

Your Brain Is Fake News Media

Deep Dives · The Recovery Files

Silencing the Inner Critic & Rewriting Your Internal Broadcast

From Catastrophe to Clarity — The Recovery Files

Fake News · Distorted, biased, unchecked · Fair Reporting · Balanced, evidence-based, honest

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Each reading is followed by its check-in questions and exercises, in the same order as the app. Your scored results are shown in the app.

PART 1 OF 5 · READING

Your Brain Is Fake News Media

Imagine waking up every morning and turning on a news channel that exclusively broadcasts stories about how terrible you are, how everyone secretly dislikes you, how every situation you walk into will end in humiliation, and how every good thing in your life is about to fall apart. Now imagine that this channel runs 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with no commercials, no opposing viewpoints, and no fact-checking. The anchors sound authoritative. The graphics look professional. The "breaking news" alerts feel urgent and real. And the worst part is that this channel is not playing on a television across the room — it is playing inside your own skull.

This is what it is like to live with an unmanaged inner critic. Your brain has become your own personal fake news network, and it has been broadcasting catastrophic, distorted, fear-based stories about you and your life for so long that you have stopped questioning whether any of it is true. You just accept the broadcast as reality.

The inner critic is not your conscience. Your conscience helps you evaluate your behavior against your values — it says "I did something wrong" and motivates you to make it right. The inner critic says "I AM something wrong" and motivates you to hide, withdraw, numb, or give up. Your conscience is corrective. Your inner critic is corrosive. Learning to tell the difference is one of the most important skills you will develop in recovery.

For people with substance use disorders, the inner critic is not just an annoyance — it is a relapse engine. Every catastrophic prediction ("This will never work"), every perceived judgment ("Everyone in this meeting can tell I'm a fraud"), every replayed social failure ("I can't believe I said that — they must think I'm an idiot"), and every dismissed positive ("That compliment didn't mean anything") creates emotional pain. And emotional pain, in the absence of healthy coping skills, drives the person back to the one thing that reliably shut the broadcast off: substances.

Alcohol didn't just lower your inhibitions — it lowered the volume on the inner critic. Opioids didn't just kill physical pain — they numbed the relentless self-attack. Stimulants didn't just give you energy — they flooded your brain with enough dopamine to temporarily override the negativity. The substance was never really about getting high. For many people, it was about getting quiet. It was about silencing the most vicious news anchor you would ever encounter: the one who lives in your head and knows all your secrets.

Recovery removes the mute button. And when the substances are gone, the broadcast comes back louder than ever — often with new material. Now the inner critic has your addiction to use against you. "You're not just a failure — you're an addict. You're not just unlikeable — you're the person who destroyed their family for a substance. You don't deserve recovery. You don't deserve anything." The fake news network has upgraded its ammunition, and if you don't learn how to change the channel, it will talk you right back into relapse.

This intensive is about learning to recognize the broadcast for what it is — distorted, biased, unbalanced, and often completely fabricated — and developing the skills to become your own fact-checker, your own editor, and eventually your own rival network that broadcasts something closer to the truth.

Reflection Questions

1. How does the metaphor of "fake news media" describe the voice inside your head? What kind of stories does your inner critic broadcast most often?

2. Can you identify the difference between your conscience (corrective, values-based) and your inner critic (corrosive, identity-attacking)? Give an example of each from your recent experience.

3. How did substances function as a "mute button" for your inner critic? What happened to the volume when you entered recovery?

4. What new material has your inner critic added since you entered recovery? How does it weaponize your addiction history against you?

5. On a scale of 1 to 10, how loud is the fake news broadcast right now? What would turning it down to a 3 look like?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 1 OF 5

Part A: Negativity Bias & Positive Blindness

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. I dismiss compliments as politeness, pity, or manipulation rather than accepting them as genuine

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. When I receive mostly positive feedback with one critique, the critique is all I remember
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
3. I have difficulty identifying things that are going well in my life without prompting
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I tend to believe negative information about myself more readily than positive information
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I minimize accomplishments with phrases like "anyone could have done that" or "it wasn't a big deal"
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. I believe that good things are temporary but bad things are permanent
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I feel uncomfortable when things are going well because I am waiting for something bad to happen
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. My mental highlight reel consists almost entirely of failures, embarrassments, and regrets
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

Broadcast Log

Catching the Critic in Real Time

Purpose

You cannot change what you cannot see. This log trains you to catch the inner critic's broadcasts as they happen — to notice the thought rather than being consumed by it.

