



What do
you mean
I'm not
AWESOME?!

Dubbed the 'Me, me, me generation', we're so unused to criticism, we fall apart when it happens. But taking it on the chin can be good for you, says **Catherine Gray**

And now for the negatives..." It's 2005 and I'm in my annual review with my boss. My hackles rise automatically – if I were a cat, I would hiss. "Thing is, Cath. You're just not. Well... You're not that great at... taking criticism. You either take it far too personally or you get defensive." A thundercloud passes ►

G SELF-DISCOVERY

◀ across my face and I attempt to prevent my mouth from pouting, which is a total failure. It's like I'm in one of those sci-fi movies where I've borrowed somebody else's face to fox the bad guys but, whoops, I lose all control. A Bratz-doll pout slips out.

Internally, I'm rat-tat-tat-ing away like a possessed antique typewriter: 'How dare she – I can totally take criticism – this is so unfair – OMG, is she saying I'm a terrible person? Well, I'm not going to let it get to me.'

I open my mouth to protest and, bam, it hits me. She's right. I think of a wise mantra a surfer friend once gave me: 'Check yourself, before you wreck yourself' – and zip my mouth shut.

I wish I could say I've developed a thicker skin since then, but that's not strictly true.

Lost in fabulosity

Some digging reveals that the psychological community believes that this inability to take criticism is a common trait of our entire generation. Apparently, this is a hangover from the 'self-esteem movement' of the '70s and '80s.

The movement revolutionised parenting and was even included in the curriculum," says Jake Halpern, trend commentator and author of *Fame Junkies*. "The idea was that there are no winners or losers. Praise, praise, praise kids and they'll grow up with buckets of self-esteem." But Halpern says it went too far, resulting in an entire gossamer-skinned 'me me me' generation unused to frank feedback. Thus, when we hit the workplace and the scary real world in general, the reaction to negative feedback is: 'Woah – what?!'

"This 'shoot for the stars, you're amazing, you can



The news that Topshop was relocating went down as well as could be expected

“ Our parents were 'seen and not heard' whereas we were the centre of our parents' universe ”

do anything!' slogan has also left an over-inflated sense of entitlement in some people," says Halpern. In the '50s, only 12% of children ticked the box, 'I am a very important person'. By the '80s, 89% were ticking it. "This is narcissism, or self-love. Our parents were 'seen and not heard' whereas we were the centre of our parents' universe." Therefore, when those with entitlement issues find out that not only are they not perfect, but it won't all be handed to them on a plate, the toys come hurtling out of the pram. "Parents need to positively reinforce, of course," says Halpern. "But they should also stress that their children need to lick a lot of stamps and shovel a lot of manure on the escalator to the top. We've overshot padding self-esteem, and ended up nurturing narcissism."

Take my friend, Stella. "My parents told me I was amazing. Stunning, hilarious, intelligent, charming," she says. "So when I landed work experience at a top advertising agency, I was expecting some red-carpet treatment. They'd seen my CV, right? When they told me I'd be making tea and doing a mail-out all week, I sent an email to my boss saying that I had some brilliant ideas, so wouldn't my time be better spent pitching rather than posting? She took me aside and told me to manage my expectations; I told her she was missing a trick by not using my brain. I was asked to leave that day. I've learnt to suck it up since then – it was a definite learning curve!"

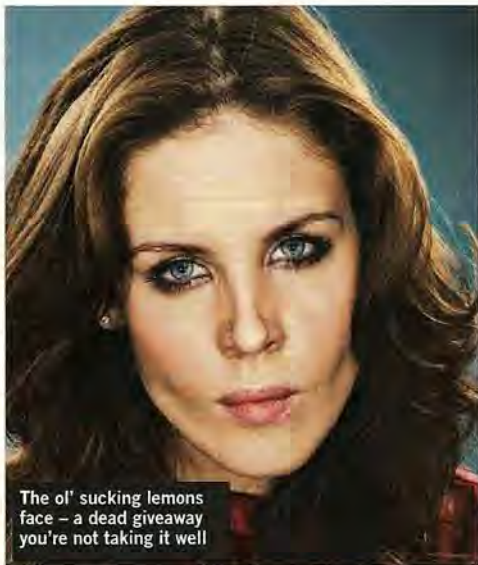
Toughing it out

When criticism strikes: pause. Take a deep breath. Absorb. A 'fight or flight' response is common when the barb takes root. Let's start with 'fight'. Who can forget Rooney's tantrum at the camera while storming off the pitch after England's draw with ▶

