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It's NOT All In Your Head (but some of it is)

A Strategy Guide for Getting the Patriarchy
Out of Your Head

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Welcome!

I'm really glad you're here.

About a year ago, I saw a post on social media from a friend and fellow coach. She posed the question “What if your inner critic is really the patriarchy in disguise?”

This question acted as a lightning rod for a pattern of questions swirling around in my own head about how women can overcome self-criticism and gender-based social conditioning.

Business coach **Jo Casey** calls this ***feminine conditioning***—what women learn throughout our lives about what it means to be a woman. This type of conditioning is mostly unconscious and often triggers shame, leaving women with the overwhelming feeling that they can never be enough. It drives us to think and act and behave in a variety of ways, most of which are against our own interests. It's also a form of internalized oppression.

What this means for women is that we're often doing the work of the patriarchy inside our own heads. When we hold ourselves back from opportunities, when we don't give our opinions because we're afraid of how we'll be seen, when we say yes when we really want to say NO, we are succumbing to our patriarchal conditioning.

So, exactly how does this work and, more importantly, how can we STOP?

The Feminine Condition

We get messages and information about ourselves from other people from the day we're born. From our families, we learn what we need to do to get what we need: food, shelter, comfort, love. Later, we get messages from teachers and friends about how to be successful, liked, smart, popular. Throughout our lives, we're constantly receiving information from everyone who crosses our path. Sometimes it's verbal, other times we learn from expressions, reactions or emotions that we see in others.



The way that people react and respond to us shifts our perception of ourselves and the world around us.

MESSAGES COME FROM

Family Friends Lovers

Communities Celebrities

Television, Movies and Radio

Employers Educators Advertising

Spiritual or religious institutions

Politicians Journalists

When we take in this information, we start to form an idea about what it means to be a 'good' girl and, eventually, a 'good' woman. In fact, as we move through the world, we often reinforce these messages to other women and girls, without even being aware of it. So what does this all add up to? What have we learned about how we 'should' be as women?

Cultural messages about being a woman

Be Smart and Successful.
But not *too* ambitious.

Make everyone comfortable.
Regardless of how you're feeling.

Be Polite and Contained
NOT bossy or bitchy

Remember
To
Smile!

Always be Nice.
Never be Angry.

Look pretty.
Be Young and Thin.
Always.

Put others before yourself,
At work and at home.

Be Small,
Quiet and Modest.
Don't draw attention to
yourself!

Give until you have
nothing left.
(then give some more)

Be Sexy!
But not
Sexual
and
NEVER
Slutty.

P.S. All of this
SHOULD
look effortless.
No one wants to
see you sweat.



Do these ridiculously impossible standards sound familiar?

When we internalize cultural standards that are impossible to achieve, it puts us in a constant state of internal conflict. We end up constantly striving for unmanageable ideals and then judging ourselves (and often each other) when we aren't able to live up to them. This creates an experience and a culture of shame. Shame can be a total showstopper; it can prevent us from fully experiencing our lives, connecting with others and going after what we really want.



SHAME + CONDITIONING

Shame is the powerful feeling that we are somehow not worthy of love and belonging. Everyone experiences shame, it's a universal emotion. The conditioning messages that we receive about what we 'should' be are powerful, and often when we push back against or feel like we aren't living up to that conditioning, shame is the resulting emotion. Tuning into when we feel shame can be a powerful tool in recognizing our feminine conditioning.

What can we do about this?

Have you danced to the beat of this drum before? Are you ready to find your own rhythm and set your own standards? You may not be able to completely stop the music of feminine conditioning, but the exercises below can help you start to break free from its grasp. Take some time to really think through the exercises in each section and write down your answers.

#1 AWARENESS IS POWER

Building self awareness is one of the most powerful tools you have to change your life. Awareness changes the way we see and think about everything. Consciousness is like a muscle, the more you use it, the stronger it gets. When you strengthen this muscle, you get to decide how to handle a situation consciously, rather than just letting your conditioning kick in.

