

Dealing with Criticism

What Criticism Is

No one enjoys having another person criticize his or her actions, work or behavior. Criticism hurts, even when it might be justified. In this lesson, you will learn two very important skills. First, you will learn how to receive criticism so that it does not affect you in a negative way. Then you will learn to offer constructive criticism to friends and co-workers in a way that helps them learn and improve.

Criticism may be defined as the unfavorable evaluation of a person, their actions, or their behavior. In other words, someone lets you know that they think your performance or actions fall short. Receiving criticism – having someone point out our faults – is not a pleasant experience. However, it can be helpful to us if we know how to take it in a positive way.

When criticism is given to help someone improve, it is called **constructive criticism**. It is easier for us to handle criticism if it is given in a constructive or positive manner. We are less likely to be hurt or angry if we can see how to improve as a result of criticism. It also hurts less if we see that the person criticizing us has good intentions. We are more likely to listen to criticism when it is offered in a constructive way.

A New Way of Looking at Criticism

Everyone will be criticized for something at one time or another. It is important to understand why we criticize others and why others might criticize us. We also need to understand why we do not like to be criticized. Lastly, learning some specific ways to handle criticism will help us get along and perform well.

This lesson will teach you to deal with criticism without damaging your self-esteem or confidence. When people are criticized, they sometimes view it negatively. They see it as a form of punishment. For this reason, people often react to criticism with very strong emotions. It is human nature to dislike criticism, even when it may be deserved. When we believe it is unjustified or undeserved, we react even more negatively.

Criticism can be easier to take if we view it as an opportunity to improve our skills and become better people. If we keep this benefit in mind, we might even ask for criticism or feedback.

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Effects of Criticism

People may react to criticism, deserved or not, with very strong emotions. Some people cannot accept any criticism without getting their feelings hurt. Often, they will deny criticism and respond by attacking the person who is criticizing them. Other people may take criticism without a word. Their feelings may be so deeply hurt by it that they don't respond at all. A person who is very sensitive to criticism often reacts in these ways.

In addition to aggressive reactions or deep hurt, people who receive criticism may feel anger, resentment, embarrassment, worthlessness, or a sense of failure.

Criticism can affect people in three general ways:

1. **Criticism can be destructive.** Destructive criticism is criticism that hurts people. It puts them down, and does not serve a useful purpose. The following statements are examples of destructive criticism:
 - "You act stupid all the time."
 - "Your hair looks weird."
 - "You dress like a slob."
 - "You can't do anything right."

The examples above are general, destructive comments. First, they criticize the person instead of their behavior or actions. Second, they are too general and do not identify specific areas of weakness. Finally, they do not offer or lead to ways the listener can improve. It is difficult to deal with destructive criticism. When we hear this kind of criticism, we are more likely to avoid that person or react strongly toward them.

2. **Criticism can be constructive.** Constructive criticism is positive criticism. Its purpose is to correct the behavior of the person being criticized. Those who offer constructive criticism have good intentions. This positive criticism is called constructive because it suggests ways the person can improve. It is specific and does not put down or blame the person. The goal is not just to help a person improve his or her skills or performance, but also to remove barriers between people.

Constructive criticism can improve communication among people working together and this leads to better problem solving. Even so, unless people know how to give and receive constructive criticism, criticism may be seen as punishment and cause negative reactions.

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Sometimes, you might be the one giving criticism to another person. When you are giving constructive criticism, it is a good idea to begin by stating the person's good points. For example, "I appreciate that you never miss work." Then tell them how they can improve. "... But you are taking too many breaks during the day." This strategy sets a person up for a positive reaction. It will make him or her more likely to listen and to see your feedback as an opportunity to act in a positive way. The following statements are examples of constructive criticism:

"Your voice has a lovely tone to it. Please sing louder so that everyone will be able to hear you clearly."

"Congratulations! You spelled 17 out of 20 words correctly in this week's lesson. Next time, study the rules for words ending in silent 'e' more carefully. If you do, I'm sure you will score 100% on your next test."

3. **Criticism may have no effect at all.** People may simply pay no attention to it. This is a negative reaction to criticism because the problem or condition addressed by the criticism will continue. The behavior or performance will not change for the better, and the person will not get the opportunity to improve. Therefore, whether you are giving or receiving criticism, it is important to recognize and evaluate the basis of the feedback and its intended goal. Why am I giving (or receiving) criticism? Am I giving (or receiving) criticism that is constructive?

A Close Look at Destructive Criticism

People who regularly engage in destructive criticism are not concerned with correcting a problem. They are usually more concerned with their own personal purposes. People who attack other people are often not successful in working with others to solve problems. People give destructive criticism for four main reasons:

1. **Some people criticize others out of resentment.** Tom is a new student who has just joined Juanita's study group. Juanita criticizes Tom openly in front of other members of the group. She says, "You talk too much and you are too loud. I can't concentrate with you here." Why did Juanita criticize Tom? Juanita places great value on her study group, and feels very close to her study partners. She does not want newcomers to join her close-knit study group, because she is unsure of how it might affect her place in the group. Therefore, she sees Tom as a threat and resents his presence, even though he's done nothing wrong.

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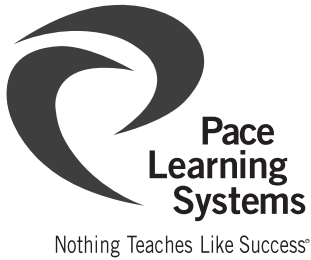
2. **Sometimes a person criticizes another out of jealousy.** Sally may tell Mandy, "I don't like that showy outfit you are wearing!" She does not criticize Mandy because she hates the outfit. She criticizes her because she wishes she had one like it, but she cannot afford to buy one.
3. **Some people criticize others to make themselves feel better.** They want to look better in the eyes of others. These people struggle with their own self-esteem and may have negative feelings about themselves. What these people mean when they criticize is "I'm better than you are," or, "You're not as good as I am." These people make themselves feel better by making someone else feel bad! This is a major source of destructive criticism.
4. **Sometimes people have not learned the skills of constructive criticism.** Many people are unskilled and know of no other way than to be negative and to put people down. They may think this is the only way to express their criticism. They may also assume that the other person requires harsh feedback.

Looking Closer at Constructive Criticism

The purpose of constructive criticism is to help people improve a deficit, weakness, or skill. This type of criticism has a good purpose and positive effects. It is not to make one person look good at the expense of another.

When a teacher points out misspelled words to a student, it is not to make the student feel stupid. The teacher wants the student to improve their skill and learn to spell the words correctly. A supervisor corrects a worker to prevent another mistake, not to make the worker feel like a failure. A friend may tell you that you are too pushy in certain situations. Your friend wants you to improve your behavior and make more friends that you both can enjoy seeing.

All these examples of constructive criticism are intended to help people work on something. Those who are criticized may or may not be aware they need this help. Constructive criticism comes from sources who are interested in the well-being of the person being criticized. The following guidelines can help you deal with criticism.



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