

Example dialogue with a critical ego state

Prior to engaging the critical ego state, the therapist has used visual imagery to take the host (client) to a safe and secure place (e.g. a building, forest clearing, island). In this example, the host ego state is named John and the therapist has brought him to a communal room in a building (in John's imagination) which has "a circle of chairs in the centre of the room and a number of other doors leading into it."

- Therapist John, I would like you to choose a seat and make yourself comfortable. Take a look around the room. Notice the décor, the lighting conditions, the temperature, and any sounds and smells there are ... that's good.
- If you could invite into the room to join you that part of you which gives you a hard time, that part which is critical of you whenever you get something wrong. Just notice if anything comes into the room or if you are aware of a presence or feeling in your body... If nothing comes in that's fine too.
- John Yeah, there's something there.
- Therapist Can you describe what you are aware of?
- John There's like a woman with sharp features. She's wearing a black dress and a shawl around her shoulders.
- Therapist That's good. Just invite that part over to the circle of chairs and invite it to sit down.
- John She's sitting now.
- Therapist That's good. I would like to speak to the part that has just come in and introduce myself. My name is Michael and I'm trying to help John. He's the man who was already in the room when you arrived. I'm wondering what name I could know you by; perhaps you could let me know through John in a way he can understand?
- John She says she doesn't have a name.
- Therapist I see, can I just check if the part which came into the room is the one which is critical of John when he gets things wrong?
- John It is.
- Therapist Okay, thank you. Is it okay if I know that part as 'Critical'?
- John She says that's okay.
- Therapist Critical, I would like to thank you for coming. If you wish to speak to me directly rather than tell John so he can tell me that may be something we could do. Would that be acceptable to you?
- Critical Yes.
- Therapist Would that be okay with you John?
- John Yes, I'm fine with that.

Therapist Critical, I understand that when John gets things wrong you say things to him which upset him, is that correct?

Critical Yes.

Therapist What is the reason you give John a hard time when he gets it wrong?

Critical To try to stop him messing things up and making a spectacle of himself.

Therapist So you try to get him to do things right so as not to embarrass himself ?

Critical He embarrasses me too when he messes up.

Therapist Would you be more happy if John did things right.

Critical I would.

Therapist I wonder, if John was trying to walk up a mountain and you were on his back saying, "Look at you puffing and gasping. You're making hard work of this. Push yourself harder, go on you lazy lump." Would that help him get up the mountain?

Critical Maybe not.

Therapist Instead of that, if you were walking beside John saying, "Come on John you can do it. Just up to that next rock and have a breath. Look how far you've come, well done." Would that help John get up the mountain?

Critical It might.

Therapist So if you were to give John praise and encouragement, instead of criticism, is it possible that would get more out of him and help him succeed?

Critical That's possible.

Therapist How would you feel about giving John praise and encouragement instead of criticism, even when he gets things wrong?

Critical I don't know I've always been critical of him.

Therapist What about doing it for a trial period?

Critical I suppose I could For how long?

Therapist What about three weeks and then you can evaluate whether John is doing better?

Critical Yeah, I could try that.

Therapist Can we just check with John that he would be prepared to go along with that?

John I'd like to do it but I'm not sure if Critical will stick to the agreement.

Therapist Well Critical, would you be prepared to stick to the agreement?

Critical I'll try.

Therapist Are there any parts outside the room that wish to comment or add anything to what we have been speaking about?

John No, nothing.

Therapist Thank you. Critical, we are in agreement that you will give John praise and encouragement to try to get the best from him. Could I suggest that even when he gets things wrong, which he will, you will help him find what he can learn from the experience so he can get it right the next time?

Critical That's okay.

Therapist Is there anything else you would like to say Critical?

Critical No

Therapist What about you John?

John No, nothing else, except for I hoping this works with Critical.

Therapist Critical, I would like to thank you for your input and hope we can make things work out for John and you. Could I ask you to leave the room now and stay wherever in the building you feel safe and secure. If you could be available for John whenever he needs you, and remember, you are giving praise and encouragement without reverting to your old ways for the length of the three week trial period.

John, please let me know when Critical has left the room.

John Critical's gone now.

Therapist Okay John, whenever you are ready. I'd like you to make your way from the communal room back down the hallway and out through the door you entered the building by. When you're ready come back to join me here in the therapy room.

John (Opening eyes) That was powerful. I feel really tired after that.

Therapist Just have a deep breath. Would you like to do one of the self soothing exercises you learned?

Note: John is debriefed to be aware of how he handles situations where previously he would have noticed the critical voice. He is told he can use internal dialogue to remind Critical of its agreement to give praise and encouragement. He is also reminded about his techniques for self soothing.

When you meet resistance, roll with it and suggest alternatives. Avoid conflict with ego states as you need to have their cooperation.