For example, try this: close your eyes and think about the color blue for ten seconds. Now look around at your surroundings. Notice how the blues just pop right out at you? Now that you've learned a little about what our culture tells us about being women, you'll start to notice these messages popping out at you, just like the blue objects. Look for them, learn from them. You might also start to notice other messages that you may have received. To boost your awareness even more, try carrying around a little journal or keeping notes on your phone of feminine conditioning messages in your life.



AWARENESS EXERCISE:

Take a few moments to reflect on how feminine conditioning has affected you personally.

- What were the strongest messages you received?
- Where did they come from?
- How do you feel about those messages?
- How have they affected you?

Once you've started noticing the role that feminine conditioning plays in your life, pay attention to how the message make you feel. You can also reverse engineer this process. When you start feeling SHITTY (shamed, humiliated, irritated, tense, terrified, or just "yuck"), take a look around at the situation that you're in and see if there is a message that's triggering your feminine conditioning.

This is the moment to ask yourself questions like:

- How reasonable is this expectation I'm trying to live up to?
- Would I ever expect this of another woman? How about a man?
- What would I tell someone I care about if they were in my shoes?

#2 OWN IT, SISTER

In 12-step recovery programs, there's a saying about keeping your own side of the street clean. Simply put, all we can do is to take responsibility for ourselves. You're in charge of your emotions and reactions. If something goes wrong, you get to look at the situation and figure out if/how you contributed. ***On the flip side of the equation: you don't have to take responsibility for what isn't yours.***

As women, we're conditioned to manage situations that are not always our responsibility. We feel pressured to make other people comfortable, minimize our own emotions and take responsibility for the emotions or actions of others. We're taught to accommodate the needs of others and downplay our own accomplishments. Cultural expectations have taught us that we should do the lion's share of the work but be too modest to take the credit for it. Is this a recipe for misery, or what?

To own your life, you have to take responsibility for your own shit and ONLY your own shit. Acknowledging and accepting your emotions, your responses and your reactions is key to taking ownership. It's only by owning your experiences, and letting go of what isn't your responsibility, that you can be your true self and really shine.

OWNERSHIP EXERCISE

- Where can you take more responsibility for yourself, your emotions or reactions?
- Where do you need to let go of what isn't yours?

#3 FIND SISTERHOOD + SPEAK YOUR TRUTH

One of the things that makes shame so powerful is secrecy. Shame is an isolating emotion. When you're able to share your experience with others, you can feel their empathy, which relieves shame. Sharing your experience, with someone you trust in a safe space, helps you to put things into perspective and disassociate from the aspects of the situation that aren't serving you.

Being part of a supportive community of women, aka a sisterhood, is like having a superpower. Our world needs strong women, more than ever. And those strong women need to support each other. One of the most powerful things that you can do to support yourself is surround yourself with supportive women that you trust. This might mean joining an existing group or community, either in person or online. It could also be just making a point to gather women you care about together to share and support each other.

SISTERHOOD EXERCISE:

Who are the women already in your life that make up your sisterhood?

If you need to find more women for your personal sisterhood, where will you start looking?



So, there you go:

Awareness + Responsibility + Sisterhood = Freedom

It sounds simple, but we all know that it's really not. What it is: Worth It. Breaking free of the conditioning, cultural expectations and bullshit that are holding you back is powerful. It clears the way for you to find your passion, speak your truth and embrace your true power as a woman. And let me tell ya, sister, that the world is in desperate need of some powerful, truth-speaking women right now.

If you found this e-book useful, consider joining my Facebook Group, the [Unquiet Sisterhood](#) or signing up to receive my free monthly love letter, where I share tips, musings and news. You can also find more info about resources, groups and classes that I offer here.

If you're ready to start kicking your feminine conditioning to the curb and making significant changes in your life, you can find more information on my other programs [here](#).

Jen Pavich is a feminist life coach who helps women overcome the patriarchy in their own heads so they can unleash their inner badass and thrive.

Jen is a certified professional coach with an MA in Human Development, a fierce feminist worldview, and a passion for helping women create change in their lives. She is also a certified facilitator in Daring Way™ method created by Dr. Brené Brown.