COMMON DISTORTION TYPES

Catastrophizing: Jumping to the worst possible outcome

Mind Reading: Assuming you know what others think

Fortune Telling: Predicting disaster without evidence

All-or-Nothing: "Always," "never," "everyone," "no one"

Disqualifying Positives: Dismissing good things as irrelevant

Emotional Reasoning: "I feel it, so it must be true"

Broadcast Entry #1

Situation: What was happening when the broadcast started?

The Broadcast: What exactly did the inner critic say? (Write it in quotes)

Distortion Type: Which cognitive distortion is this?

Emotional Impact: How did this make you feel? (Name emotion AND rate 1-10)

Balanced Rewrite: What would a fair reporter say about this situation?

Broadcast Entry #2

Situation: What was happening when the broadcast started?

The Broadcast: What exactly did the inner critic say? (Write it in quotes)

Distortion Type: Which cognitive distortion is this?

Emotional Impact: How did this make you feel? (Name emotion AND rate 1-10)

Balanced Rewrite: What would a fair reporter say about this situation?

Broadcast Entry #3

Situation: What was happening when the broadcast started?

The Broadcast: What exactly did the inner critic say? (Write it in quotes)

Distortion Type: Which cognitive distortion is this?

Emotional Impact: How did this make you feel? (Name emotion AND rate 1-10)

Balanced Rewrite: What would a fair reporter say about this situation?

Broadcast Entry #4

Situation: What was happening when the broadcast started?

The Broadcast: What exactly did the inner critic say? (Write it in quotes)

Distortion Type: Which cognitive distortion is this?

Emotional Impact: How did this make you feel? (Name emotion AND rate 1-10)

Balanced Rewrite: What would a fair reporter say about this situation?

Broadcast Entry #5

Situation: What was happening when the broadcast started?

The Broadcast: What exactly did the inner critic say? (Write it in quotes)

Distortion Type: Which cognitive distortion is this?

Emotional Impact: How did this make you feel? (Name emotion AND rate 1-10)

Balanced Rewrite: What would a fair reporter say about this situation?

Broadcast Entry #6

Situation: What was happening when the broadcast started?

The Broadcast: What exactly did the inner critic say? (Write it in quotes)

Distortion Type: Which cognitive distortion is this?

Emotional Impact: How did this make you feel? (Name emotion AND rate 1-10)

Balanced Rewrite: What would a fair reporter say about this situation?

Broadcast Entry #7

Situation: What was happening when the broadcast started?

The Broadcast: What exactly did the inner critic say? (Write it in quotes)

Distortion Type: Which cognitive distortion is this?

Emotional Impact: How did this make you feel? (Name emotion AND rate 1-10)

Balanced Rewrite: What would a fair reporter say about this situation?

YOUR EXERCISE

Name Your News Anchor

Externalizing the Inner Critic

Purpose

When the inner critic speaks, it feels like YOUR voice speaking YOUR truth. Externalizing the critic — giving it a name, a character, a visual identity — creates psychological distance. It becomes something talking AT you rather than something that IS you.

Your Inner Critic Character Profile

Give your inner critic a name.

e.g., "Doom Dan," "Negative Nancy," "The Prosecutor," "Channel Catastrophe"

What does this character look like?

What are they wearing? What's their expression?

What does the character's voice sound like?

Condescending? Panicked? Sarcastic? Loud?

What are this character's top 5 catchphrases?

1. "You always..." / 2. "Everyone thinks..." / 3. "You'll never..."

Where did this character come from? Whose voice was it originally?

Trace the origin story of this voice...

What is this character's weakness? What makes it lose power?

What deflates this voice?

Write a direct response to this character now that you can see it clearly.

Address the critic directly...

YOUR EXERCISE

Positive Data Collection

7 Days of Deliberately Noticing What the Critic Edits Out

Purpose

Your inner critic has a negativity bias — it automatically scans for threats, failures, and evidence of inadequacy. This exercise deliberately redirects your attention to positive data your brain normally filters out.

Day 1

A compliment, kind word, or positive feedback you received today

Something you accomplished or handled well today

A moment you genuinely enjoyed or found pleasant

A strength or positive quality you demonstrated today

How did the inner critic try to dismiss any of the above?

Day 2

A compliment, kind word, or positive feedback you received today

Something you accomplished or handled well today

A moment you genuinely enjoyed or found pleasant

A strength or positive quality you demonstrated today

How did the inner critic try to dismiss any of the above?

Day 3

A compliment, kind word, or positive feedback you received today

Something you accomplished or handled well today

A moment you genuinely enjoyed or found pleasant

A strength or positive quality you demonstrated today

How did the inner critic try to dismiss any of the above?

