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POCKET POWER

ACCEPTING
CRITICISM



Hazelden

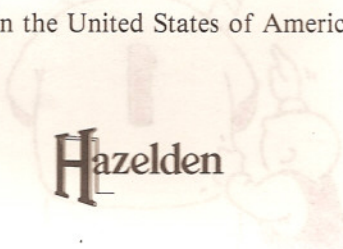
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ACCEPTING CRITICISM

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Editor's Note:

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The inability to accept criticism ranks high on our list of character defects and appears on most Fourth Step inventories. Many of us explode with anger and resentment at the slightest suggestion we may be wrong. "Stop criticizing me!" we snap, "You're not perfect either, you know!" Even though no one asked us to be perfect, or claimed to be perfect themselves, our hurt feelings make us strike back. Before we know it, we have a mini-war on our hands, and there will be no winner.

How can we deal with this explosive feeling and avoid creating unhappiness for ourselves and others? Probably the best way is to see criticism as a tool for growth rather than a weapon of attack. Bill W. once observed that A.A. would have progressed more slowly without its strong critics. He also expressed appreciation for his own critics, saying some taught him patience, while others offered him "valuable lessons." Bill's sane and sensible reaction to criticism is a model for all of us.

CRITICISM IS AN INSIDE JOB

The first thing to remember about criticism is that we do it to ourselves. If we are stabbed by a critical remark, we are doing the stabbing. This may seem surprising, but it's true. For example, if we're told we have poor taste in clothes, we can choose to believe it and think we really are poor dressers, or we can reject the remark as untrue, irrelevant, unimportant, or uninformed.

If we don't agree, we won't be hurt; what others say just won't be true (as we see it). We may wonder what's the matter with them, and look for what's going on inside their heads to provoke a comment like that. We may even feel sorry they should be so mistaken. We can react in a variety of ways to this kind of statement.

Only when we accept the criticism as valid can we become vulnerable to hurt. Then we take the words to heart and feel the sting inside. The hurt comes when our inner voice says, I'm so ashamed, or, How embarrassing to be so stupid! In this case, *we're* criticizing *ourselves*.

When we're criticized, we often learn more about the critic than ourselves. Remember the story of the psychiatrist and the teenage boy? The doctor drew a circle on a sheet of paper and asked the boy, "What does that remind you

of?" "Sex," he replied. The doctor next drew a square, and asked the same question. "Sex," repeated the young man. The doctor then drew a triangle, and once more got the answer, "Sex." "You seem to have sex on your mind," the doctor observed. "I do?" the boy replied, "You're the one who keeps drawing the dirty pictures!"

The point is, before we get upset and angry, we need to consider the source. Imagine a telephone lineman telling a registered nurse what kind of anesthesia a surgeon should use for an operation, or the nurse telling the lineman how to install a telephone switchboard! It would certainly be foolish for either one to take such suggestions seriously or be disturbed by them for even a moment.

However, we can't always reply, "You're entitled to your opinion and I'm entitled to mine," for criticism may be deserved, and also helpful, as Bill W. pointed out. Once we get ego out of the way — and that's what we've been talking about — criticism need not be such a bad or painful thing. It can, in fact, be quite useful. How? For one thing, it can give us a fresh look at ourselves.

MIRROR IMAGE

Even the most introspective person can be blind to some of the truths about him- or herself. Years of self-analysis fail to expose the obvious if we have a prejudice or a blind spot. A person who doesn't know proper grammar might naturally say, "Them that doesn't wants to doesn't has to." He wouldn't criticize this sentence; to his ear it sounds correct. At a moment like this it helps to have a friend correct him in a tactful way. This is particularly true if he is hoping to make a good impression on those who *do* use good grammar!

Helpful criticism lets us see where our biases, lack of information, or lack of self-awareness keep us blind. We will never know all there is to know about ourselves; human beings never do. Criticism helps complete us.

