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SESSION 3

Judgment

JUDGMENTS

Judging is something we constantly do and 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.

There are many things we judge about, 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 COLORS 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).

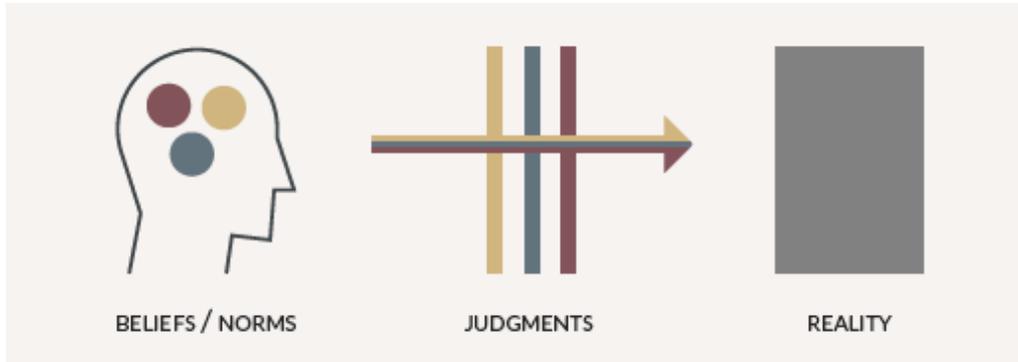
A judgment can be faced inwards, to our own feelings and thoughts. For example, when we experience sadness, we may label this sadness as “unwanted”. In turn, this judgment will affect the thoughts that come with it. We are rather inclined to end up in a negative spiral of thoughts (“I should not feel like this; I don’t want to feel like this”), and the chance of feeling negative emotions increases. 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 faced 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 will affect how we interpret the person’s behavior and how we treat that person. As we see this person as a “loser”, it is likely that we treat this person with less respect than 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.

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 describing or appropriate a judgment may seem, it is per definition a reflection of our personal opinion 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 spends a lot of time with his/her family). In this example, the judgment says something about the criteria of a “loser” of the judging person (lack of education or position). It is likely that the judging person also applies these criteria to himself. In other words, the

judgmental glasses with which the person sees the outside world corresponds to the judgmental glasses with which the person looks at himself.

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



A JUDGMENT STRENGTHENS DUALITY

Judgment is often dichotomous in character. That is, judgment is generally thought of in extremes; good/bad, beautiful/ugly, desirable/undesirable, pleasant/ unpleasant, etc. Judging creates duality. Duality is contrast. Good versus bad, beautiful versus ugly, small versus large, etc. Opposites exist only in relation to each other and 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. This coin thus consists of two halves; two opposites. The moment that one of these halves falls away, the other half will also no longer exist. Suppose for example that there were no students then there would no longer be a need for teachers. After all, 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 limited to this one half. We go there with our full attention. At the moment this separation takes place we tend to hold on to the good and to avoid the bad because we see them independent from each other. They seem to be individual events that are unrelated to each other.

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



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



However, at the moment we see that the one (bad) is required for the other (good), the tendency to fight and get rid of the bad is less. As we again focus on the whole and not 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 we know that these are necessary to be able 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 labelling something “good” or “bad”, you reduce it just to that: “good” or “bad”, although there is nothing only good or bad. An event that at that 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 as we are willing to look at them and allow them to demonstrate these insights.

As we look at the earlier mentioned example, the judgment “loser”, 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 in which that person can move.

When this person for example registers a success, we are rather inclined to assign this to luck or the situation, while in case of failure we see this rather as a result of the person’s own action and thus confirm our image of his “loser-being”. We ensure that the person fits in 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.

The limitations and one-sidedness of a judgment are also clearly illustrated by means of cultural or historical differences. Where a person who, 50 years ago, didn’t go to church was easily judged as a sinner, people nowadays are just labeled 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 a relationship involving struggle with that feeling. The gloomy feeling is there, but it is bad and therefore undesirable.