Day 4

A compliment, kind word, or positive feedback you received today

Something you accomplished or handled well today

A moment you genuinely enjoyed or found pleasant

A strength or positive quality you demonstrated today

How did the inner critic try to dismiss any of the above?

Day 5

A compliment, kind word, or positive feedback you received today

Something you accomplished or handled well today

A moment you genuinely enjoyed or found pleasant

A strength or positive quality you demonstrated today

How did the inner critic try to dismiss any of the above?

Day 6

A compliment, kind word, or positive feedback you received today

Something you accomplished or handled well today

A moment you genuinely enjoyed or found pleasant

A strength or positive quality you demonstrated today

How did the inner critic try to dismiss any of the above?

Day 7

A compliment, kind word, or positive feedback you received today

Something you accomplished or handled well today

A moment you genuinely enjoyed or found pleasant

A strength or positive quality you demonstrated today

How did the inner critic try to dismiss any of the above?

PART 2 OF 5 · READING

Catastrophizing: The Breaking News Alert That Never Stops

Catastrophizing is your brain's version of a breaking news alert — except every story is breaking, every story is a crisis, and none of them have been verified. It is the cognitive distortion of taking a situation and immediately projecting the absolute worst possible outcome, then treating that projected outcome as if it has already happened. You don't just worry about a problem — you mentally fast-forward through every domino falling until you have arrived at total ruin.

Your boss asks to speak with you. A healthy mind might think: "I wonder what this is about. Could be anything." The catastrophizing mind broadcasts: "You're getting fired. They found out you're incompetent. You'll lose your income, your insurance, your apartment. Your family will know you failed again. You might as well not even show up." By the time you walk into the meeting — which turns out to be about a routine scheduling question — you have already lived through an emotional apocalypse that never happened.

Catastrophizing operates through three interlocking mechanisms. First, there is probability overestimation — your brain dramatically inflates the likelihood of negative outcomes while ignoring the far more probable neutral or positive ones. Second, there is severity magnification — your brain inflates the consequences of a bad outcome far beyond what the evidence supports. Third, there is coping underestimation — even if the bad thing did happen, your brain tells you that you would be completely unable to handle it, ignoring every time in your life you have survived difficulty.

For people in recovery, catastrophizing is especially dangerous because the emotional response to the imagined catastrophe is just as real as the response to an actual one. Your body does not distinguish between a real threat and a vividly imagined one. When you catastrophize, your amygdala fires, cortisol floods your system, your heart rate increases, and your body enters fight-or-flight — all because of a story your brain invented. You are now experiencing genuine physiological distress in response to fiction. And that physiological distress is exactly the kind of discomfort that historically drove you to substances.

The antidote to catastrophizing is not positive thinking — it is realistic thinking. The goal is not to convince yourself that everything will be wonderful. The goal is to broaden the broadcast to include the full range of possible outcomes: worst case, best case, and — most importantly — the most likely case. Almost always, the most likely case is somewhere in the vast middle ground between "everything is perfect" and "everything is destroyed." Learning to live in that middle ground, rather than lurching between the extremes, is one of the foundational skills of sustainable recovery.

Reflection Questions

1. Describe a recent situation where you catastrophized. What was the trigger, what worst-case scenario did your brain produce, and what actually ended up happening?

2. Which of the three catastrophizing mechanisms is strongest for you: probability overestimation (it WILL go wrong), severity magnification (it will be DEVASTATING), or coping underestimation (I WON'T be able to handle it)?

3. Can you recall a time when the physiological distress from an imagined catastrophe drove you toward substance use? What was the imagined scenario, and did it ever actually occur?

4. What is the most likely outcome of a situation you are currently catastrophizing about? Not the best case, not the worst case — the most realistic, evidence-based scenario.

5. How would your daily experience change if you could reduce catastrophizing by even 50%? What would you do differently, attempt more boldly, or release from your worry?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 2 OF 5

Part A: Catastrophizing & Worst-Case Broadcasting

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. When something goes wrong, my mind immediately jumps to the worst possible outcome

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I often predict disaster before I have any evidence that things will actually go badly

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. A single mistake at work makes me believe I will be fired, exposed, or humiliated
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. If someone I care about does not respond to a message, I assume they are angry, hurt, or done with me
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I frequently use the words "always," "never," "everyone," and "no one" when describing my life
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. My inner voice treats minor setbacks as catastrophic, life-altering events
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I spend significant time and energy preparing for disasters that almost never happen
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I can take one piece of negative feedback and turn it into evidence that everything about me is a failure
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

The Fact-Check Worksheet

Subjecting Your Inner Critic to Journalistic Scrutiny

Purpose

Your inner critic has no fact-checker — it publishes whatever it wants, unchecked. This worksheet trains you to be your own fact-checker: examining the claim, demanding evidence, and issuing a correction when the story doesn't hold up.

