[washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2024/06/07/good-judgment-judgmental-judgy/)

**Are you exercising good judgment or being judgy?**

Robin Stern, Marc Brackett June 7, 2024

Exercising good judgment is essential to our physical and mental health, but being judgmental isn’t.

Asking a friend to walk you home when it’s late at night or not entering a mosh pit at a concert for your own safety are examples of good judgment. But making safe judgment calls is not the same as being judgmental — when we fixate on faults and criticism. Being judgmental is making someone feel bad about their choice of clothing or haircut. It’s about publicly disapproving a colleague’s perspective or contribution with a tone of superiority.

There are ways to maintain the integrity of our convictions without being judgmental of others. And we can learn to deal with others who are judgmental.

**Judgment is helpful; being judgmental is not**

Judgment is a natural and necessary component of [decision-making](https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/drawing-the-curtains-back/202305/how-to-judge-without-being-judgmental). You see the line of cars in morning rush hour and judge that there will not be enough time to stop for coffee. You see a job posting and judge that it is a promising opportunity to explore.

Judgments also keep us constant with our values, beliefs and needs.

Exercising judgment moves into being judgmental when we embrace an attitude of moral superiority, and even [contempt](https://www.gottman.com/blog/what-causes-contempt-in-relationships/), when we profess to know better or, worse, to be better.

We can be judgmental out of envy, fear, anger or some combination of these. It is both a way to avoid dealing with our own insecurities and a critique of another person so we can feel more secure and righteous. For example, we may criticize a friend’s relationship without context or concern for their feelings because we are envious or not satisfied with our own relationship or unhappy that we don’t have our own relationship.

Like many attributes, being judgmental is a learned behavior. Perhaps your parents disregarded your opinion or told you it was “ridiculous” for you to have an opinion, or your siblings criticized you, or your peers teased you. Judginess is often modeled by those who molded our values, character and behavior.

But regardless of what has been modeled for us, we can work toward being less critical and judgmental and engage with others with greater compassion and curiosity. It can help our well-being as research shows that being judgmental correlates [with diminished mental health](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886918304884?casa_token=rc8k0-zUxewAAAAA:1yUmbqE7gToAgCPVfRu4BZntMGd4oj4uKD3LyHeU6vJyFHGXilJENcFsTOtfaStkUT4436b91Q).

When we are overly critical of others, we often become apathetic or even antipathetic. This is mutually harmful. By hyper-fixating on faults, we train our brain to focus on the negatives — in others and in ourselves.

The goal is not to agree with everyone all the time, but to unlearn judginess and to learn how to communicate your judgments by using [emotional intelligence](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/emotional-intelligence).

Based on our work at the [Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence](https://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy/services/community-and-schools-programs/center-for-emotional-intelligence/), we have developed strategies to help people become an emotionally intelligent judge — or, better yet, an emotion scientist. Here are some tips to get started, along with signals to help recognize when you are being judgy yourself.

**Beware of certainty**

Curiosity is the antidote to being judgy. If you find yourself tempted to jump to conclusions because it appears someone’s beliefs or attitudes do not align with yours, pause and get curious.

This applies to any conversation, be it in-person or online. Before rushing to respond, question your own assumptions about the other person’s identity, character, values or motivations. Consider yourself a learner, not a knower; a scientist, not a judge.

**Engage with empathy**

Assume good intent on the part of others, and be mindful of your language in response. Specifically, respond in a way that reflects your perspective rather than your judginess. Extending grace may sound like an old-fashioned idea, but it is helpful.

Being judgy may sound like: “You’re a grown woman. Why are you still living with your mom? It’s more than a little bit weird.” Or “Maybe stop being so co-dependent. Don’t you think it’s time to grow up?”

Expressing your judgment may sound like: “For me, getting my own place was a big part of feeling independent. Maybe you feel differently — how do you see it?” or “I hear you, but I can’t really relate.”

**Avoid moral superiority**

In moments of tension, anger or embarrassment, retreating to moral superiority (“I know better; I am better.”) creates divides rather than bridging them. While emotions are important pieces of information and might influence how we react to tense situations, they do not have to dictate our response. Express your beliefs clearly but without imposing a sense of superiority. If this becomes difficult because emotions are too high, consider ending the conversation.

Being judgy may sound like: “Are you kidding? If they got fired, they deserved it. Some people just don’t work hard enough.” Or “The only reason they got the job to begin with is because of their connections.”

Expressing your judgments may sound like: “I personally don’t think they are a good fit for the position. I am curious about why you think otherwise?” Or “I have my own perspective. I can tell you feel strongly about this, too.”

What happens when the shoe is on the other foot? How do you avoid the sting when others can’t manage their urge to be judgmental?

**Stand firm in your integrity**

If you are on the receiving end of someone’s judgmental rant, it is natural to feel hurt or attacked and to turn defensive. However, the toxicity of a back-and-forth conversation only continues a cycle of harm in relationships.

Try instead to reframe a judgmental statement as a learning moment that reveals more about them than about you. Again, be a learner, not a knower, and get curious. You have options beyond responding in a judgmental way yourself. You can ask honest questions, assert your beliefs without engaging in further conversation, or simply end the conversation.

**Remember it’s not really about you**

Judginess is often a strategy people use to empower themselves by diminishing others. But judgmental commentary reflects on the judge (their insecurity, anger, envy or other big feelings) far more than it reflects on you. However tempting it is to take judginess personally, before you take the bait and launch a response that fuels conflict, remember that you can simply let this be the other person’s issue, not yours.

We cannot control anyone else’s thoughts, actions or judgment. But we can all take ownership of our own.

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