

# STFU: LEARNING TO RECOGNIZE AND SILENCE YOUR INNER MEAN GIRL

Heathers. Dynasty. Beverly Hills 90210. Real Housewives of ANYWHERE. Literally any villain from 90's teen movies. And of course, Mean Girls.

The quintessential idea and image of the “mean girl” has permeated pop-culture for more than three decades, and thus our inner lives. These mean girls are generally depicted as beautiful, statuesque individuals. Super popular and affluent – and not afraid to remind people just how much privilege they attain. They're often the catty, judgemental, sometimes funny, but ultimately one-dimensional villains of our sweet heroine's life. With this depiction, it becomes easy to separate ourselves from these characteristics and therefore the idea of actually being a “mean girl.”

## We're The Heroines of Our Own Lives

We're the main characters, we're the Cady Herons of our own stories, not the Regina Georges. With that mindset in place, there's no way any of us could really be a mean girl. None of us could ever be judgemental and critical without reason. And yet, there are so many mean-girl-happenings in the world. There are so many cases of bullying, quick and hard judgments, and baseless and shallow critiques. So somebody HAS to be the mean girl. Newsflash: It's all of us.

At one time or another, we've all judged someone else, we've all been a bully, and we've all just been plain mean. Whether you realize it or not, whether you truly think your actions have that weight or not, it's happened. You've been mean. We don't always see these mean things happening. We can't always see when we're the bully or the judge because we're too close – and not on the receiving end. Just because you didn't intend to hurt someone's feelings doesn't mean you didn't. And you don't get to decide how you made someone else feel. You just have to recognize that you did make them feel a certain way and move on positively from that.

## Intent Is 90% of The Law

Good. Now that we've recognized that we've all acted negatively toward another human before we can now move on to INTENT.

Like I mentioned above: You. Do. Not. Get. To. Decide. How. You. Made. Someone. Feel. While intent is a very important aspect of our lives, it's still just one stitch in the greater tapestry of emotions and actions.

I might tell you your skirt is ill-fitting and ugly, and to me, I'm just being honest. A decidedly noble virtue to embody. However, that is a petty and catty thing to do, especially when unwarranted. I'm being unnecessarily judgemental. I don't know that person or their life. I don't know why they're wearing that skirt. I KNOW NOTHING. So why do I feel the need to comment on it? I shouldn't.

Now if your true intent wasn't to put someone down or hurt their feelings – GREAT. That still does not absolve you of any wrongdoing. That still does not mean you did not hurt that person's feelings. If you find yourself “speaking the truth” and subsequently hurting others, you can and should go to that

person to explain that that was not your intention. But again, you've still upset them and you can't undo that.

Part of recognizing you have an inner mean girl is recognizing the difference between intent and outcome, and taking responsibility for your part in the emotional well-being of those around you.

### The Judge: Bitch vs. Bully

I hate to use the word "bitch" in a negative tone. Bitch and all its derivatives are not bad. To be a bitch is to be opinionated and strong, and is something we should celebrate. So no. We are not bitchy when we cast judgment on others, WE ARE BULLIES.

People don't like to be called bullies. It has a weight and stigma that seems to feed deeper into our souls and lives, more indelibly than a word like "bitch" does. If I'm being a bitch it might be a one-time thing. If I'm being a bully it might be a long-held aspect of my personality that I'm choosing to ignore or have not been made aware of.

Bully is bad. Bully is worse. And rightfully so. Being a bully isn't just sitting in silent judgment or occasionally making unwarranted quips at another's expense, it's a state of constant judgment and outward action on said judgment, often to lift yourself up. That's all bullying is and that's all judgment is – putting others down to lift yourself up.

We all have been bullies and will probably bully again at some point in our lives. You need to be aware of this fact. You need to be aware that these actions are part of a larger social structure and they follow us our whole lives – they just might take different forms.

It might not be schoolyard teasing. It could be "unknowingly" sabotaging our colleague so that we get the promotion, or swiping left because of some guy's weird profile pic, or deciding to vote against a group of people because they don't fit your idea of what a person should be. It could even come from or be toward our own families and friends.

We often disregard this aspect because they are the closest people to us. We may see their judgment as inherently coming from a "good place" because generally our friends and family want the best for us. But their best might not be our best, and therein lies a disconnect. For example, my best friend and I, at one point, were on very similar paths. Now our paths have changed. We both respect one another's paths, recognizing that just because it's not for us doesn't mean it's wrong. However, at times I can feel – or AUDIBLY HEAR – the judgment coming from her about my decisions. It gets frustrating and drives a piece of me to be catty and judgemental back about her decisions. It's not healthy, even when it comes from a place of deep and intense care for the other person. It's still a judgment. We're working on it.

Bullies are everywhere, running rampant these days. In our politics, on our social threads, on our TVs, in the people we choose to surround ourselves with, and even in our White House. It seems like a lot. It also seems like, again, we're excluding ourselves from this narrative, because there's no way we could be like these people. But we are...or we can be...just on a smaller scale.

You have to recognize that bullies are humans and complex because we've all been on both sides of the spectrum at one point or another. Once you realize that, it's easier to move forward. It becomes easier to tell the difference between bitchy, catty, critical, and an outright judgemental bully.

## How To Take The “Catty” Out of Critical

It's quite ok to be critical of things around us – people, events, general happenings, etc. You want to be critical of certain things, like our government. To be critical is not to be negative, it is to be analytical of something in order to improve it. If we didn't care we wouldn't say anything, we wouldn't try to improve it. We'd just let it fester.

It's even ok to be critical of individual people. However, the difference between critiques and cattiness is what you're judging them on.

During the last election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, people were critical of both candidates. However, the critiques turned into catty, bullying judgments when news outlets, journalists, and all us lay-people began to analyze and comment on Clinton's outward appearance rather than her politics and career. That is not ok. Her appearance had nothing to do with your professional life or success. It had no bearing on her ability to perform the duties of the presidency at all. People were being catty and calling it critical. They were wrong.

You can AND should be open to criticism and critiquing others. Learning how to do so in a way that is constructive and ultimately beneficial, not mean. It's a fine line to walk. It's like letting an alcoholic put their lips on the bottle but not have a taste. It's very easy to accidentally slip into mean-girl territory, but again, the first step is becoming and remaining cognizant of this very real part of ourselves, and learning to overcome and silence that judgy voice in our heads.

## What Next?

I will say it again and again and again. The first and most important step is recognizing that you are a mean girl. That we all are in some way to someone (including ourselves). Once we are aware, it's easier to recognize the individual incidents that make up the judgment lobe in our brain (I don't think that's a real thing from science, but just go with me).

From there, we learn how to stop those judgments, both outward and silent, in their tracks. We learn to recognize the differences and how not to cross the line from constructive criticism into catty awfulness.

Just be honest with yourself. Be honest about how you'd like to be treated and treat others with the same respect you give yourself. Be open to criticism, be open to discussion. Take responsibility for how you make others (and yourself) feel.

There's not a set checklist to make sure you're never mean again. It's a very personal and internal thing. It also will happen again. You will be mean, you won't be able to stop yourself, you won't recognize it. You will hurt someone or yourself. Because guess what? You're a human, and that's ok. Just again, remember to take responsibility, own up and apologize. Begin working harder towards the goal of living a judgment-free life. It's a process. It's life!