This is the motivation behind the Fourth and Fifth Steps. We have learned that lack of self-knowledge is a chief stumbling block to sobriety, abstinence, or sanity. Bill wrote that the ones who fail are those who are "constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves." The experience of countless A.A. members teaches the same thing. "The Program won't work until you start getting honest with yourself." "I had to get honest before I could

ever get sober." "Honesty is the key." We hear these words and others like them over and over again.

Such advice is not uttered to frighten or discourage anyone; it is a practical insight and an accurate description of just what it takes to "make it" in the Program. Doing the Fourth Step inventory and admitting all we have found out about ourselves to another human being is one sure way of getting honest. The one who hears our Fifth Step acts as a mirror, showing us what we really look like, not just how we would like to appear. When we get a more accurate picture of who and what we are, we can use our talents and skills more effectively and avoid some of our more glaring defects.

When we first got sober, many of us didn't really understand why we acted the way we did. We felt our minds and bodies were booby-trapped with spiritual and emotional "land mines" that could go off at any time. We didn't know what or where they were. It was quite impossible to live each day wondering when we would trigger one of them again. The Program blessed us with the wisdom of the inventory and talking it over with someone else. We may not get rid of all the "mines," but we can learn where they are and how to avoid or defuse them.

Another human being can guide us to some of the "mines." His or her objective eye can help us see ourselves, and we, in turn, can be just as helpful to others. We are mirrors for each other!

DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

When we submit to criticism, or offer it to others, we must remember we are dealing with a dangerous tool. "You know where you stand with me!" one young woman proudly announced because she was "only being honest" with others. It sounded commendable, but she really used this as an excuse to say whatever she felt without thinking about other people's feelings. Her remarks were not helpful; they hurt, and they came from a reservoir of hurt inside her which she either didn't recognize or refused to admit was there. This was not honest reflection, it was hostile attack. Such remarks should be seen for what they are. If we take such words to heart they will cut and destroy.

One way to avoid hurting others is to speak from our feelings rather than judging their behavior. There's a world of difference between saying, "I get uncomfortable when you swear so often," and "You ought to stop cussing; it isn't nice." The first statement can be a scalpel that

exposes a character defect; the second is a meat-ax that will probably make the problem worse. When we speak about our feelings without trying to make someone else feel ashamed or guilty we are offering useful criticism. In other words, "Don't take other people's inventory."

Criticism is a tool for determining value. It is a standard for judging and can be used to improve performance. Athletes in training are subjected to criticism in order to discover their weak points and perform better. Authors submit their work to critics to see how well they have accomplished their task. Golfers listen to the advice of friends in hopes of bettering their golf score. This is the purpose of criticism.

The problem comes when we interpret criticism as a diminishment of our value. If our efforts are criticized, we are no good. Someone points out that I made a grammatical error and I respond, "I *never* do anything right!" The criticism, which was only a tool to evaluate a particular effort, is taken as a judgment from the gods. It sounds as if I were saying, "If you don't love my sentence, you don't love me and therefore I'm no good!" That's a lot to assume from one criticism.

When we state how we feel rather than point out others' possible shortcomings, we can avoid hurting them. We also help ourselves if we avoid

making a remark sound like a total condemnation. Being aware of the significance of what we say keeps the sword of criticism in balance.

THE MEASURING STICK

Every criticism implies a value judgment. A simple remark like, "You're late!" only makes sense if we both know what "on time" means. If one person thinks 10:30 P.M. is the right time to be home, while another assumes 1:00 A.M. is the deadline, there can be no agreement. The problem is agreeing on the definition of "on time."

Much criticism can be troublesome because we aren't using the same measuring stick. For example, a frustrated mother explodes when she sees her son's bedroom. "It's a disaster!" she cries. Knowing she wants everything neat and tidy all the time, the angry adolescent protests the unfair criticism. "You expect me to be perfect!" They're both talking about the same room, but each sees it differently. A common measuring stick would help.