Fact-Check #1

The Claim: What is the inner critic asserting? (Write as a news headline)

Evidence FOR the claim: What actual observable facts support this?

Evidence AGAINST the claim: What observable facts contradict this?

Alternative Explanations: What other explanations exist? (List at least 3)

Most Likely Reality: What is the most balanced, accurate version of events?

Fact-Check Rating: Verified / Partly True / Mostly False / Fabricated

Fact-Check #2

The Claim: What is the inner critic asserting? (Write as a news headline)

Evidence FOR the claim: What actual observable facts support this?

Evidence AGAINST the claim: What observable facts contradict this?

Alternative Explanations: What other explanations exist? (List at least 3)

Most Likely Reality: What is the most balanced, accurate version of events?

Fact-Check Rating: Verified / Partly True / Mostly False / Fabricated

Fact-Check #3

The Claim: What is the inner critic asserting? (Write as a news headline)

Evidence FOR the claim: What actual observable facts support this?

Evidence AGAINST the claim: What observable facts contradict this?

Alternative Explanations: What other explanations exist? (List at least 3)

Most Likely Reality: What is the most balanced, accurate version of events?

Fact-Check Rating: Verified / Partly True / Mostly False / Fabricated

Fact-Check #4

The Claim: What is the inner critic asserting? (Write as a news headline)

Evidence FOR the claim: What actual observable facts support this?

Evidence AGAINST the claim: What observable facts contradict this?

Alternative Explanations: What other explanations exist? (List at least 3)

Most Likely Reality: What is the most balanced, accurate version of events?

Fact-Check Rating: Verified / Partly True / Mostly False / Fabricated

Fact-Check #5

The Claim: What is the inner critic asserting? (Write as a news headline)

Evidence FOR the claim: What actual observable facts support this?

Evidence AGAINST the claim: What observable facts contradict this?

Alternative Explanations: What other explanations exist? (List at least 3)

Most Likely Reality: What is the most balanced, accurate version of events?

Fact-Check Rating: Verified / Partly True / Mostly False / Fabricated

YOUR EXERCISE

Evidence vs. Interpretation

Separating What Happened From What You Decided It Meant

Purpose

Evidence is what a security camera would record: observable, verifiable facts. Interpretation is the story your brain tells about those facts. Your inner critic specializes in disguising interpretation as evidence.

Situation #1

Describe the situation briefly

EVIDENCE (What a camera would record)

INTERPRETATION (The story your brain added)

How many other interpretations could explain the same evidence? List at least 3.

Situation #2

Describe the situation briefly

EVIDENCE (What a camera would record)

INTERPRETATION (The story your brain added)

How many other interpretations could explain the same evidence? List at least 3.

Situation #3

Describe the situation briefly

EVIDENCE (What a camera would record)

INTERPRETATION (The story your brain added)

How many other interpretations could explain the same evidence? List at least 3.

Situation #4

Describe the situation briefly

EVIDENCE (What a camera would record)

INTERPRETATION (The story your brain added)

How many other interpretations could explain the same evidence? List at least 3.

Situation #5

Describe the situation briefly

EVIDENCE (What a camera would record)

INTERPRETATION (The story your brain added)

How many other interpretations could explain the same evidence? List at least 3.

Situation #6

Describe the situation briefly

EVIDENCE (What a camera would record)

INTERPRETATION (The story your brain added)

How many other interpretations could explain the same evidence? List at least 3.

PART 3 OF 5 · READING

Living on Perceived Judgment: Mind Reading Without a License

One of the inner critic's most convincing broadcasts is its coverage of what other people are thinking about you. Your brain assigns itself the role of expert commentator on the private thoughts of every person you encounter, and its commentary is almost exclusively negative. "They think you're stupid." "She's only being nice because she feels sorry for you." "Everyone at the meeting noticed you stumbled over your words." "He looked at his phone while you were talking — he's bored by you." Your brain presents this commentary as expert analysis. In reality, it is pure fiction.

Cognitive behavioral therapy calls this "mind reading" — the assumption that you know what others are thinking without any external evidence. It is one of the most common and most destructive cognitive distortions, and it is almost always biased in one direction: negative. You never "mind read" that someone is thinking about how kind you are, how insightful your comment was, or how much they enjoy your company. The inner critic's mind reading is exclusively tuned to the criticism channel.

