Micro-Progressions And Re-Parenting The Inner Critic

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progression (n.)
late 14c., "action of moving from one condition to another," from Old French progression and directly from Latin progression (nominative progressio) "a going forward, advancement, growth, increase," noun of action from past participle stem of progredi "go forward," from pro- "forward" (see pro-) + gradi "to step, walk," from gradus "step"

*Credit: I heard someone use the term micro-progressions in an interview about something a while back and began chewing on it in my mind, but I didn't write the source down at the time and totally can't find it. If you have heard this term or know who to credit it to, let me know! :)

"The Slower You Go, The Faster You Get There."
That's what my last therapist said to me during our second session together. My reaction? "WTF!?" I just wanted to know what to do to fix me. Just tell me. Because, like *every* trauma survivor I have ever met, I am hard working and desperate to figure out how to stop suffering. That statement, about going slow and getting there faster, really angered me: I HAD ALREADY GIVEN 36 YEARS OF MY LIFE TO TRAUMA. Go slow, he says.

But he was right. Painfully so.

Because for those of us with complex trauma, big healing happens with lots of smaller inglorious victories. Like realizing you just asked for something you wanted, got it and it felt ok to receive it. Like feeling anxiety rise up in your chest and being able to talk yourself through it. Like recognizing that self-harm is a valid coping skill for unbearable overwhelm and having a profound sense of compassion wash over you. Like speaking up to your boss/lover/parent/other and saying your truth and then letting them deal with it. Complex trauma taught us a bunch of nasty crap that we are in a daily battle to survive, recognize, tear down and replace. And we do a ton of labor in this process. Hence the desire, the
desperate desire, to know how to fix it. The isolation can be excruciating. I once believed that if my anxiety could go away, that I would be 'normal,' 'healed,' 'healthy,' .... 'lovable.' But, it hasn't been the “healing” of anxiety that is helping me eradicate some of the deeper lies of the trauma, it has been the slow overturning of ways of being in my body-self that are extractive and abusive which lessens the load my body is carrying so I have more energy to withstand exploring the painful deeper wounds at the core. Slowly, the amount of energy going into physiological survival gets turned over into energy that can be rerouted into healthier or more restorative patterns.

The lies trauma instills in our body-selves build rigid walls. They build structures meant to keep us small and sheltered. Lies such as:

- we are responsible for the emotional well being of everyone around us no matter what our needs are
- we are not allowed to occupy our bodies, be who we are, feel our own boundaries
- we are responsible for inciting the abuses against us
- feelings, vulnerability, attachment, love and safety are illusions and to be mistrusted/avoided
- we deserve how we were and are treated when it is painful and that we are being conned when it is loving
- There are cultural lies which, for trauma survivors, often reinforce and deepen the wounds of the personal traumas:
  - your worth is you productivity
  - there is such a thing as normal
  - your body is a machine and if it goes wrong you need fixing, deserved it, aren't doing enough ________
  - you are the sole entity responsible for your well being
- you deserve more power, visibility, and safety if you are: whiter, more male, more hetero, able-bodied, rational, neurotypical, financially endowed and/or monotheistic

All these lies build rigid structures within us that the inner critic uses as parameters for keeping us "safe." The inner-critic's definition of safe that is.

They become the building within, the walls which we slam against when we are trying to heal, change and live up to our own high expectations of ourselves. Finding ourselves repeating patterns, even when we can see them is a sure sign we have hit one of the walls built inside by trauma.

The cement is the legacy of our survival techniques. A monument to it. The rigid structures within us were only a useful survival tool during the onslaught of abuse. Wouldn't it be nice if there was an automatic demolition fairy that came to tear down these awful structures as soon as the threat has passed as opposed to us survivors navigating these ingrained patterns of survival in a culture which keeps puiking up the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" myth? The inner critic LOVES that myth. But for now, let's just use it as a solid metaphor: trauma builds structures of lies within us and every day we are working to tear those fuckers down. My herbal practice is dedicated to the demolition of these structures. One piece at a time.

I went into my therapist's office wanting a big ass Las Vegas style demolition. BOOM! I'm ready! Let's tear this down!

