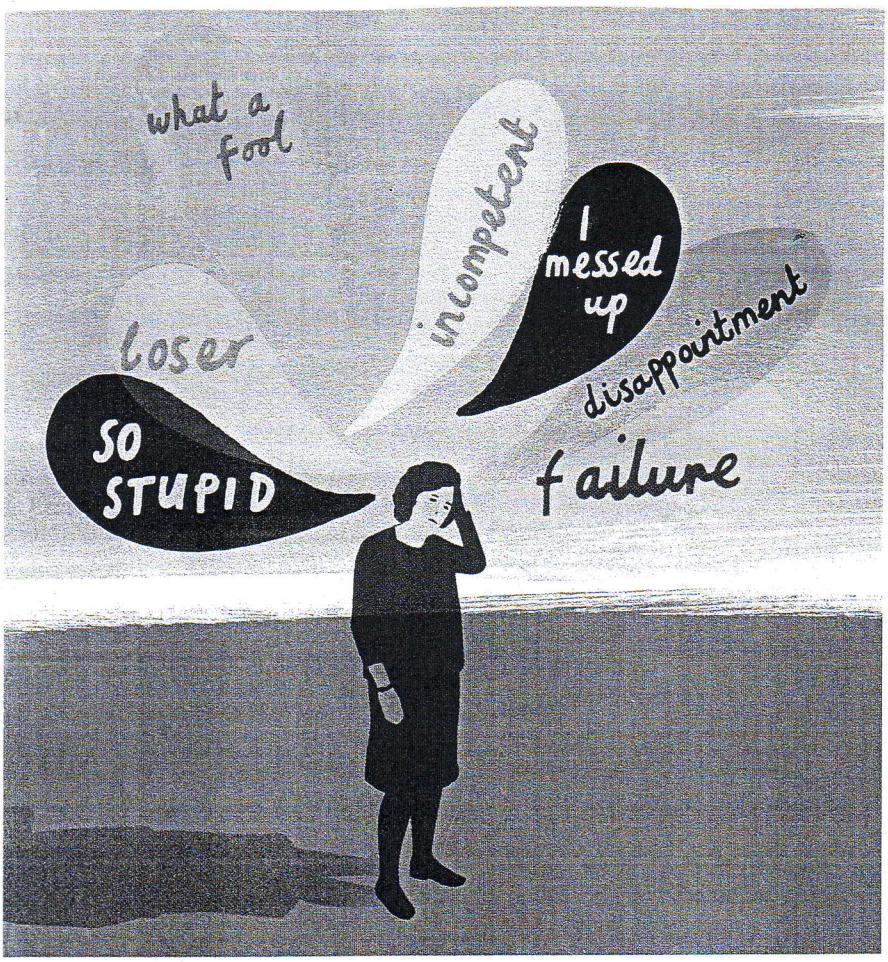

Does criticism MAKE YOU CRUMBLE?

FROM YOUR BOSS, YOUR BEST FRIEND OR OUR PARTNER, A LITTLE CRITICISM CAN BE GOOD FOR YOU – AS LONG AS YOU KNOW HOW TO TAKE IT, SAYS FIONA GIBSON

ILLUSTRATION GEORGINA HOUNSOME

I can remember my first 'bad day at the office' like it was yesterday. I had completed a piece of work and handed it in to my boss. New to the job, I was super-keen, my s seemed to rate me and I felt I could nothing wrong. Through the glass walls ny boss's office, I could see her casting an eye over my piece of writing. Then she beckoned me in. 'Yes?' I said, expecting the praise I was used to. It didn't come.

Phrases like 'rushed and sloppy' and 'not what you were asked to do' floated around the glass box, while I choked back tears. At the first chance, I bolted out of her office like a greyhound, grabbed my bag and hurried out of the building to a nearby leafy square, where I sobbed on a bench. I know: *really* mature.

Any passer-by might have thought I'd just received tragic news – not had a brisk (and deserved) ticking-off. In my defence, I was young, hyper-sensitive, ambitious and desperate to please. In other words: the world's worst at accepting criticism.

Yet, even with more life experience and less time to worry what people think, women so often crumble in the face of negative feedback. Whether in our professional or personal lives, many of us find even the mildest remark devastating. 'There's an inherent contradiction in women,' says career coach Ros Toynbee (thecareercoach.co.uk). 'While it's so important for us to be praised, we also need feedback to tell us how well we're doing. But when we get it we tend to take a dramatic view. We say things like, "It's hopeless," or "I'll never repair this," when what we really need is a little perspective in order to work out what our contribution is, and how we can move forward.'

If we are oversensitive to criticism, though, that's hardly surprising right now. We live in insecure times, when the slightest knock makes us fear for our professional futures. Plus, our generation is praise-focused; how many times have you said, 'No, you were perfectly fine,' when a friend asks if she stepped out of line after too many drinks? I've lost count of the times I've told one girlfriend she was 'absolutely right' to give her partner a rollicking – when, actually, I thought she was being unfair. In fact, New York psychologist Ron Taffel has suggested that decades of being told how great we are has turned us into 'praise junkies'. And the minute it's not forthcoming, our world cracks.

'I was brought up with a lot of praise and encouragement, and know I can be defensive,' says osteopath Maria James, 35, who has a two-year-old daughter. 'My whole family shares this trait. Nothing is *ever* our fault. It took my partner, Keith, pointing this out for me to be aware that I often blame others. I've tried to take his criticism on board. Generally, though, after a couple of glasses of wine I cry about how useless I am, hoping that Keith will say, "No you're not, you're wonderful." Childish and pathetic, I know.' As for ☛