compared to their openness to the “third party.”

### A) Dealing with outwardly directed critics (externalizers)

**1. Externalizing the critic.** We interrupt gently, mark, validate, and sort out:

*“I notice that you’re taking quite a strong position right now. I wonder if those might be your Inner Critic voices speaking up. Of course, we all have them, but I get the impression they’re strongly influencing the process here. You know, we’re all sitting on different sides of the smartphone, with different perspectives and viewpoints. To move forward, I suggest we place those voices here on this chair.”* A separate chair is placed to the side for the critic voices (Step 1 in Fig. 1). Opposite, we place an empty chair for Tom (Step 2). Tom himself sits on an observer chair to the side, as in the empathy exercise in Module 5.

**2. Stimulating the critics.** *“Betty, please sit on this critic chair.”* (We sit next to her. Both look at Tom’s empty chair.) *“When you now look at Tom over there on the empty chair, and you’re completely honest with me—what do you, the critic voices, think about Tom? ... Does he really give enough to the relationship? ... Are you truly satisfied with him?”* In a sense, we encourage gossip in the presence of the partner (Step 3). This works surprisingly well, because the side-by-side seating and our blunt confidentiality activate the corresponding patterns. Once we dismantled the voices, we ask Betty to express them to the face of Tom’s chair: *“Ok, tell Tom to the face what kind of person he is!”*

**3. Feeling the effect.** Afterwards, as in the empathy exercise in Module 5, Betty must sit on Tom’s chair (we sit next to her) and close her eyes (Step 4). We repeat the critic’s sentences, and Betty should feel their toxic impact in her body and notice her action impulses.

Then all three stand up together, looking at the Critic voice chair and its effect on Tom (Step 5 in Fig. 2). *“Betty, what feeling arises in you when you see how the toxic Critic voices push Tom away and damage—or at least strain—the relationship?”* Ideally, Betty feels anger toward the voices. Then we ask Tom: *“And what do you feel when you hear those voices over there?”* He should also feel anger.

**4. Timeout for the critics.** *“Now, if both of you feel anger toward the Critic voices, then you’re united. How about giving those voices a timeout? What name would you like to give them—black crows, mosquitoes? Some even choose the name of their mother-in-law or an annoying aunt ... Whoever of you notices the voices may name them and send them into timeout. Agreed? Ideally, you give each other a brief hug before returning to everyday life.”* (Step 6)

**5. Fears about the future.** We handle these in the same way, e.g.: *“How can I ever trust him again?”* or *“How do I know he won’t do it again?”* Fears are also Critic voices (or dysfunctional beliefs) we don’t work with on the content level. We only look at the effects together. The same applies to strong (e.g., religious) convictions. These, too, are marked, validated, placed on the Critic chair, speaking up to the empty chair in the same way. Finally we ask what the vulnerable side on the back stage wants.

**Note:** Our working level is the relationship in the here and now, which we try to perceive, balance, and use as a starting point for actions that hopefully improve the relationship. We cannot work on the past or the future, only the present moment. Couples must be reminded of this and brought back into the therapy space again and again. In the sense of the *functional contextualism* of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), the focus is not on the content of statements but only on their effect—on oneself (with self-critical thoughts) or on the partner (with critical thoughts about them).

## **B) Dealing with self-directed critics (internalizers)**

If letting go of Critic voices or fears is difficult, we can work—in the partner’s presence—on the “toxic” effects of these voices on one’s own feelings. This follows the same procedure as the chair dialogue for internalizers in individual therapy (see: <https://www.schematherapy-roediger.org/index.php/resources/instructions>)).

**6. Giving the Inner Critics a voice.** Place a chair for the critic voices on the “back stage” (Step 1 in Fig. 3), with another chair opposite for the emotional side (Step 2). In online work, the patient’s chair can also be just pulled backward. Then the person sits on the critic chair (we sit beside them) and we ask: *“What do you honestly think about that Betty over there?”* To intensify the situation, we might ask: *“Does she really give everything? ... Is she truly a good partner? ... If not—who would want someone like that?”* Surprisingly often, patients spontaneously respond in a gossipy tone: *“Nobody!”* Betty must then clearly voice these sentences in direct speech to the “stupid Betty” on the other chair (Step 3 in Fig. 3).

**7. Feeling the effects.** Next, the person moves to the chair for the emotional side (we sit beside them), where they close their eyes and feel in their body the emotions triggered by these sentences (Step 4 in Fig. 3). Ideally, they feel the pressure created by the Critic voices. We then ask first about their action impulse, and then about the underlying need in their body. The goal is to feel the pressure or pain caused by these “toxic” voices.

**Note:** Because Critic voices are usually internalized voices of earlier attachment figures, this exercise strongly activates schemas. From here, a float-back into the childhood schema-forming scenes is often possible (as in Module 5 and 9). This deepens understanding of the origin of the Critic voices and makes distancing easier. In an analogy to the famous German fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel: The kids have to team up against the neglecting parents and get away for a better life.