Perceived judgment creates a self-reinforcing loop. You believe people are judging you negatively, so you become guarded, withdrawn, or overly accommodating. This behavioral change makes your interactions less authentic, which creates a subtle awkwardness that others may actually notice. You then interpret their awareness of the awkwardness as confirmation of your original belief: "See? They DO think something is wrong with me." The prophecy fulfills itself — not because the original judgment was real, but because your response to the imagined judgment created the very dynamic you feared.

The work of recovering from perceived judgment is not about convincing yourself that nobody ever thinks about you negatively. Some people will. That is the human condition. The work is about recognizing that you do not have access to other people's private thoughts, that your brain's "expert commentary" on those thoughts is unreliable, and that organizing your life around imagined judgments is building your house on a foundation of fiction.

Reflection Questions

1. How much of your daily energy is spent managing what you believe other people think of you? If you could get that energy back, what would you do with it?

2. Give an example of a time when you were absolutely certain someone was judging you negatively, and you later discovered you were wrong. What did that experience teach you?

3. How does the self-reinforcing loop (imagine judgment → become guarded → create awkwardness → interpret awkwardness as proof) play out in your relationships?

4. Does your inner critic use your addiction history to validate present-tense perceived judgment? What specific "evidence" does it cite?

5. What is the difference between healthy accountability for past behavior and the distorted assumption that everyone is currently condemning you? Can you hold both at the same time?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 3 OF 5

Part A: Living on Perceived Judgment

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. I assume other people are judging me negatively even when I have no evidence of this

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I frequently believe people are talking about me behind my back

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I change my behavior, opinions, or appearance based on what I think others expect

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. I interpret neutral facial expressions as disapproval, disgust, or rejection

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. I avoid social situations because I believe I will be evaluated and found inadequate

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

6. I spend more time worrying about how I was perceived than actually experiencing the moment
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I need reassurance from others that they are not angry, disappointed, or secretly critical of me
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I believe that if people really knew me, they would reject me
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

Spotlight Effect Reality Test

How Much Are Others Really Watching?

Purpose

Research consistently shows that we overestimate how much other people notice our appearance, mistakes, and behavior by a factor of 2–3x. This exercise uses real-world experiments to test whether your spotlight is as bright as you believe.

Experiment 1: The Unnoticed Change

THE EXPERIMENT

Make a small change to your appearance. Track who notices.

Your Prediction: What does your inner critic predict will happen?

Actual Result: What actually happened?

Prediction vs. Reality Gap: What does this reveal?

Experiment 2: The Social Mistake Test

THE EXPERIMENT

Ask a trusted person what they remember from your last conversation. Compare to your inner critic replay.

Your Prediction: What does your inner critic predict will happen?

Actual Result: What actually happened?

Prediction vs. Reality Gap: What does this reveal?

Experiment 3: The Attention Reversal

THE EXPERIMENT

In your next group setting, try to recall exactly what each person was wearing and any mistakes they made. How much did YOU notice about THEM?

Your Prediction: What does your inner critic predict will happen?

Actual Result: What actually happened?

Prediction vs. Reality Gap: What does this reveal?

Experiment 4: The Ancient History Test

THE EXPERIMENT

Ask three people you trust: "What do you remember about our last conversation?"

Your Prediction: What does your inner critic predict will happen?

Actual Result: What actually happened?

Prediction vs. Reality Gap: What does this reveal?

Experiment 5: The Embarrassment Survey

THE EXPERIMENT

Think of something embarrassing you did around someone. Ask them (if safe) if they remember it.

Your Prediction: What does your inner critic predict will happen?

Actual Result: What actually happened?

Prediction vs. Reality Gap: What does this reveal?

PART 4 OF 5 · READING

Playing the Tape Back: The Highlight Reel of Shame

Your brain has a highlight reel, but it is not made up of highlights. It is made up of every embarrassing comment, every awkward silence, every visible mistake, every social misstep, and every moment when you were less than you wanted to be. And your inner critic plays this reel on repeat — not to help you learn, but to keep you small.

"Playing the tape back" is the compulsive mental habit of rewinding social interactions and scanning them for evidence of failure. You leave a conversation and immediately begin the review: "Why did I say that? That joke didn't land. They looked away when I was talking. I shouldn't have brought that up. I talked too much. I didn't talk enough. I sounded stupid. They probably think I'm an idiot." This is not reflection — it is prosecution. You are not reviewing the tape to learn; you are reviewing it to convict.

What makes the replay so distorted is selective editing. Your brain does not replay the entire interaction. It edits out the laughter, the connection, the moments when someone leaned in because they were interested, the compliment you received, the genuine smile. It extracts only the moments that can be used as evidence against you and plays those on a loop.

