



# Not Being Judgmental – Not Possible

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The psychological process of *projection* is a defense mechanism that causes us to transfer our unwanted feelings or behavior onto another person. For example, a person who is highly self-critical may constantly feel (or fear) criticism from others. So, when we judge people around us—either positively or negatively—we are projecting aspects of ourselves onto them. We are seeing the world only through our personal filters, which are embedded in our brains in the same way as our physical environment. (1) Our ideals and life outlook are our version of reality.

## Desperate

I had my first personal insight into this phenomenon a few years ago, after I emerged from a severe depression and burnout. While I was deep in the abyss, I experienced an endless barrage of negative self-judgments. With repetition they became my “story,” my identity. All I wanted was to have a few positive thoughts about myself—*any* would do.

A few years after my life turned around, I realized that positive self-judgment was almost as disruptive to my peace of mind as negative self-judgment. Like negative thinking, it prevented me from experiencing the present moment. That realization was a major shift for me. After I had worked so hard to be successful and to acquire the things that would allow me to view myself in a more positive light, I realized that *any* judgment is still judgment.



## Your “Story”

Judgment can turn into vindictiveness, as these stories become stronger with repetition. These beliefs become our “ideals” and much of human history revolves around causes that are actually just a word. The labels and judgements placed on groups covers up their humanity. Labeling is the first step in justifying bad behavior.

At the individual level, you have to first judge another person as “less than” in order to justify treating them unkindly. You can no longer see who that person is and what his or her needs might be. What most of us don’t see is that the driving force (projection) behind this process is needed to prove and validate one’s self in comparison to others. It boils down to the phrases in our heads, “Not good enough.” “Be all that you can be.” “FOMO – fear of missing out,” and this list doesn’t stop.

## **Awareness**

Anthony De Mello, in his book, *The Way to Love* points out that as soon as you have labeled anyone—either positively or negatively—you have lost awareness. You can no longer see who he or she is. A comment, appearance, or opinion has triggered a reaction in you, and your response has little to do with who the person really is. How well do you know them? What is going on in their life? What reasons do they have for feeling the way they do?

Even going back to the first century BCE, the Greek philosopher, Epictetus, observed that it is different to call someone a drunk, as opposed to saying, “This is a person who drinks too much.” One is a disparaging label while the other is merely a description. Think about your experience about being labeled a “pain patient.” It would be more appropriate for the medical profession to consistently use the phrase, “This is a person who is suffering from chronic pain.”

One century earlier, Lucretius, in his famous poem, “The Nature of Things”, pointed out that all each person can do in his or her lifetime is to enjoy it, regardless of circumstances. The Roman poet and philosopher lived in a time and place of great upheaval and civil war. How he figured this out is a mystery, but a challenge each of us should consider.

## **Joy?**

It is impossible to experience joy when you are being judgmental. If you really stopped and took stock while you are judging someone, you will notice how tedious and joyless you feel. You are merely projecting the same view—your view—onto others.

Yet, judgment is and always has been necessary for our survival, to assess safe vs. dangerous. So, judgment is here to stay; you cannot stop judging. What can you do to keep judgment from robbing you of the joy that is your birthright? Become aware. De Mello’s solution is simply to become aware of the effect your judgmental nature is having on your quality of life and relationships. Awareness not only dissolves judgement, it is the only effective option.

## **Not being judgmental**

An exercise that I offer my patients is to think about someone they really dislike. (It usually doesn’t take long.) I say, “Look, you now understand the effects of labeling, and you no longer want to judge this person. What happens when you try to stop being judgmental? You are now suppressing your thoughts, which will make you even more judgmental.” They look at me, perplexed. I remind them that, in addition to cultivating their awareness, they can write down their judgmental thoughts and destroy them. Then the thoughts aren’t suppressed, but you realize they are just thoughts that you can separate from. Although you still may dislike that person, you have opened possibilities for more careful listening and greater understanding of their perspective. At the end of the day, you are not trapped by your thoughts, and you have allowed more joy into your life. There is no greater joy (and relief) than finding common ground with someone you regarded as an adversary.

I have also occasionally written down in detail what I think about a specific person – positive and negative; and then in the next column note how I feel about myself on that that same topic. It’s pretty humbling.

## **Peace??**

The great majority of us want peace in this world, but peace is improbable unless each person takes responsibility for his or her contribution to the collective consciousness. Is your consciousness one of peace or war? No matter how justified you feel about your position, anger is still anger and labeling is still labeling. Those behaviors are far more combative than merely liking or disliking a behavior or viewpoint.



Why am I writing about being judgmental? Because ongoing judgments will keep you in a state of agitation. The adverse effects on your body's chemistry increase your physical pain. (2) Of course, you are now even more upset. You don't have a choice about being judgmental. You do have a choice to become aware and learn the strategies learn how to process it. As you move forward, it builds on itself and positively affects your close relationships. Becoming aware is the one contribution each of us must offer to the human experience to move it to the next level.

1. Feldman Barrett, Lisa. *How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*. Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt Publishing, New York, New York. 2017.

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