**8. Observing from the adult position.** Finally, all stand together and observe from the adult perspective what feelings arise in their bodies when they see the effects of the toxic voices: *"Betty, we up here are the people your vulnerable emotional side down there needs. What feeling streams up from your body when you perceive how the toxic voices but that vulnerable side down and rub its face in the dirt?"* Hopefully anger! *"And what do you feel in your chest looking at that pittyful self?"* Hopefully compassion. *"And how about you, Tom?"* Sometimes looking at the vulnerable side as a 'child' helps. Especially after we connected the vulnerable state with a childhood experience in an imagery float back. Ideally, both Betty and Tom feel anger toward the Critic voices (Step 5 in Fig. 2) and compassion for the vulnerable side (Step 6 in Fig. 2).

The point of this intervention is to show the couple that on the "front stage" they are entangled in their RED legs. But if you step onto the "back stage" and separate the person into Critic voices and vulnerable emotional side, both can unite on their BLUE legs against the critic voices as a "common enemy."

**9. Discussing how to handle the voices.** At the adult level, the couple can decide how to deal with these voices. For example, the other partner might "show the timeout sign to the critic voices". At home, both can also try sending the voices into timeout and shifting into a more cooperative communication style—or postponing the issue to a couple dialogue. If necessary, individual sessions can continue working on the Critic voices, the underlying schemas, and a present-focused, mindful handling of them.

**Homework** (for both cases): Notice the critic voices and send them into timeout. Optionally, listen together to the session recording one evening and reflect again on the experience.

