



INSTITUTE
for LIVING
Courageously

AN 8-WEEK MINDFULNESS TRAINING

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Session 3

Judgment

JUDGMENTS

Judging is something we do constantly, and it is largely automatic. Within a fraction of a second, we form an opinion about somebody we meet for the first time. We only need a little time to call an evening successful or to label a feeling as annoying.

We judge many things, such as other people, ourselves, situations, the weather, and so on. The main characteristics of a judgment are described in the following sections.

A Judgment Colours Reality

A judgment is like a pair of glasses or a filter. We see the world through the glasses of our judgment. A judgment stems from our beliefs (“Uneducated people are stupid”, “I’m always unlucky”, “A man is not supposed to cry”) or norms (“One celebrates Christmas with family and friends”) (see Figure 1).

A judgment can also be directed inwards, towards our own feelings and thoughts. For example, when we experience sadness, we may label this sadness as “unwanted”. In turn, this judgment affects the thoughts that come with it, often leading to a negative spiral of thoughts (“I should not feel like this; I don’t want to feel like this”) and increasing the chance of feeling negative emotions. When we subsequently judge these emotions also as “bad” or “wrong”, we become further dragged into a cycle of thoughts and emotions, as described in session 2.

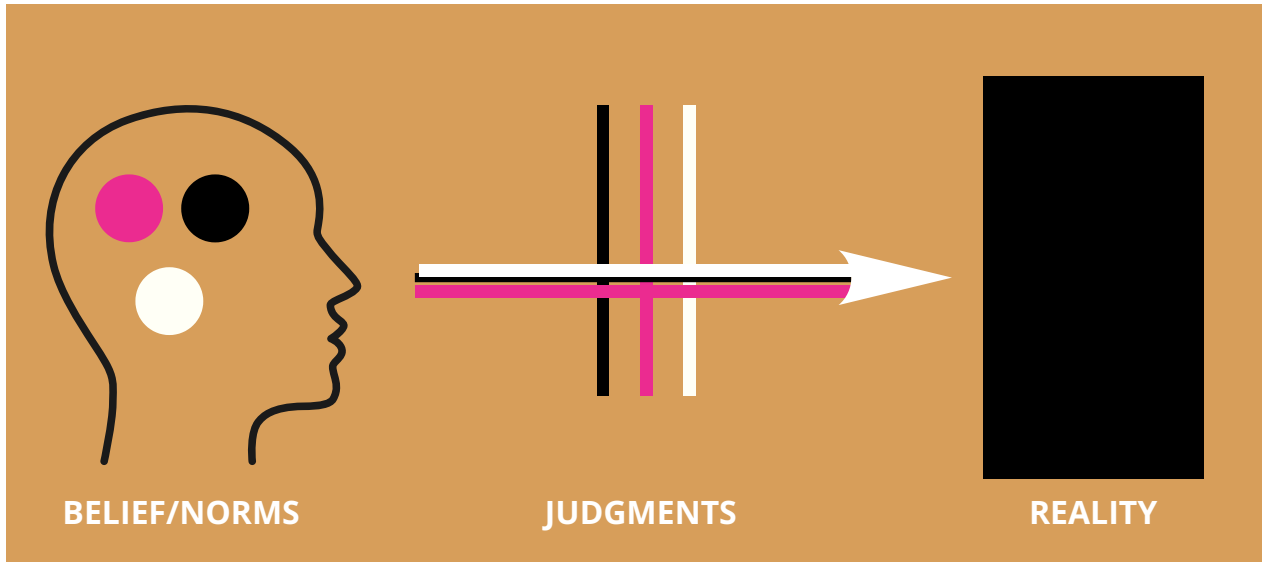
Judgments can also be directed outwards. An example of a judgment outside of ourselves is when we call somebody a “loser” because of his lack of education or position. This judgment affects how we interpret the person’s behavior and how we treat that person. Since we see this person as a “loser”, it is likely that we show this person less respect than we would if we were to see him as a successful person. The moment we judge, we only see our own projections and not other aspects of the person that may be hidden behind these projections.

JUDGMENTS

Interestingly, a judgment often says more about the person who makes the judgment than about the person about whom the judgment is made. No matter how accurate or appropriate a judgment may seem, it is by definition a reflection of our personal opinions and beliefs. Thus, our judgment of another person is not a true characteristic of that person. After all, the person who we call a “loser” because of his lack of education can be a successful person to someone else (e.g., because the person has a lovely family). In this example, the judgment is based on the judging person’s criteria of a “loser” (the lack of education or position).

The judging person is likely to apply these criteria to himself. In other words, the judgmental glasses with which the person sees the outside world correspond to the judgmental glasses with which the person looks at himself.

