

## Constructive Criticism

Someone says to you, "I would like to give you some constructive criticism." What is your first response? Is it, "Wow! I am really looking forward to hearing this!" or is it, "Ouch!"?

*Constructive criticism* is actually an oxymoron that gives a confusing positive and negative message simultaneously. It is the pain of the negative that is stimulated and not the pleasure of the positive. For this reason, I believe that constructive criticism cannot be given; it can only be received.

Receiving criticism and transforming it into something constructive is a process we must do for ourselves. The power to transform criticism into constructive criticism is greatly dependent on the degree to which we have been taught self-respect and have experienced feeling good about ourselves. If we grow up in a very critical environment that diminishes our self-esteem and leaves us feeling ashamed, our confidence in our power to transform criticism is greatly weakened. We may not even realize that we have the power to transform criticism.

In its most toxic form, criticism is delivered with a tone and words that shame and condemn. Criticism can strike us with piercing pain that leaves us depleted and demoralized. If we are already critical of ourselves, even the most benign criticism can cause significant pain. Regardless of how criticism is given, it is ultimately in our power to process it and make it into something constructive rather than destructive.

Making a criticism constructive is accomplished by cognitively setting aside the negative feelings and examining the content of the message. Are there suggestions or observations that make sense and offer me a different way of doing what I am doing? Do I need more information about what the person is telling me, and can I hear the information without being defensive? Even if I don't like what I am hearing, do I trust this person's motive for giving me criticism?

If we can pursue criticism with the desire to learn and possibly change and grow, then we can make it constructive. However, we must learn to listen carefully to both the feelings and the content of a criticism. If we determine that the motive is simply to hurt us, then it is really about the one delivering the message and not about us.

It is important to remember that we cannot really give constructive criticism, and we need to appreciate the difficult transformation process others can have even when our suggestions or critiques are caring and well intentioned.

