

G CONFIDENCE

Think back to your childhood and, chances are, you can recall a comment or criticism someone made, however trivial, that still affects how you feel about yourself and how you behave. In her

book, *The Real Me Is Thin*, comic Arabella Weir recalls the day her father told her eight-year-old self that she wasn't allowed to eat potatoes because she was fat. Arabella has traced a lifelong fixation with her weight to his words. And she's not alone. The comments we carry with us may have related to our looks, our personality or our skills – but why do we let mere words exert such a powerful control over our self-esteem?

“When we're very young, we need to believe what our parents say, and do what they want, to get our basic needs met,” explains psychologist Dr Victoria Galbraith. “Because we don't yet have reasoning skills, any criticism we receive, we assume to be true. As we grow up, the same goes for other people ‘in authority’, such as teachers, siblings or friends. Over the years, we internalise these criticisms, believing them to be facts rather than simply opinions.”

As adults, we need to break the link to the past by realising that these comments aren't fact and don't represent who we are today. “Simply being aware that you're being held back by something someone said to you all those years ago is the first step to breaking the spell and increasing your self-worth,” says Dr Galbraith.

Here, GLAMOUR readers share the comments that crushed them, and our experts reveal how they – and you – can move on for good.

“You're getting quite a bottom there...”

My mum said this when I was 11 and sporting a new pair of cycling shorts (well, it was the '80s).

She meant it in a positive way, as in, ‘You're getting some nice curves.’ But I thought she meant I was getting fat, and ever since then I've been body conscious. *Andrea, 35*

“We all have an inner critic, often revolving around body image, and it's usually turned on in childhood,” says clinical hypnotherapist and self-esteem expert Georgia Foster, author of *The Stress Less Mind*.

“It can stay with us for life unless we learn to switch it off. When the inner critic starts talking, the body releases stress chemicals, so we start to feel anxious. An amazingly simple breathing trick can break a pattern of negative thought and restore positive thinking.”

Whenever you hear your inner critic taking charge – you're scrutinising your figure in the mirror, say – breathe out, emptying your body of air for the count of five. Hold for five, then inhale slowly for five. Repeat three times. “Taking your focus to your breathing distracts your mind and cuts off the negative chatter,” Foster explains.

“You're so clumsy”

My dad said this by way of explanation when I knocked a glass flying at a family party. I dread cooking, clearing plates, doing DIY or anything that requires dexterity, in front of others. *Samia, 29*

“The child that heard this statement accepted it,” explains Dr Galbraith. “But the adult you can challenge it. Remember, your

being cack-handed or clumsy per se is not based in fact.” Try ‘reframing’ – a technique used in cognitive behavioural therapy ▶

HOW NOT TO TAKE CRITICISM TO HEART

“Human beings thrive on love and a sense of belonging,” says Dr Galbraith. “So caring what others think of us is inevitable, to some degree.” What's important is to not let criticisms control how we feel about ourselves as people, or how we behave. “The same goes for compliments – enjoy them but don't rely on them,” she adds.

“True self-esteem comes from within, not from others.”

Next time a colleague, friend, partner or stranger says something that threatens your self-perception:

* **Avoid ‘all or nothing’ thinking.** One comment is just that, it doesn't mean your whole personality is flawed.

* **Keep it in perspective.** Just because one person may think this about you, it doesn't mean everyone does.

* **Don't overanalyse.**

Was it even a criticism or was that just your interpretation?

* **When someone says something that hurts you, say to yourself:**

‘That's just their opinion.’

‘What counts is what I believe about myself.’

* **Or try reframing the comment:**

‘Just because Sarah thinks I'm lazy, it does not make me a lazy person. I am hardworking and capable.’