But it isn't dynamite that brings the major pieces of that building down. It continues to be daily micro-progressions. We had to start with the fact that a building was even there, built within my own inner landscape (because I believed it was all 'character flaws'). And then look at it. And then go inside. And then take inventory of its immensity. And then look at
what equipment I might need to chip away at it...and where I could get the equipment...and what was the safest way to bring it down without destroying the ecosystem I wanted to keep around me, and what I would do with the rubble...and what I would build (if anything) in its absence. It takes time. Time I didn't feel I had and time I resented having to devote to the process. Except that progressively, I was seeing changes....

**Micro-changes.**

These make a more sustainable difference than dynamite. I have a powerful inner critic who would happily rebuild any internal structures I blow up quickly. I have to teach this aggressive and hostile part of myself new things as I tear down the very structures it calls home. The inner critic LOVES these concrete lies and borders and boundaries. They are firm, they give us a sense of power and control and edges we can feel, the limits we can identify. The inner critic loves security, so, a sudden big open field of emotional flowers and sky where once a concrete building stood is nothing short of terror-inducing to the inner critic: "HOW CAN I SHIELD YOU IN THIS DAMN BED OF FLOWERS VULNERABLE TO THE OPEN SKY?" it screams at me through my neurophysiology.

The inner critic likes the predictable forms of our concrete trauma structures, it thinks in dualism: this is good, that is bad. You are good, you are bad. It likes to force our relationship to ourselves to be very linear and consequence oriented:

- "If I can just get good enough at_____ I will deserve______."  
- "I am bad/ugly/worthless and that will change if I just work/look like/become ____"  
- "If I didn't have so many needs I could be there for others and worthy of_____"  
- "I need to change _____, I hate myself."  
- "I should be/do/say ______ and I don't because I am bad/awful/lazy."  
- "If I can know all the details and all the things my mind would rest and I could too."
• "If I were like ______ I would deserve ______."  
• "I can't be late/tired/off/hungry/emotional, or else _____ will see I am bad/needy."  
• "I hate me; I need to fix me."  
• "You don't really want that, you aren't good enough yet for that."  
• "I can't need/want ______ because only weak/bad/superficial/lazy people need/want that."  
• “I shouldn’t ____ , or should never have needed________________."  

It does not believe in micro-progressions or the complexities of multiple truths co-existing. It thinks in good and bad, safe and unsafe, loved or hated. Safe is better than vulnerable.  
Familiar is better than new.....  
But, who is this inner critic to be building walls in my psyche? Why would a piece of myself limit or turn on me so?  

We are wildly complex. We are worlds of amazing multiplicity within. All of us have "parts of ourselves," which make up the diverse and fluctuating core of our total beingness. One we have all become more familiar with through psychology speak is our inner child, a part of our self which co-exists with us, is us, and also is somewhat limited because they are not all of us, they maintain their own identity as a place marker for our child self(s): this part speaks for those needs, remembers feelings and fears and joys from that stage in our development and imparts valuable information about our needs and desires to us. There is within each of us, multiple parts of the self constantly in negotiation. These parts will have different needs and perspectives and when we have internal conflicts, it is usually because the needs of different parts of the self are having it out or presenting opposing demands which we cannot simultaneously meet. This is often behind the "I know I should, but I can't seem to" phenomenon.
Our inner ecology is beautiful. Growing. Seasonal. Wild. Curious. And like any ecology, works to maintain some dynamic equilibrium, balancing our multiple needs, desires, and experiences. For many of us, the inner critic is a dominating power hungry jerk who tries to control our inner diversity. In a robust inner ecology, an honest, calm and gently critical part of our self can help us tease out our own internal workings, balance multiple needs, look at the whys of our fears, and offer us honest feedback when we could improve or act in a way that is better than how we have in that past. This inner knower/inner parent can step in, having observed our parts out of harmony and begin an inner dialogue between them. It helps us continue to grow as beings through the various events we experience throughout our lives.