The selective replay is closely connected to the "spotlight effect" — the well-documented cognitive bias in which we dramatically overestimate how much other people notice and remember our behavior. Research consistently shows that other people notice our social mistakes far less than we believe, remember them far less vividly, and judge them far less harshly.

For people in recovery, the replay habit is particularly damaging because it creates a constant baseline of shame. Shame is not guilt — guilt says "I did something bad" and motivates change. Shame says "I AM something bad" and motivates hiding, isolation, and numbing.

The antidote is not to stop reviewing your interactions altogether — reflective awareness is a recovery strength. The antidote is to stop the prosecution and start the journalism. A good journalist reports the full story: what went well, what was neutral, what could improve, and what context matters. Learning to review your experiences with journalistic fairness rather than prosecutorial bias is a skill that fundamentally changes your relationship with yourself and with others.

Reflection Questions

1. After your most recent social interaction, what did your mental replay focus on? Was it balanced, or did it edit out positives and magnify negatives?

2. Name a social "failure" you have been replaying. Now honestly assess: how likely is it that the other person remembers this as vividly as you do?

3. How does the constant replay contribute to shame rather than growth? Can you tell the difference between reviewing to learn and reviewing to punish?

4. What would a "journalistic" review of yesterday look like? What went well? What was neutral? What could you adjust? What context matters?

5. If you could erase one memory from your shame highlight reel, which would it be? What would change about how you see yourself without it?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 4 OF 5

Part A: Overcritical Social Replay

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. After social interactions, I replay conversations in my head searching for mistakes I made

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I fixate on one awkward thing I said and ignore everything that went well

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I assume other people noticed and remember my social mistakes as vividly as I do

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. I cringe at memories of things I said or did years ago as if they happened today

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. I mentally edit conversations after the fact, wishing I had said something different

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

6. I avoid speaking up in groups because I pre-judge my contribution as stupid or irrelevant
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I interpret silence or lack of laughter as evidence that I failed socially
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. Replaying social interactions keeps me awake at night or distracts me during the day
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

Tape Rewind — Full Story Replay

Replaying With Journalistic Fairness, Not Prosecutorial Bias

Purpose

Your inner critic replays a selectively edited version of events. This exercise forces a complete replay — including the parts the critic edits out.

Full Replay #1

The Event: Describe the interaction your inner critic has been replaying

The Critic's Edit: What does the inner critic emphasize?

The Deleted Scenes: What went WELL that the critic edited out? (List at least 3)

The Neutral Moments: What was completely ordinary that the critic ignores?

The Full Story Edit: Write a complete, balanced account as a fair journalist would

After writing the full story, how does your emotional rating change? (Rate before and after, 1-10)

Full Replay #2

The Event: Describe the interaction your inner critic has been replaying

The Critic's Edit: What does the inner critic emphasize?

The Deleted Scenes: What went WELL that the critic edited out? (List at least 3)

The Neutral Moments: What was completely ordinary that the critic ignores?

The Full Story Edit: Write a complete, balanced account as a fair journalist would

After writing the full story, how does your emotional rating change? (Rate before and after, 1-10)

Full Replay #3

The Event: Describe the interaction your inner critic has been replaying

The Critic's Edit: What does the inner critic emphasize?

The Deleted Scenes: What went WELL that the critic edited out? (List at least 3)

The Neutral Moments: What was completely ordinary that the critic ignores?

The Full Story Edit: Write a complete, balanced account as a fair journalist would

After writing the full story, how does your emotional rating change? (Rate before and after, 1-10)

Full Replay #4

The Event: Describe the interaction your inner critic has been replaying

The Critic's Edit: What does the inner critic emphasize?

The Deleted Scenes: What went WELL that the critic edited out? (List at least 3)

The Neutral Moments: What was completely ordinary that the critic ignores?

The Full Story Edit: Write a complete, balanced account as a fair journalist would

After writing the full story, how does your emotional rating change? (Rate before and after, 1-10)

Full Replay #5

The Event: Describe the interaction your inner critic has been replaying

The Critic's Edit: What does the inner critic emphasize?

The Deleted Scenes: What went WELL that the critic edited out? (List at least 3)

The Neutral Moments: What was completely ordinary that the critic ignores?

The Full Story Edit: Write a complete, balanced account as a fair journalist would

After writing the full story, how does your emotional rating change? (Rate before and after, 1-10)

YOUR EXERCISE

Narrative Inventory

The Stories You Tell About Yourself

Purpose

Individual distorted thoughts are like individual news stories. But underneath those stories is an editorial narrative — a master story about who you are. This inventory makes those master narratives visible so you can begin to revise them.