Some think criticism has quite a bit to do with perfection. Anything less than perfect is imperfect, and that, by definition, is bad. If criticism is applied as a tool to achieve perfection, the one being criticized cannot help but

feel judged, devalued, belittled.

Actually criticism has little to do with perfection; it's an impossible goal, so it's useless to expect perfection from someone. Measuring anything against perfection proves nothing. Critical remarks are much more helpful if we make them with a more realistic measuring stick.

Telling stories from experience can be a positive and productive way of criticizing. "Well, when I was in a spot like that, here's what happened to me." Bill W. used this method very effectively. This supports the tradition of "attraction rather than promotion." If we show others the benefits of our experience, they can make a choice that might work for them. This way they won't feel coerced, devalued, or judged.

THE MEASURE OF LOVE

Probably the biggest problem with criticism — whether we are receiving it or giving it — is the problem of personal ego. We know what's best for ourselves and others based on personal criteria and preferences. When we decide someone needs to change his hairstyle, we may very well believe it's in his best interest; but this really is a question of personal opinion. He might

interpret our words as criticism and condemnation instead of a helpful hint. He might respond with his opinion, which he feels is every bit as good as ours. From this point on there is no hope for growth. We end up arguing over who's the smartest, has the best taste, or the most convincing experience. The result will be anger, hurt feelings, and probably a broken relationship.

How do we avoid this impasse? In my experience, the most helpful rule is the measure of love. When I speak, I do so in love. I speak as a friend. I speak as one conscious of your best qualities. For that is what it means to love — to see infinite value and worth in others.

Love is not a sentimental emotion for greeting cards; it is a special vision that sees beauty where others do not see it and recognizes worth others have overlooked. We might notice a couple that seems very strangely matched and asked, "What on earth does she see in him (or he in her)?" The fact is they *do* see worth in each other, and that is the meaning of love. There is value and goodness there which we admire, enjoy, and want to encourage.

All of us have been on the receiving end of love if we have found our way to the Program. Whether our problem was alcohol or other drugs, overeating, gambling, or emotions that

had gone wild, we agonized in the knowledge that we were flawed, no good. We were told we had great potential, but we could not fulfill that potential. We felt worse for knowing how far short we fell of our own ideals.

Then we encountered people with the same problems — and they were making it. With the help of our Higher Power we began to bloom and grow; and with the encouragement of these friends our problems lessened and hope no longer seemed out of reach. What was happening to us was the healing of love. People saw good in us we could not see; they placed faith in us we did not have in ourselves.

Criticism is only valid if born of the keen eyesight of love. Those who criticize us in order to help us be more true to ourselves, speak in love. Those who criticize so they can show us how much better or smarter they are, or how much better they are at living their lives than we are, are not real critics. They are trying to make themselves feel better at our expense, and we don't have to listen or accept their words.

By the same token, criticism from us should contain the same vision of goodness in others. If we see no worth in someone, we have no right to criticize. We are truly blind and our opinion has no value.

GOD'S CHILDREN

We are all God's children and each of us is a person of infinite worth. When we deal with others, our task is to look for the treasure buried within. And the more we see in others, the more others will uncover treasures in us. Criticism will no longer be a brutal blow to our ego; it will be an adventure of treasure hunting.

Criticism may still be painful, of course. Growth always is. It is humiliating to have our defects and shortcomings pointed out to us — we all prefer compliments to blame. On the other hand, being confronted with a bit of truth about ourselves is the biggest help we can get. When we are criticized, the wise thing to do is search for whatever truth it contains. A quick “spot inventory” as Bill recommends in Step Ten, can validate the criticism and show us whether this is a place for growth, or an opportunity to show our true selves to others. A visit with our sponsor, or a discussion with friends at a meeting, can help us see more clearly where wisdom lies.

Genuine criticism tells us we are all God's children and have value and worth; it is the clear-eyed look of love. It can give us a glimpse of what we are and what we can be. With that vision we are healed and enabled to grow. If we

can remember this we need never fear criticism. In fact, we can be grateful for its gift!

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