And that is the critical piece: the healthy inner parent/guide witnesses all of our inner ecology and parts: the good, the struggling and the funky. It knows us deeply. It is the wisdom of this part which can be called upon to shed light on our patterns of behavior, motivations and desires when we are feeling in the dark or come up against a sufficiently complex experience. This part of ourself can tell us things about us no one else can and can offer the loving gentleness and forgiveness when we mess up or need support. It holds space for both the fullness and wonderfulness of all that we are with honest reflection about places we have room for growth in. It is akin to an inner parent (if the parent was healthy). It's work is that of service to us, it helps us learn and to balance growth with limits, honesty with compassion, feedback and critique with respect. And to set good boundaries within and without. It understands and appreciates that we are always growing and learning, integrating new experiences with new depths of relating.

The inner parent, the inner guide was developing right along side of us through all of our formative experiences. It took incredibly accurate notes about how to treat us based on how we were treated. How culture treats/views us. How we have been defined by others, especially though our developing years is most often how the inner parent knows how to
define us. Whatever it learned early on about what keeps us safe is what it continues to believe. Self-righteously. Overpoweringly. If we lived in/are living in environments where turning against our own body and feelings was what kept us safe then our inner-critic continues to believe that is the recipe for success. And if genuine inter-personal safety was something elusive to us as we developed, then that is shape of the walls within us.

**The inner critic often becomes our own internalized abuser. Which really sucks.**

This part of our self, capable of having forthright, genuine and vulnerable discussions with our internal ecosystem becomes a tyrant. Gaslighting us. It absorbs the lies we don't even know we are operating under and holds us to them forcefully. It is inner-parenting us from a place of desperate avoidance of vulnerability. When we grow up in homes with gaslighting, emotional neglect, the variances of violence and systemic messages that who we are and the desires which naturally occur within us are bad, we learn that we are either totally out of control of our reality or that we have to find ways to fit into these paradigms in order to survive.

**It boils down to focusing the blame on ourselves.** We might not be able to control these external forces but we can turn on ourselves and learn to control/blame ourselves. And so, in abusive environments, we erect towers inside so that we know where we can dwell safely. The cement making up our internal structures is a mixture of emotions and reactions to our abuse/trauma that had to be turned inward because it could not be safely launched into our external environments. We literally could not build structures around us to protect ourselves and so we built them within. Shame, panic, rage, dissociation, numbing, self-hate, perfectionism, attachment disorders............ *sigh* sadness arises within me typing this.

**Through our stages of development this was entirely appropriate: being in relationship with the outside world helps us navigate our relationship with the inside**
world. Learning new things about our inside worlds helps us navigate our adventures and experiences in the outside world. This is what’s happening during growing up years. If what we experienced from the world outside of us repeatedly sends us messages that our internal world, who we are, our boundaries, what we desire and need are not respected then we have little choice but to build towers within to help keep those things from spilling out and being seen. Shame built these structures.

The inner critic becomes the landlord/ building manager/ tax collector/ maintenance person for these towers as we move into adulthood. Because it wants us to be safely housed. Our goal then is to re-parent this well-meaning but incredibly misinformed beast. And that, like raising any little curious creature, happens daily, with many, many small, cumulative victories and discoveries and re-negotiations of boundaries.

**Micro Progressions.**

Of course, there are also the big, memory worthy ecstatic epiphanies and 'never-going-backs' and booming changes too. But those big shifts are sustained by the smaller, less seen and celebrated ones. Much like parenting ;)

The Inner Critic & Emotional Flashbacks:

If you have never heard of, or don't have an idea of what an emotional flashback is, I wrote about it here. Us trauma survivors, particularly in the case of complex and cultural traumas, have heightened reactivity to danger and power dynamics. We are extra sensitized to it and learn to even be sensitized to the anticipation of it. The heart and the amygdala are constantly scanning our internal and external environment to intercept what might harm us, looking for signs so we can anticipate what might be coming.

Many of the things which actually harmed us on all levels of our being we had no real control over. None. But, especially when trauma is happening through developmental stages, we seek to understand these terrifying and painful experiences and so, unable to control or
prevent the violence against our being, unable to escape the environments they occurred in or to truly address the reality that our primary caretakers and/or the dominant culture are unsafe or incapable of meeting our needs, **we look to control what's within us.** That awareness has to go somewhere. The observant part of us that would be a reliable inner-parent as we become less dependent on our primary caregivers and emerge into adulthood instead witnesses our internal panic and learns from our abusers.