My Self-Worth Narrative

What story does your inner critic tell about your fundamental worth as a person?

What evidence does the critic cite to support this narrative?

What evidence does the critic deliberately OMIT?

Write a REVISED narrative that accounts for the full picture — struggles AND strengths

My Social Belonging Narrative

What story does the critic tell about your place among other people?

What evidence does the critic cite to support this narrative?

What evidence does the critic deliberately OMIT?

Write a REVISED narrative that accounts for the full picture — struggles AND strengths

My Competence Narrative

What story does the critic tell about your abilities and intelligence?

What evidence does the critic cite to support this narrative?

What evidence does the critic deliberately OMIT?

Write a REVISED narrative that accounts for the full picture — struggles AND strengths

My Lovability Narrative

What story does the critic tell about whether you deserve love?

What evidence does the critic cite to support this narrative?

What evidence does the critic deliberately OMIT?

Write a REVISED narrative that accounts for the full picture — struggles AND strengths

My Recovery Narrative

What story does the critic tell about your capacity to recover and change?

What evidence does the critic cite to support this narrative?

What evidence does the critic deliberately OMIT?

Write a REVISED narrative that accounts for the full picture — struggles AND strengths

My Future Narrative

What story does the critic tell about what your future holds?

What evidence does the critic cite to support this narrative?

What evidence does the critic deliberately OMIT?

Write a REVISED narrative that accounts for the full picture — struggles AND strengths

PART 5 OF 5 · READING

Changing the Channel: Rewriting Your Internal Broadcast

The inner critic did not install itself overnight, and it will not be dismantled overnight. You have been listening to this broadcast for years — possibly decades — and the neural pathways it has carved are deep. But neuroplasticity is on your side. Every time you catch a distorted broadcast, challenge it with evidence, and replace it with something more balanced, you are literally rewiring your brain.

The first skill is cognitive catching — learning to notice when the inner critic is broadcasting. You don't hear it as a voice — you hear it as truth. The first step is to externalize it: give it a name, give it a character, treat it as a separate entity that is talking AT you rather than a voice that IS you.

The second skill is evidence examination. When the inner critic makes a claim — "Everyone at that party thought you were boring" — you subject that claim to journalistic scrutiny. What is the actual evidence? You are not trying to replace the negative thought with a positive one. You are demanding the same standard of evidence you would demand from any other news source: show me the facts.

The third skill is balanced broadcasting. Once you have caught the distortion and examined the evidence, you create a more balanced statement. Not positive spin. Not empty affirmation. Balance. "Everyone thought I was boring" becomes "I had some conversations that felt natural and some that felt awkward. The awkward ones don't erase the good ones, and one evening doesn't define my social worth."

The fourth skill is compassionate commentary. Imagine if a friend came to you and said everything your inner critic says to you: "I'm such an idiot. Everyone hates me. I'll never get this right." You would never agree with them. You would offer perspective, context, encouragement, and kindness. The work here is learning to offer yourself the same quality of commentary you would automatically offer someone you care about.

The fifth skill is the most advanced: narrative editing. Over time, you learn to notice not just individual distorted thoughts but the overarching story your inner critic has constructed about who you are. Recovery is, at its core, a narrative revision project. You entered treatment with a story about yourself that had been written primarily by your addiction and your inner critic. The work of recovery is to take the pen back.

Reflection Questions

1. If you were to name your inner critic as a separate character, what would you call it? What does it look like, sound like, and how does it operate?

2. Take a current thought from your inner critic and apply evidence examination: what is the claim, what is the actual evidence for it, and what evidence does the critic conveniently ignore?

3. Write a "balanced broadcast" for a situation your inner critic recently distorted. Include what went well, what was neutral, and what could improve — all with equal weight.

4. If your best friend told you the things your inner critic tells you, what would you say to them? Now write that response to yourself.

5. What is the overarching narrative your inner critic has constructed about who you are? Write it out. Then write the fuller, more honest narrative that accounts for your complexity.

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 5 OF 5

Part B: Reframing & Balanced Thinking Capacity

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. I can catch myself catastrophizing and consciously consider more realistic outcomes

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I can recognize that my perception of what others think is often a projection, not a fact

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I have people in my life who offer a balanced perspective when my inner critic is loud

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. I can identify cognitive distortions (all-or-nothing thinking, mind reading, fortune telling) when they occur

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. I practice self-compassion when I make mistakes rather than attacking myself

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

6. I can name specific things that are going well in my recovery and my life

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

7. I have strategies for interrupting the negative replay loop after social interactions

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

8. I am learning to treat my inner critic as one voice among many rather than as the voice of truth

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

Compassionate Commentary Practice

Treating Yourself Like Someone You Care About

Purpose

You would never say to a friend what your inner critic says to you. This exercise makes that gap visible and teaches you to extend the same quality of compassion inward that you automatically extend outward.