Fig. 1. Coloured perception: The influence of judgments on perception of reality



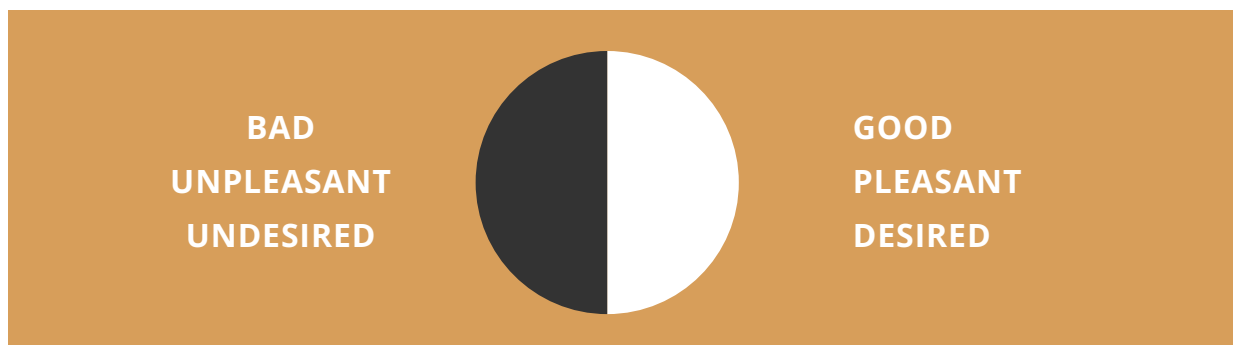
JUDGMENTS

A Judgment Strengthens Duality

Judgment is often dichotomous in character, as it is generally made in extremes, such as good/bad, beautiful/ugly, small/large, desirable/undesirable, pleasant/unpleasant, and the like. Judging creates duality. Duality means contrast. Opposites exist only in relation to each other, and they cannot exist independently. Good can only exist if there is bad. Light can only be there if there is dark. A teacher can only exist if there are students. Opposites are always part of the same coin that consists of two halves, two opposites. The moment that one of these halves falls away, the other half will also no longer exist. For example, if there were no students, then there would no longer be a need for teachers. A teacher is only a teacher if there are students to teach. If you were the only person on earth, would you be a good or a bad person, a tall or a small person, would you be a teacher or a student? Absolutely speaking, there cannot exist a student and teacher, no good and bad and no tall and small. One could say that both can only exist in relation to each other. The existence of one half (bad/student/grief) makes the experience of the other half (good/teacher/pleasure) possible (see Fig. 2).

When we judge, we focus on a specific half of the coin. A judgment focuses on one of the two opposites. We do not see the entire coin, but only one half (see Fig. 3). Our reality is focused on this one half, which receives our full attention. The moment this separation takes place, we tend to hold on to the good and avoid the bad because we see them as independent from each other, as individual events that are unrelated to each other.

Fig. 2. Opposites can only exist in relation to each other



JUDGMENTS

Fig. 3. A judgment focuses our attention on a specific half



However, the moment we realize that the one (bad) cannot exist without the other (good), the tendency to fight and get rid of the bad declines. As we again focus on the whole and not on the individual parts, it gets easier to experience peace on the dark side of the coin. Eventually, it might be possible to be grateful for the experiences we perceive as less enjoyable because they allow us to experience the other side. Negative experiences are just as necessary as the pleasurable ones.

A Judgment Limits Reality

A judgment always highlights only one side of the given information. The reality is in fact endlessly complex. By labeling something “good” or “bad”, you reduce it to just that, “good” or “bad”, although nothing is only good or bad. An event that at one moment is perceived as difficult or bad (e.g., being fired or dismissed from a job), later often turns out to be a positive change (a new and better job). Was the event then good or bad? The judgment delineates an area. It creates a boundary, a limited space in which the reality itself may happen. For example, if we judge a feeling as “bad”, we limit the moving space of this feeling. The feeling must not move or get worse, it may not be there, it has to leave. It also reduces the experience and perceived complexity of the feeling. Even negative feelings can give us valuable insights.

JUDGMENTS

As we look at the example of “loser” mentioned earlier, we can see that we reduced the endlessly complex person to the limited label “loser”. The behavior of this person will subsequently be interpreted within our framework of “loser”. This framework indicates the boundary within which that person can move.

When the person that we perceive as “loser”, for example, registers a success, we are inclined to assign this to luck or the situation. On the contrary, when this person experiences a failure, we see this rather as a result of the person’s own action, supporting our image of this person being a “loser”. We ensure that the person fits our judgment without realizing that we limit the person and ourselves. The judgment “loser” limits us to perceive the human that is hidden behind our projection.