**Our inner critic has trauma.**

It comes at us from a well-meaning but very wounded place. It *interpreted* that needs, vulnerability, happiness, emotions, the desire for love or intimacy all the things that brought the abuse to us. Thus, it believes it is helping us when it rears up and unleashes loads of shame, fear, and guilt. It thinks those things will keep us tucked away safely in our internal cement buildings, unable to be hurt by the elements. But, just as it watched and learned terrible lessons early on, it is also watching us as we do the immense unseen, undervalued and powerful labor of re-relating to our lives, our wounds and our desires. It doesn't trust this change...at all, likely. In fact, it will also try to use that against us when we are feeling the boundaries of our wounds. We can start these micro-progressions by witnessing this as a process it cycles through. By noticing. Slowly, we build up to talking back to it. Letting it know it has some outdated methodologies. This in no way is easy work, in fact, it might be some of the hardest, particularly when we are surrounded by well-meaning folks who don't have to do this work and have no idea how hard or lonely it is. Or, how rewarding. The inner critic may or may not respond well to big, dynamite driven epiphanies. Those ripple in and change our whole internal systems, but often, right after them, the inner critic responds with force, wanting to reassert its protective controls over us, which can look like dissociation, disconnection, shame, feeling like we are actually bad, too much, too
something or not anything enough...that's the inner-critic whispering to our amygdala that we need a little 'reality check.' It senses danger. It thinks it knows best. It remembers when we felt big things that brought on terrible consequences.

**It believes shame, isolation, guilt and self-hatred are useful tools to protect us.**

No, it seriously believes this. **The punch line in all this: the inner critic has the power *alone* to induce an emotional flashback.** I mean, we are living with the voice/narrative of our original trauma right inside ourselves. These are the flashbacks that can be the most isolating, because if our own thoughts or feelings can trigger us, how can we ever, ever feel safe? If we can cause our own flashbacks, how can we have any self-image of ever being cement free?

There are far more sneaky and gnarly ways the inner critic maintains its structures around us. It often appears as a feeling. As an arousal state. That lurking shadowy feeling behind moments we are happy/ok. The ways we can lose ourselves in laughter, delight or joy for a moment and come back to a feeling of self-hate. The way a desire creeps in for something out in the world and we push it away, out of consciousness to focus on our work, to somehow earn the right to experience those things. If this sounds familiar, chances are, your inner critic watched your younger parts, heart open to delight and genuine connection get trampled on. It watched and it believes it is the need/desire/innocence and vulnerability of that younger self which seduced the abusive, neglectful or violent behaviors. It wants those parts in the basement. The inner critic is meanest to our most vulnerable parts of ourselves. It prides itself on being a good learner, and it studied the dominant culture and our abusers very well.

**It needs re-parenting.** It needs lots and lots of micro-progressions to shift its worldview and adopt/trust new tools. And I know, for those of us who didn't get great modeling of healthy parenting and safe vulnerability, this can feel like....stupid. It all begins to feel kinda stupid. Cause other parts of us are tired and don't want to have to be doing this work all the time.
But trust me, it is listening even now. Each time we are able to interact lovingly with ourselves, it listens.

Micro Progressions are like adding a new blossom, a new petal, that stays on our tree through the seasons.

**Re-teaching the Inner Critic:**

For some of us with complex trauma, trying to talk to our inner critic is like turning to the waiter and saying, "I'll start with an appetizer of shame, feast on a large bowl of emotional flashbacks and end with a delightful serving of cold, creamy anger and despair....oh, and please, charge me extra." But creating a bridge of communication between the inner critic and our daily operating inner voice is important, it is something we can begin to build upon, creating other bridges internally, opening up connections between the parts comprising our inner worlds. There is a place we might reach along our journey where the amount of kindness we can proactively offer our self will supersede the amount of abuse we have withstood. I believe that. I believe that place is a powerful mark along our paths. We get there through micro-progressions, not 'deciding' or 'calming down' or 'fixing.'