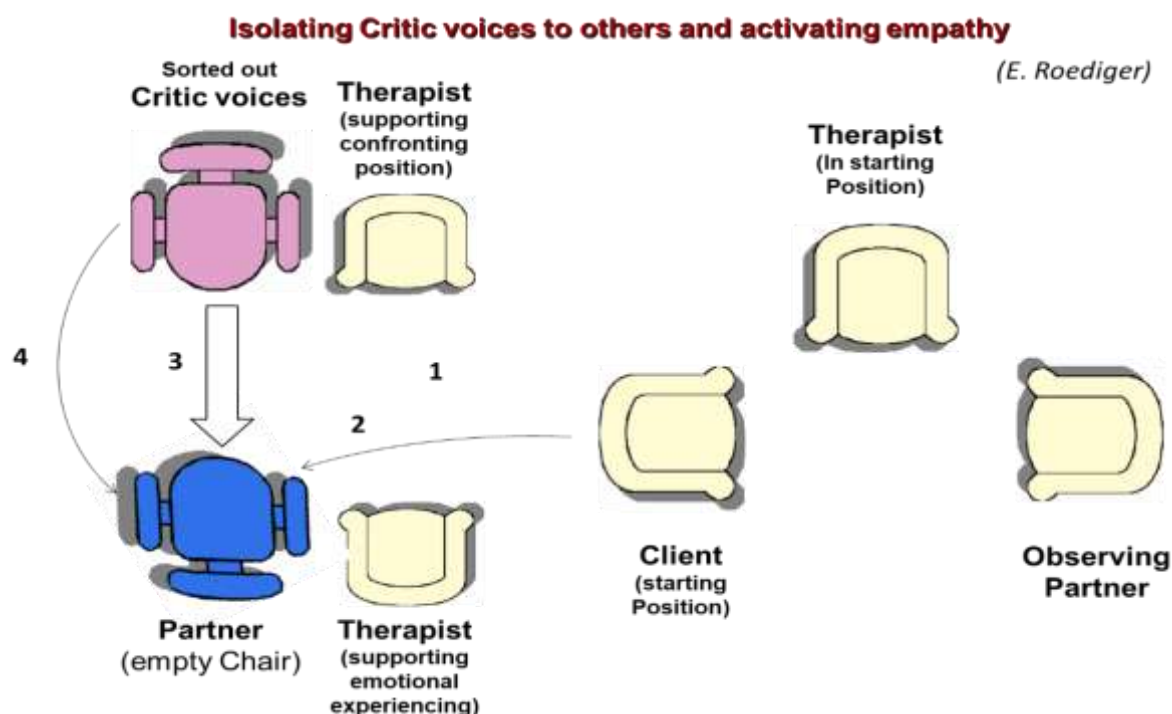


Figure 1

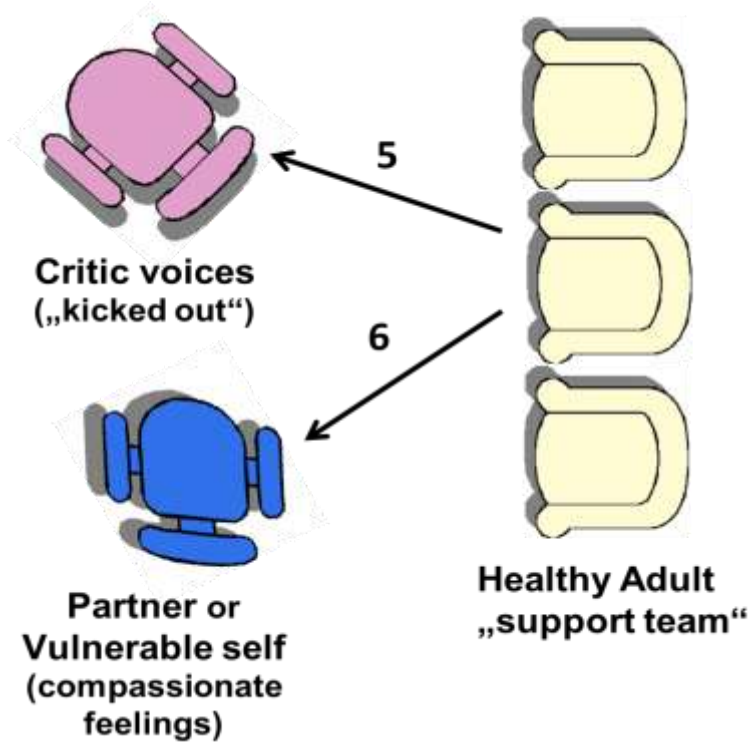


Figure 2

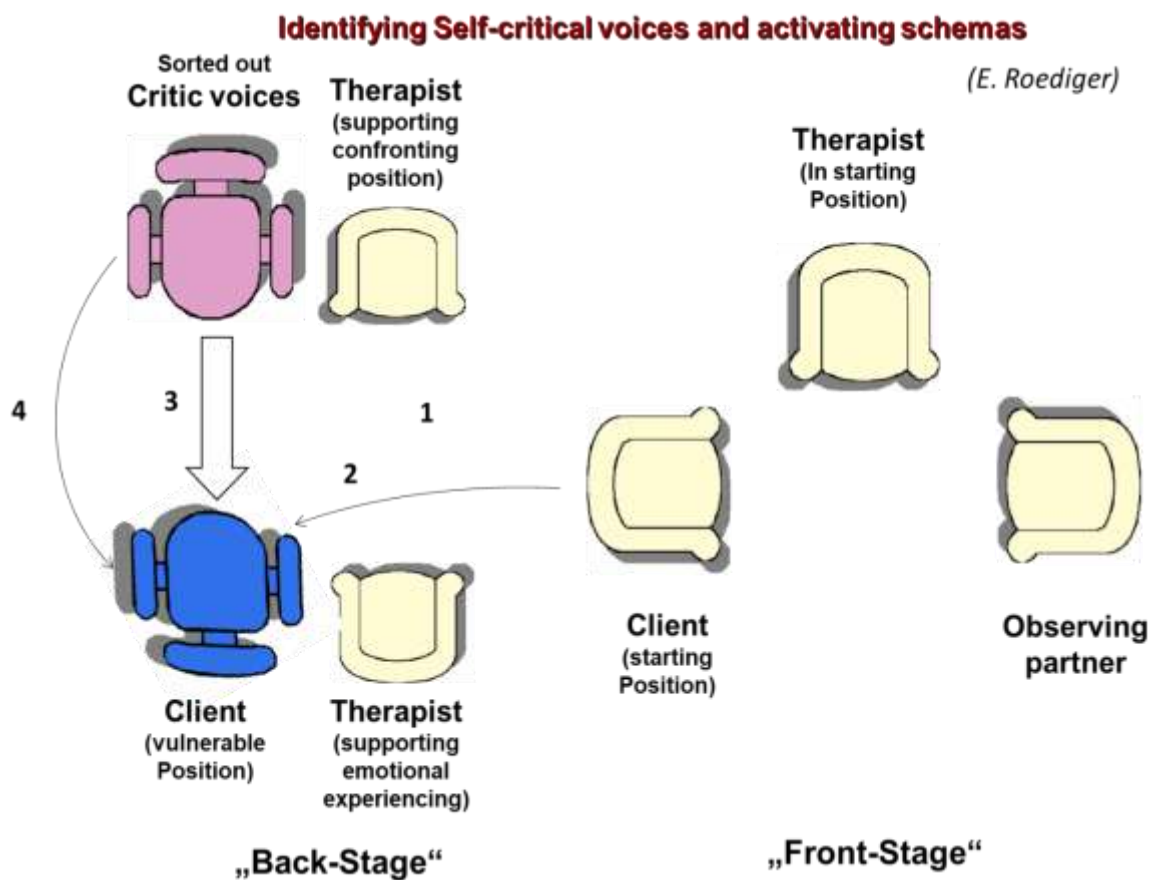


Figure 3: Dealing with self-directed Critic Voices