Cultural or historical differences also clearly illustrate the limitations and one-sidedness of a judgment. While a person who, 50 years ago, didn’t go to church was easily judged as a sinner, people who don’t go to church now are judged as as naïve when they say that they believe in God and go to church. It can be enlightening to see how the same event, depending on age, ethnic background, or religion, can be judged differently and thus experienced differently.

A Judgment Creates Conflict

Suppose you feel gloomy. By judging this feeling as bad, you start struggling with that feeling. The gloomy feeling is there, but it is bad and therefore undesirable.

The moment something is judged as undesirable or bad, a conflict occurs between how things are now (bad) and how things should be (good). Not only can this conflict cause us to feel upset, it can also encourage us to want to avoid or to escape the current, as negatively judged, feeling. We are encouraged to expand our effort to get rid of the feeling. Soon, we find ourselves trying to change what we feel right now into something we believe we should or want to feel. In fact, a problem or conflict exists only when a situation, event, or feeling is judged as such.

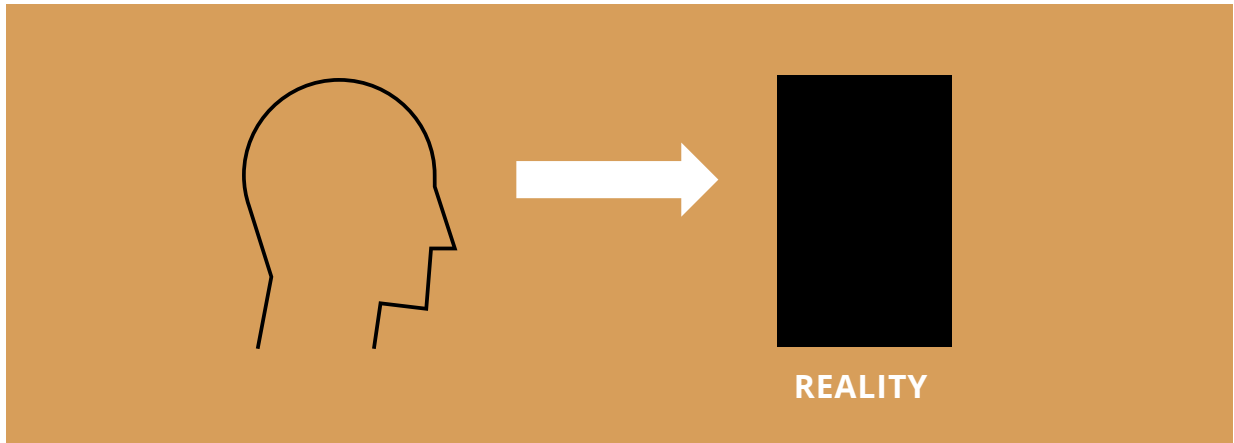
MINDFULNESS AND JUDGMENTS

Mindfulness can help us learn that people, places, things, and events are neither good nor bad but that our mind labels things as such almost automatically. Events, feelings, or persons are not intrinsically good or bad; they “are” simply what they are, that is, events, feelings, and persons. They affect our thoughts and behavior only when we label them as right or wrong.

Understanding judgments is an important part of mindfulness. Judgments often happen automatically. This is the conditioned functioning of our mind. There is nothing wrong with that, as such functioning is necessary to interpret the world around us. However, as described previously, judgments may limit us severely or can even be counterproductive if we forget that they don't reflect reality but our beliefs about reality. By becoming aware of the natural tendency of the mind to judge, the effect of a judgment on our functioning is reduced. The more we become aware of our judgments, the less automatic they become. By noticing that you judge a feeling or a situation, you can decide to focus your attention completely and immediately, without judging, on the experience of the moment. You can be the direct observer of what is happening in the present moment again, without judgmental glasses (see Fig. 4). This helps you create more space not only for yourself, but also for your environment. The conversation with the person who is sitting opposite you is no longer limited to the box in which you put this person. Without judging a gloomy feeling as bad and undesirable, but by accepting and letting it be, a conflict is eliminated. When you refrain from judgment, you see the bigger picture again, realizing that this experience is as necessary as the pleasurable experiences. They are both part of the same coin. The gloom is not bad in an absolute sense. If the gloom is not bad anymore, the gloom is no longer a problem; it is a feeling, like all other feelings.

MINDFULNESS AND JUDGMENTS

Fig. 4. Direct perception: Perception of the reality without judgment



PRACTICE: BEING AWARE OF JUDGMENTS

The only way to reduce the effect of judgments is to be aware of the judgments rather than by trying not to judge. Judging is something the mind often does automatically. Many of the judgments we make during the day are negative. Try to notice this week as many negative thoughts as possible about other people, groups, yourself, situations in which you found yourself, and the like.

