

# The Inner Critic or Superego

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**HOW TO LIBERATE OURSELVES FROM IT'S CRUSHING INFLUENCE** by Jane Monica-Jones<sup>©</sup>

Let's explore about something called the Superego, also known as the inner critic or the inner judge. That critical voice we all have inside our head.

You may be all familiar with a debilitating or belittling voice that often tells you, you are not good enough, smart enough, young enough, should be better, should feel ashamed, and generally makes us feel small, crushed and worthless. For some of us, it is not a voice or comment in our head but rather you may notice it as a feeling; feeling small, collapsed, contracted, wrong, or ashamed for example.

This voice is not only extremely painful, it is also what fundamentally keeps the status quo of our particular conditioning in place. As long as the voice of the Superego is not recognised and defended against, the work we do on our self – in therapy or other personal development work – will only be of limited duration. The voice of the Superego will ensure that anything that challenges the status quo of your conditioning will be put back into the basement of your unconscious.

It is important to understand that the development of the Superego is a natural phenomenon in the process of the creation of our ordinary ego structures. Every human being develops one. Let us have a look how that process happens ...

When we are infants and very small children, we are totally dependant on our primary care givers. Without their love and support we would literally die. As infants we initially respond appropriately to inner and outer stimuli, for example when we are hungry, we cry, and when fed we feel satisfied. However as we grew older, our parents or caregivers didn't always recognise or for other reasons meet our infant self needs. Our parents over time may have struggled with our crying or our upset in some way and we began to see how our needs affected our parents. To placate the caregiver (the source of survival) the child feels the impulse be discouraged from certain behaviours or encouraged towards other behaviours, supplicating their own needs and wants as a strategy to survive. If we don't 'behave', we may receive some form of displeasure or a worst punishment, in the form of an angry tone of voice, not being attended to or at worst neglected. Because of the total dependence, the child learns to keep the parent's love and protection by accommodating the parents needs. It is the self-preservation instinct in action because not accommodating the parent, means losing love and protection which is experienced as life-threatening.

In the beginning the infant literally responds to this external pressure as it is applied by the parent in the moment as it happens. As the infant matures into a toddler this external pressures become internalised. Slowly, slowly, the very small child registers and remembers the tone of voice and other behaviours from the parents and in turn anticipates these stimuli by remembering them in his own newly developing mind. All of this happens automatically and unconsciously. It starts very early, in a felt sense and preverbal way. And develops over time to also include internalised verbal messages – this internalised coercive pressure is what we call the Superego.

As we work with the Superego we often first encounter the layers that were formed when we were a little older as those are the layers closest to consciousness. We can recognise the voice that tells us “you are stupid” or “I am stupid” much more readily because it is closer to our conscious memory. You may recall that your mother, father or teacher actually saying those type of things to you.

The deeper layers of the felt sense of the Superego such as smallness, collapse and shame were formed much earlier, in infancy. The infant's very aliveness often has been disproved of, and because of the self-preservation instinct we learned to tone it down. The Superego in this example operates on a pre-verbal level. In general, the infant and later the child learns that it is not safe to live in a natural and essentially expressive way. We learns to control our naturalness, exuberance or vitality (like a child) – hence to stay safe – by going along with the messages we receives from our Superego.

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As adults when we feel or experience the emergence of our natural aliveness or essential expressiveness we may encounter what we call a *Superego* attack. Our inner judge ramping up all the reasons why we shouldn't or can't or it won't be possible. Essentially our common narrative that keeps us locked in, stuck and collapsed into our conditioned status quo.

## Defending against the Super Ego

1. Firstly it is important to realise that stopping or reducing the impact the super ego has on our life takes time, it is not a quick fix, but rather needs work, at least in the beginning. Over time the work we do to defend against the Superego, makes the Superego presence in our lives more manageable, less frequent and less impactful.
2. Secondly you will come to realise that the presence of the Superego, particularly in a form of an attack, can be a great indicator of the emergence of your natural aliveness, essential expressiveness and vitality and a longing to expand.
3. Thirdly, defending against the Superego and its impact on your life can be absolutely life changing!

**One of the best way to defend against a Superego attack is to literally stop and question whether I am having a Superego attack right now? Are all these belittling and crushing comments I am saying to myself right now, could that possibly be the voice of my Superego?**

When we are a victim of a Superego attack, we effectively believe we are the child. 30, 40 or 50 years ago when we were a child it was true that you were not equipped to withstand the pressure that was put upon you. First by the voices of our caregivers and then by the internalised voice of our own Superego. Our nervous system literally did not have the capacity to do rebuke the pressure, and we needed to go along with our household's status quo to ensure our survival.

Now that we are an adult, it is a different story. We are now an adult with an adult's nervous system and capacities. We are no longer the child without a choice. We can and must turn toward the voice of the Superego and say "NO!" "Stop!" "Shut up!" When defending against a Superego attack it is important to say it out loud. Saying it inside your head it not enough (at least in the beginning), one needs to vocalise, and possibly move the voice away from us with our hands, as though it has a directional quality, or remove the crushing feeling from of our bodies. Put some umpf into it.

As you learn to do this you will regain your essential strength. This may feel like an aliveness and passion in the body or you may experience as a bit of anger, which is also normal. The feeling of anger is an emergence of our healthy aggression, a self protective mechanism as an adult, being able to respond to Superego attacks in the present moment.

## REFRAMING THE SUPEREGO

As mentioned before the purpose of the Superego is to maintain the status quo. Maintain the worldview, beliefs and habitual behavior that was necessary for survival in our childhood. As such when we challenge or expand in some way that is different from rigid conditioned settings of the old Superego, its presence or narrative will be ramped up. For example when changing behaviours Me: "I am going to start exercising" Superego: "You'll never stick to it, like last time" . When changing beliefs "I believe I would be a good therapist, maybe I should study something" Superego "You're too old to go back and study"

Learn to reframe the presence of the Superego when it emerges, particularly when we seek to expand and change.  
Me: "I am going to start exercising" Superego: "You'll never stick to it, like last time" Me: "Ha! If you're here Superego, putting in your two cents, then I must be on the right path!"