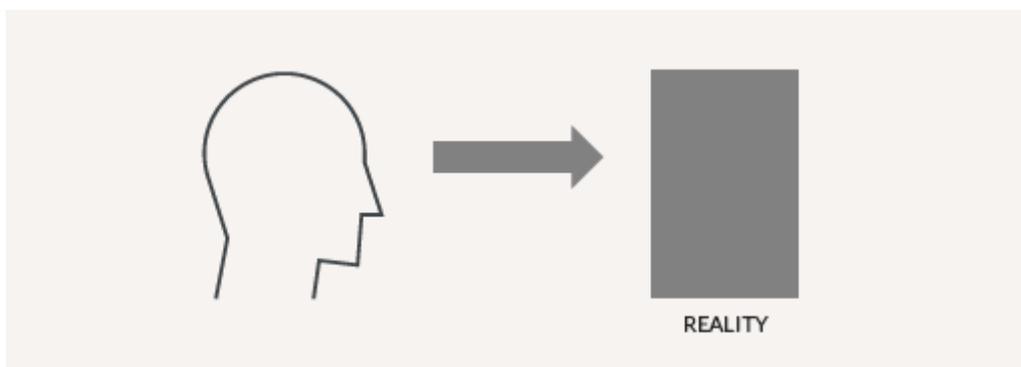
The moment something is judged as undesirable or bad a conflict occurs; namely between how things are now (bad) and how things should be (good). Not only can this conflict cause us to feel upset, it can also encourage us to want to avoid or to escape from the current, as negatively judged, situation. We are encouraged to expend effort to get rid of the feeling, which often leads to the paradoxical effect that the feeling gets stronger. In fact, there is only a problem or conflict when a situation, event or feeling is judged as such.

MINDFULNESS AND JUDGMENTS

Mindfulness can help us learn that people, places and 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; events, feelings and persons. Only when we label them as right or wrong, they affect our thoughts and behavior.

An important part of mindfulness is to understand judgments. Judgments often happen automatically. This is the conditioned functioning of our mind. There is nothing wrong with that and it is also necessary to interpret the world around us. However, as previously described, 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 our minds will tend to label automatically. 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 filters (see fig. 4). This not only creates more space 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, there is no longer a conflict. When you refrain from judgment you see the bigger picture again; 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.

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 not by striving not to judge, but to be aware of the judgments. Judging is something the mind often does automatically. Many of the judgments we have during the day are negative. Try to notice this week as many negative thoughts about other people, groups, yourself, situations you are in etc. as possible.

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 through again in some different form. Simply note this judgment and then return to your breathing, the anchor point of your attention. That it happens is not bad, it is an automatic process. And 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 choice 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 or at least barely present. 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” (Dijkman, 1982). 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 the judgment or not. You could say that you will have more control over the consequences of your thoughts.

There are many forms of daily judgments. 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. It is rather 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. Usually, this regards the effectiveness of a goal-oriented process, such as writing an article, building a house, planning a trip, etc. 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 on things, not 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). Once you consciously try to bring more relativity to your talking (“this is bad” versus “this could be better”) this doesn’t 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 contributes more space for improvement in itself and is not only less offensive but perhaps also more motivating.



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 switch the wrist on which you are wearing the bracelet. Do this switch without judgment, without being hard on yourself, or internal dialogue. Just switch in a friendly manner. 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 on a daily basis.
- 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”, “It should feel different”, etc.

LOGBOOK

MONDAY

| Exercise | Times performed | Observations or perceptions during the exercise |
|------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Body Scan | | |
| Seated Meditation | | |
| Awareness of Judgments | | |

TUESDAY

| Exercise | Times performed | Observations or perceptions during the exercise |
|------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Body Scan | | |
| Seated Meditation | | |
| Awareness of Judgments | | |

WEDNESDAY

| Exercise | Times performed | Observations or perceptions during the exercise |
|------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Body Scan | | |
| Seated Meditation | | |
| Awareness of Judgments | | |

THURSDAY

| Exercise | Times performed | Observations or perceptions during the exercise |
|------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Body Scan | | |
| Seated Meditation | | |
| Awareness of Judgments | | |

FRIDAY

| Exercise | Times performed | Observations or perceptions during the exercise |
|------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Body Scan | | |
| Seated Meditation | | |
| Awareness of Judgments | | |

SATURDAY

| Exercise | Times performed | Observations or perceptions during the exercise |
|------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Body Scan | | |
| Seated Meditation | | |
| Awareness of Judgments | | |

SUNDAY

| Exercise | Times performed | Observations or perceptions during the exercise |
|------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Body Scan | | |
| Seated Meditation | | |
| Awareness of Judgments | | |

NOTES
