

High anxiety: Dealing with critics

by [Margaret B. Hess](#) in the [July 15, 2008](#) issue

Responding effectively to criticism in ministry has been one of my growing edges for many years. On a good day, when I'm well rested, spiritually grounded and in touch with my inner warrior woman, and the planets are properly aligned, I handle criticism just fine. But on my bad days, I'm pretty lousy about staying in my own skin when someone comes at me with a criticism, especially about my preaching.

In my head I know that feedback from others can contribute to my own growth. But what happens in my body is another thing altogether. My arms start to tingle and my breathing quickens, something fluttery starts to happen in my stomach and my vocal chords constrict, making my speech sound all wobbly. I instinctively take a step backward or cross my arms over my middle.

Anxiety is a response to a threat. Threats can be real or imagined. The brain doesn't always do a good job of sorting out the difference between the two. The parishioner who greets me in the line after church with "I hate your sermons with the white-hot intensity of a thousand suns" is probably not going to physically hurt me. But my primitive brain might not know this, and it kicks in with those evolutionary lifesaver messages of fight, flight, freeze or herd. Granted, this parishioner may be a power broker in the church capable of spearheading an effort to get me fired. But he is not likely to pull out a weapon.

My inability to deal effectively with criticism can create distance in my relationships, rob me of valuable feedback and cause unnecessary wear and tear on my brain. Knowing these things with my frontal lobe has prodded me to work on how I hear and respond to criticism. I have become a student of my own anxiety.

Edwin Friedman's notion that criticism is a form of pursuit has helped me to understand criticism from a new angle. Behind Friedman's idea is the understanding that human beings always engage in an emotional dance of approach and retreat. This concept comes from Murray Bowen's theory of family systems. Bowen asserts that every two-person relationship is essentially unstable; the dynamic of the dyad is always to move toward or away from the other in an effort to achieve homeostasis.

All communications can be understood as expressions of this dance of closeness and distance. When the comfortable balance of closeness and distance is disrupted, the partners seek to restore the balance by taking a step forward or back in order to restore a comfortable distance.

The first time I intentionally incorporated the idea that criticism is a form of pursuit into my self-talk during a heated exchange with a parishioner, I found it helped me to stay engaged. I had just announced my resignation from a church I had served nearly ten years. I had clearly defined my boundaries to the congregation, letting them know that I would no longer function as its pastor, which meant that I would not conduct funerals or weddings, among other things. A woman cornered me in my office after worship and criticized me for being such a mean person and bad pastor. She said that I was cold-hearted and uncaring. Her attack was personal and detailed. I fought the urge to say, “Why, I’d be happy to conduct your funeral,” and tried to calm the storm of anxiety rising within me.

In my head, I kept saying over and over: “Criticism is a form of pursuit. Criticism is a form of pursuit.” I was resigning as pastor, a distancing move in the relationship. Her criticism was a move toward me, a way to restore the relational balance. Her words may have been *intended* personally, but thinking about the relational dynamic helped me not to *take* it personally. Framing the exchange this way helped me to stay connected with this woman, and to thank her for coming directly to me with her concerns—something I genuinely appreciated, in spite of my discomfort.

Yet sometimes the unsolicited criticism is not rooted in an ongoing relationship but comes unexpectedly from a stranger. How do I deal in a less reactive way with that kind of criticism? Thinking of relational dynamics here can be useful too. If in this case also criticism is a form of pursuit, then I can choose whether I want to distance myself from or move toward the critical person. Seeing criticism as an opportunity to learn more about myself is a useful posture to adopt.

Recently I was a guest preacher at a church, and after my sermon I got the usual comments of folks going through the line—brief but positive. Then one man shook my hand and said, “You did a poor job of interpreting the scripture. I didn’t like your sermon at all.” Then he bared his teeth at me. Or was that a smile? I felt the usual tingling sensation of anxiety in my arms, but forced myself to say “Thanks for telling me that” before I turned to the next person in line.

Later I went into the church office for a moment alone, taking inventory of my anxious reaction. I felt the immediate urge to triangle someone in—to tell the pastor about what this crabby parishioner had said to me and thus relieve some of my anxiety. After taking a few deep breaths, I determined not to be held hostage by my fear. I resolved to follow up with my critic.

I went into the room where the coffee hour was being held and located my critic. “I’d like to hear more from you about what you didn’t like about my sermon,” I said. “It would help me if you could be more specific.”

My sermon text that morning was the X-rated story about King David and Bathsheba. The gist of my sermon was that God’s redemptive activity is stronger than any of the messes we make. The man told me that he thought I had used the scripture to approve of sin. I was quite surprised to hear this, for that was hardly my intent. After we discussed our theological perspectives, I invited him to tell me more about himself. My strategy was to move toward him, and that helped me to stay connected with a critic and to hear what he had to say.

Moving toward the critic and hearing his specific criticism gave me some valuable information about how my sermon was heard. I am always curious about what happens when the words leave my mouth and enter the listeners’ ears. Although he had heard what I did not intend to say, his feedback gave me a clue as to how I could strengthen my sermon. When I preached the sermon again during the second and third services that morning, I added a few sentences to clarify my views. It was a stronger sermon because I had listened to the criticism, clarified my theological thinking and communicated my position more directly.

As I reflect on this encounter with a critic, I am mindful that my desire to avoid being criticized grew out of the protective function of anxiety. Wanting to be liked is linked to the herding mechanism: we feel safer being approved of by others in the group. The original purpose of this anxiety was to keep us alive and well. But failing to move beyond the need for approval can limit our development both personally and professionally. Learning how to tolerate the displeasure of others involves facing our own anxiety and managing it more effectively.