I try to actively hang out with the part of me who understands my trauma patterns and who is allowed to feel good about myself. Like a hang out I would have with a friend or someone who I trust. Honestly, in the beginning, the real work has been actually finding this part of myself, believing they are real (inner critic can get triggered around this), and then getting to know *them*. Who is the 'me with healthier relational patterns' and what do they feel like?

If you have read any of my stuff you know I am a huge Tori Amos fan. Her 1991-2001 works shaped me profoundly. I used to mark the changes in my life by what Tori album I was listening to and saw her live several times in my early to mid-twenties. When I would see her in concert I would access parts of myself I didn't know how to in my daily life. In the
loudness of her roaring, singing every lyric with the other 30,000 fans in the audience I found a way to inhabit my deepest feelings, unlike any other way I felt in normal life. I felt power. I felt seen. I felt real. I had emotions. For someone with intense dissociation, feeling real was the most pleasurable thing. In those moments I had access to energy and insight into my life I didn't have any other ways of accessing (yet). But I knew I felt something, something that let me feel like I actually existed on this planet. Throughout my twenties and thirties and still today, I play key songs, especially the live ones, when I need them AND as a secret tool of inner connection to the me who needs to be reminded that they are real. 

What I thought is that it was she who created this experience within me. I thought the desires to be alive, strong, vocal, passionate and aware of my own worth even amidst my struggles was something she had and she was the source of. But, as on-stage Tori, she midwifes that for any of us who also has that same burning self within. But she was never the source of that within me. She provided the opportunity for me to touch my inner badass. That was in me. That "when we shine brightly we help others to shine brightly too" thing. Alone in my kitchen singing Tori, I got to learn how the me who inhabits my body and deserves to have anger and is successful and vocal feels in me/as me. I get to know that future me, one I am every day getting more familiar with, in these moments. I recognize her in my body when she visits and I hear her advise when moments of fear and vulnerability come up. I use that feeling when the inner-critic comes in, when it wants to obliterate any worth I may have.

It’s just one tool that helps me, as an example. I use music as a way to feel different self-states in my body-self. To get familiar with them. 

So many of the messages we get about trauma centers 'healing' as if there is this magical place we will arrive t. It's great marketing but I think it is when we have a relationship with the us who we really like, who we look up to, who gets to come with their experiences and their context of having been totally cemented over that we can begin to celebrate some
success. That inner relationship can only step forth if we let them take up space in our inner ecology, slowly easing out the landlord of our old structures. Finding the energy to devote towards this work is exhausting, it really is tearing down a building with bare hands.

Here are some of the ways I practice this as much as I can:

- I noticeably appreciate and affirm that any work or energy I invest in this is actual work and takes energy and resources.
- I look for moments when I feel badass, or in my body, or aware of something larger and more empowered than how you usually feel and then say out loud, "I like feeling this."
- I find small, regular amounts of time to privately summon this ok self and then recruit my imagination for a few minutes of play, like while cooking I put Top Chef on in the background and pretend I am a trained chef, the imagination is powerful.
- I listen critically to what the inner critic tells me we cannot be/do/say/need/desire and wonder where I learned that or what makes it true.
- And during emotional flashbacks, I have a saying I use to remind me that that it was it is, I say “the feelings are real but the context is old.”
- I actively observe healthy interactions among friends, on episodes of shows I like, and study them.

“We will not know our own injustice if we cannot imagine justice. We will not be free if we do not imagine freedom. We cannot demand that anyone try to attain justice and freedom who has not had a chance to imagine them as attainable.”
— Ursula K. Le Guin

This is labor. This will brings stuff up and the inner critic might try to convince us that this kind of taking up internal space and dreaming about a self that has a safer inner ecology is
for other people, 'healed' people, 'gooder' people. Expect that. Greet it when it arrives: Hello walls, Hello building. I see you.

We have the right to our internal realms. We have the right to spend time with the us we want to experience. We have the right to find them within us and create space for them in our internal and external realities. We have the right to name abusive dynamics even if they are springing up from old buildings within.