◀ Algeria in the World Cup (“Nice to see your own fans booing you. That’s what loyal support is.”)? “It’s so easy to go to that dark place of ‘How dare they?’ and start loading bullets to fire back,” says Nancy Wasson, relationship counsellor and co-author of *Keep Your Marriage*. “But you’ll merely shoot yourself in the foot. Listen hard.” Octavius Black, co-founder of The Mind Gym and co-author of *The Mind Gym Relationships*, advises trying to imagine the criticism as a gift that can lead to growth. “Ask questions like, ‘How so?’ or ‘Tell me more?’”

Wasson agrees that curiosity is ideal. “Back up one step emotionally, from outrage to intrigue.” How many of us have wished for the superpower of reading people’s minds? Now here is a silver-plattered opportunity to see what others see – and you’re tossing it aside. “Try to stay objective and figure out how they reached this opinion. You’ll want to stick labels on them like ‘wrong’, ‘judgemental’ or ‘horrible’, but that’s a dangerous place to go.” Halpern says the irony is, by bristling at criticism and ignoring it, we’re turning our nose up at a gift-wrapped opportunity to get better. At everything. Getting promoted. Getting more friends. Getting Prince Harry! “Negative feedback not only toughens up our skin, it sends us zooming to the top if we listen to it carefully,” he says. I bet Richard Branson et al are great at taking digs.

The ‘flight’ response is where you retreat inside yourself or just cut the person



The ol’ sucking lemons face – a dead giveaway you’re not taking it well

MAKE CRITICISM WORK FOR YOU

Turn it into a positive with these three steps

1

“Be honest,” says Harvey. “If you’re crushed, tell them – there’s nothing wrong with that. Ask questions to understand what you can do to improve the predicament.”

2

“Turn it over in your head,” says Black. “If you were redecorating your house, you’d look at lots of interior ideas, letting an idea form. Do the same, look at feedback from all angles.”

3

“Try to stimulate an anthropological interest in how this person arrived at this opinion,” says Wasson. “That will help you retain objectivity. Treat it like a puzzle you’re trying to unravel.”

off. My first instinct during my ‘You can’t take criticism’ review was to just get another job. How mature!

Occasionally, when someone criticises you, it’s nothing to do with you – it’s their bad day or hangover talking. “Feel free to park it and ignore it if you really think it’s nonsense,” says Black. But generally, there is a molecule of truth to be eked out. And if there’s a theme emerging, really listen up. “If two or more people tell you the same thing, chances are, it’s true,” says Black.

Criticism in the workplace can sting the worst – but it’s the most important place to take it well. “Overly sensitive people are difficult to work with,” points out Wasson. “But the recession has created a knee-jerk ‘Aaargh’ reaction to criticism at work,” adds careers coach Katie Harvey. “The fear of losing jobs summons a need to prove the critic wrong (bad idea) or going into a passive aggressive, monosyllabic ‘Uh-huh, uh-huh’ slump.” Harvey adds that employees are aware of the ‘compliment sandwich’ cliché now, so not even that softens the blow of criticism, unless their boss is a silver-tongued communicator and can disguise it.

Lord knows it’s a bitter pill to swallow, but constructive criticism is the key to unlocking an even more spectacular you.

Behind that formidable door marked ‘dealing with it’ lies more friends, more money, a better body, that dream house, a corker of a career. So take the key graciously, and face up to your future. ©