

A Toolkit for Unhooking from Criticism by Tara Sophia Mohr

It's happened to all of us: feedback on our creative work has, at one time or another, caused us to get stuck. Maybe a client hated your designs, and your confidence was shaken for the months that followed. Or a client hated your designs, and you wasted hours arguing with them in your head. Or maybe it's the quieter criticism of no response at all—to blog posts or a new offering in your business—that has you feeling demoralized.

All of these are ways we get “hooked” by criticism – caught by it in ways that limit us. What we want instead, of course, is to be able to hear and incorporate useful feedback, without the personal wounding or creative blocks that so often come with it. Over the past several years, I've had the privilege of working with creatives, entrepreneurs, and leaders to help them unhook from criticism, so they can have more impact and feel a greater sense of freedom in their work. I've also abandoned creative pursuits I'm passionate about—writing, dance, performance—because I got so hurt by feedback that I could no longer keep creating. I had to find my way back to creating consistently, in spite of the ups and downs of audience receptions to my work. And now, as a working writer and entrepreneur, again and again, I have to unhook from praise and criticism all the time.

I had to find my way back to creating consistently, in spite of the ups and downs of audience receptions to my work. Through all of that work I discovered there are a few tools and practices we can use in our daily lives to completely change our relationship to criticism for the better. These key concepts are a core part of what I teach and what I've written about in my book, *Playing Big*.

See feedback as giving you information about the person giving it—not as giving you information about yourself. Perhaps your boss has given you the feedback that your work on a recent project is “bad.” So here's the question: Does that give you any facts about your work, your talent? I'd argue it doesn't. But it does tell you something about your boss' preferences and taste.

Understanding feedback in this way—as providing information only about the person giving it—is liberating, especially for creatives who will always have to deal with a range of highly subjective assessments. When you view feedback in this way, it simply becomes strategically useful information that can tell us how to engage the people we want to engage: bosses, clients, colleagues, or the audience for our artistic work.

We can still take feedback seriously. We can still work hard to incorporate it. But we do so knowing the feedback isn't a verdict on us; it's information about how we've come across, and about how we can be more effective with a particular person or group.

Try it out. Think back to some negative feedback you've received. What did that feedback tell you about the person giving the feedback? What insight did it give you into their preferences, their style, or their expectations? How does that perspective change how the feedback feels, and what you might do about it?

Recognize that all distinctive work brings criticism. Many of us hold the notion that if our work was as good as it could be, everyone—or almost everyone—would love it. But often, our greatest work is the most polarizing. To steep yourself in this idea that all distinctive work brings praise and criticism, visit your favorite bookseller’s website. Look up one of your favorite books. Read a five star review. Read a one star review. Read another five star review. Read another one star review. Toggle back and forth between the most laudatory and the most critical reviews. Take in the range of reactions, the opposing opinions shared.

Find the match-up. The criticism that we most fear receiving and that we find the most wounding is criticism that matches up with what we believe about ourselves. Notice which past criticisms have stung the most for you. Notice if there is a particular criticism you most fear receiving. Perhaps it’s being seen as “arrogant” or “good but not great” or “lazy.” Simply notice what it is for you. In what way does this mirror what you believe about yourself, or fear to be true about yourself?

Your work is to turn your attention away from the outward criticism and develop a more accurate, compassionate assessment of yourself. When you’ve changed the belief about yourself, you’ll no longer be so afraid of or wounded by that criticism. Typically, it’s not feedback itself that gets us in trouble, but the way we interpret it.

Separate facts from interpretation. Typically, it’s not feedback itself that gets us in trouble, but the way we interpret it. Say several publishers reject your book proposal. That’s the fact. But what you make that mean might be “my idea isn’t marketable” or “I’m a bad writer.” Maybe those conclusions are true, maybe not. When you receive feedback that causes you to get stuck, separate fact from interpretation by writing down these four items:

1. The fact of what happened (for example, “Six publishers have rejected my book proposal”)
2. Your current interpretation of the facts (for example, “The proposal is embarrassingly bad”)
3. Five other interpretations of the facts (for example, “I haven’t found the right fit yet” or “I may need to make the marketing section stronger” or “Having a personal introduction to an editor might really help.”) Bring in a friend to brainstorm with you if you have trouble thinking of alternative interpretations.
4. One action you can take to find out more about what the feedback really means, so you can shift your approach accordingly (hint: that probably means talking to the people who gave the feedback to learn more).

Have you gotten hooked by criticism in the past? When has it hampered your creative growth, and how did you move past the block? And what would be possible in your creative life right now, if you were less attached to feedback?

Prayer for Unhooking from Criticism: *Creator of Relationship, you bless us with opportunities to grow and learn. Feedback is one way you provide for us to become the best versions of ourselves. It’s also one of the ways you empower congregations and organizations to serve with greatest impact. Equip us to unhook from the negative aspects of criticism so that we can tune-in to where your Spirit is at work. Give us courage as we release our need to prove ourselves so that we can make space for your movement among us.*