Deepening our relationship with the part of ourselves that we love and have positive regard for forces the inner critic to witness new things. Watching us have compassion for ourselves changes the power balance internally. It provides a source of felt experience to draw on when the inner critic goes on its tirades. It gives us company/an ally when we need to tell the inner critic, "Thank you for asking me to _____ so that we can appear safer. Thank you for trying your best to protect me from things you fear, but I need you to trust me now, I need you to take some redirection and learn new things."

Microprogessions.

They add up. For those of us with complex trauma, it is often not the big dynamite, "I am never going to feel/do/be/say _____ again!" moments that create permanent shifts, but the more daily, private and powerful internal dialogues of negotiating new space that summon lasting changes. Where is the 'there' being referenced in 'the slower you go the faster you get there?' A healthy re-balancing of the inner ecology so the inner critic can't get away with stuffing us in old buildings so often. Something like that. :) Here are a couple of recent examples of how the inner critic shows up in my own life that I thought I would share in case examples are helpful:

1. Uglyness. The month before I moved to Portland (so, March and right now it is May), I decided rather stoically that I had done enough trauma work to gamble seeing my mother,
whom I haven't seen in a couple years. I really did do a good job of prepping but the visit was painful. There has been no change for her in how human I am allowed to be and how much blame I am supposed to carry for my own abuse. I can see progress for myself as I didn't have flashbacks after the visit. Instead, a strange new phenomena gripped me: I really, really felt the full weight of the visit. Like I literally felt it. I didn't dissociate, pretend it didn't hurt, or throw myself into the woes of wanting it to be different. Because of that, I really, really felt the pain of being blamed, of being expected to have no self. And it hurts. Real, real bad. In present time. As a response to this hurt, and my inability to really effect any change on our relationship, the inner critic popped up with a new technique: for a few weeks after the visit I would look at various parts of my face, ways I would laugh, hand gestures, facial expressions, etc. and very suddenly feel immense hatred and deep feelings of ugliness. Especially if I caught myself in a reflection. I felt it and decided to just observe it without giving the weight of being truthful. I knew it had to be a trauma response and so I decided to try and observe it. Soon, I was able to identify that everything I was labeling as ugly were parts of myself that reminded me of my mother. Which led me to realize that I felt powerless to make a change between us, which led me to look at how deeply I actually miss her and wish she was a safe part of my life, which led me to begin the grieving process. The immediate and sudden seeing/feeling/knowing myself to be hideously ugly is definitely not the way I treat myself now and so I was able to catch it better. A few years ago it was my reality. In this case, the inner critic was routing a feeling of intense hate (which ultimately is pain) onto myself since I am unable to get it resolved in another way.

2. "Taking one for the team." I let something that meant something to me out, shared it, and it ended up no longer really being mine. I shared work I was excited to be doing with someone who I thought was a colleague who then thefted my work and made it their own. That was the last thing I expected it to happen and so my guard was really down. Though, my intuition was pretty loud in certain moments and I downplayed it and ended up in a
situation where I feel like I got some wind taken out of my sails. As I have come to see and accept that this happened, I feel very angry. Anger with someone I am close to still gets very confusing for me. I grew up being told that my anger was always wrong, that I don't see things clearly, that I feel too much and that as a female I am always to prioritize the needs of the male/other. They get more space. Their intent outweighs my boundaries. The inner critic sneaks in like this: I feel anger at something that happened in the context of a relationship. I see where I could have made different decisions and decide to take all of this as a 'lesson,' as surely I will do better next time. Surely I can put use to this loss and be better. And, I decide all this without even considering that I would set the boundary with the other person or name my grievances. Because ultimately, when I think of actually holding ground and giving my anger merit, I get a bit triggered and don't trust me. So, its easier to blame me and romanticize all of this as a cosmic lesson about how my actions lead to my suffering. My inner narrative sounds like, "well, this is a lesson to you: you have to be less open. Less trusting." You brought this on. **Sneaky jerk my inner critic can be, tricking me into prioritizing self-blame over naming that which has provoked the anger and making it clear that a boundary of mine had been crossed.**

**Everyday, micro-progressions and re-parenting our inner critics...**

xoxo!

gwynniebird