You made a mistake at work and your boss noticed

What would the inner critic say to YOU? (Write it verbatim)

What would you say to a FRIEND describing this same situation?

Now write that same compassionate response TO YOURSELF. Use "I" language.

You said something awkward in a group conversation

What would the inner critic say to YOU? (Write it verbatim)

What would you say to a FRIEND describing this same situation?

Now write that same compassionate response TO YOURSELF. Use "I" language.

Someone you care about seems distant or cold toward you

What would the inner critic say to YOU? (Write it verbatim)

What would you say to a FRIEND describing this same situation?

Now write that same compassionate response TO YOURSELF. Use "I" language.

You relapsed or came close to relapsing

What would the inner critic say to YOU? (Write it verbatim)

What would you say to a FRIEND describing this same situation?

Now write that same compassionate response TO YOURSELF. Use "I" language.

You looked at yourself in the mirror and felt ashamed

What would the inner critic say to YOU? (Write it verbatim)

What would you say to a FRIEND describing this same situation?

Now write that same compassionate response TO YOURSELF. Use "I" language.

You compared yourself to someone who seems to have it all together

What would the inner critic say to YOU? (Write it verbatim)

What would you say to a FRIEND describing this same situation?

Now write that same compassionate response TO YOURSELF. Use "I" language.

YOUR EXERCISE**Inner Critic → Recovery Risk Map**

How the Fake News Broadcast Threatens Your Recovery

Purpose

The inner critic is not just uncomfortable — it is clinically dangerous. Every major recovery challenge has an inner critic component that, when left unchecked, increases relapse risk.

Cravings & Urges**THE CRITIC'S ROLE**

The critic provides the emotional pain that cravings promise to relieve: "You're a failure, you'll never change — might as well use"

BENEFIT OF CHALLENGING

Catching the critic removes the emotional fuel from the craving, revealing it as a thought pattern rather than a need

When have YOU experienced the inner critic fueling this specific recovery challenge? What did the broadcast sound like?

What specific strategy from this intensive could you use to challenge the critic in this situation?

Isolation & Withdrawal**THE CRITIC'S ROLE**

The critic convinces you that people are judging you, don't want you around, or will eventually reject you — so why bother?

BENEFIT OF CHALLENGING

Challenging perceived judgment opens the door to connection that the critic has been barricading

When have YOU experienced the inner critic fueling this specific recovery challenge? What did the broadcast sound like?

What specific strategy from this intensive could you use to challenge the critic in this situation?

Shame Spirals

THE CRITIC'S ROLE

The critic turns every mistake into identity: "I did something bad" becomes "I AM something bad"

BENEFIT OF CHALLENGING

Separating behavior from identity allows for accountability without destruction

When have YOU experienced the inner critic fueling this specific recovery challenge? What did the broadcast sound like?

What specific strategy from this intensive could you use to challenge the critic in this situation?

Sleep Disruption

THE CRITIC'S ROLE

The critic runs the replay reel at 2 AM: every mistake, every embarrassment, every predicted catastrophe

BENEFIT OF CHALLENGING

Recognizing nighttime rumination as the critic's broadcast schedule allows you to change the channel

When have YOU experienced the inner critic fueling this specific recovery challenge? What did the broadcast sound like?

What specific strategy from this intensive could you use to challenge the critic in this situation?

Low Motivation

THE CRITIC'S ROLE

The critic tells you that effort is pointless: "It won't work. You'll fail. You always do. Why try?"

BENEFIT OF CHALLENGING

Challenging the fortune-telling distortion creates space for action even when motivation is low

When have YOU experienced the inner critic fueling this specific recovery challenge? What did the broadcast sound like?

What specific strategy from this intensive could you use to challenge the critic in this situation?

Comparison & Envy

THE CRITIC'S ROLE

The critic runs a highlight reel of everyone else's success against your lowlight reel

BENEFIT OF CHALLENGING

Recognizing the unfair comparison (their highlights vs. your behind-the-scenes) restores perspective

When have YOU experienced the inner critic fueling this specific recovery challenge? What did the broadcast sound like?

What specific strategy from this intensive could you use to challenge the critic in this situation?

The Recovery Files

Embrace, Empower & Evolve · Recovery Made Simple

Sheamus Moran, CSC-AD