See if you can become aware of when you are judging things. Complaining is also a clear example of this. Complaining is a common way of externally expressing what you are internally judging as negative.

See if you can become aware of and observe the judgment. Try not to judge yourself if you notice that you have a judgment (“there I go again, I’m full of judgments, which I should not have”) because then the judgment will just return again in some different form. Simply note this judgment and then return to your breathing, the anchor point of your attention. It is an automatic process that is not necessarily bad. If you have a judgment, ask yourself who you really see, the person/feeling or just your own judgment. That is how you create room for a reality beyond your own limited view again.

If it works and you become aware of the fact that you want to judge something, see if you can let go of the judgment and if you can use a more objective description in which a judgment is not present or only barely. For example, “He didn’t show up, therefore he doesn’t care about me” versus “I was there, he wasn’t there.” Or: “He was wearing ugly shoes” versus “His shoes were not quite my taste” or “What lousy weather” versus “It is raining.” It can be really helpful to train your mind this way.

INFORMATION: BEING AWARE OF JUDGMENTS

By becoming more aware of your judgmental mind, you train the “observing self”. In this way, you will learn to look at the content of your mind, as a kind of independent observer, without going along with it. You will not only gain more insight into the automatic patterns of your mind, such as judgments, but you will also learn to be able to believe or disbelieve the judgment. You could say that you will have more control over the consequences of your thoughts.

Many forms of judgments exist. A common example is complaining. Complaining is rarely aimed at actually solving the problem (“I really don’t want to work”, “Things never work out the way I want”). You do not expect the person to whom you complain to have a solution for you. Instead, you are asking for a confirmation of a negative state, hoping that the person goes along with it.

It is important to note that judging itself is not problematic. Obviously, in some cases, it is unavoidable or maybe even important to judge, for example, when judging the effectiveness of a goal-oriented process, such as writing an article, building a house, planning a trip, and the like. Here, the judgment reflects a desire for optimal performance. Judging can become problematic when we forget that every judgment, per definition, reflects our own vision of things rather than the things themselves. When judgment is inevitable or desirable, it can be beneficial to learn to express yourself in less dualistic terms (i.e., black/white judgmental terms such as good, bad, wrong). Consciously trying to bring more relativity to your talking (“this is bad” versus “this could be better”) does not need to be at the expense of the effectiveness or clarity of your message. Compare the statement “You did a bad job” with the statement “Your work could be improved”. The latter formulation allows more space for improvement in itself and is not only less offensive but perhaps also more motivating.



**THE ONLY WAY TO
REDUCE THE EFFECT
OF JUDGMENTS IS BY
BECOMING AWARE
OF THE JUDGMENTS.**

AT HOME

- Do the following exercise “Being aware of judgments” this week. You can use a bracelet or elastic band as a tool. Whenever you find yourself making judgments about yourself or others, simply put the bracelet on the other wrist. Move the bracelet from one wrist to the other one in a friendly manner, without judgment, without being hard on yourself, or without internal dialogue. You may become aware of how often you actually (automatically) judge. This exercise may feel somewhat confrontational; however, it also helps demonstrate, in a visceral way, that you are becoming more aware of your thoughts and actions.
- Do the “Body Scan” and seated meditation as often as possible, preferably daily.
- As you do the “Body Scan” or seated meditation, try to pay attention to the judgments you make during or after the exercise. Examples of judgments are, “This is useless”, “I can do this well”, “It didn’t go well”, or “It should feel different”, among others.

LOGBOOK

MONDAY

EXERCISE	TIMES PERFORMED	OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS DURING THE EXERCISE
Body Scan		
Seated Meditation		
Awareness of Judgments		

TUESDAY

EXERCISE	TIMES PERFORMED	OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS DURING THE EXERCISE
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

LOGBOOK

WEDNESDAY

EXERCISE	TIMES PERFORMED	OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS DURING THE EXERCISE
Body Scan		
Seated Meditation		
Awareness of Judgments		

THURSDAY

EXERCISE	TIMES PERFORMED	OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS DURING THE EXERCISE
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

LOGBOOK

FRIDAY

EXERCISE	TIMES PERFORMED	OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS DURING THE EXERCISE
Body Scan		
Seated Meditation		
Awareness of Judgments		

SATURDAY

EXERCISE	TIMES PERFORMED	OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS DURING THE EXERCISE
Body Scan		
Routine Activities		
Consciously Listening		

LOGBOOK

SUNDAY

EXERCISE	TIMES PERFORMED	OBSERVATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS DURING THE EXERCISE
Body Scan		
Seated Meditation		
Awareness of Judgments		

