

# On Making Judgments and Being Judgmental

## **Eight dynamics to consider in making constructive judgments**

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The other day my father asked me the difference between making judgments and being a judgmental person. Given how I sometimes experience my father, it was a potentially loaded question. Although he has many wonderful qualities and we are close, it certainly is the case that I (and several others) occasionally experience him as being overly judgmental. In asking me the question, it was clear that he wanted to make the point that everyone makes judgments all the time. And, if that is the case, why are only certain people accused of being judgmental? Or, to put it slightly differently, is it fair to say that am I being judgmental if I accuse my father of being judgmental?

Carl Rogers had much to say about problems associated being judgmental. The ideal of a nonjudgmental attitude was central to his client centered humanistic approach to psychotherapy. ([See Mayer's blogs on this](#)). Roger's argued that people had a positive growth force that would be stunted from reaching its potential in the context of judgmental others. Because of this, Roger's maintained that successful therapy required the therapist to possess a nonjudgmental, positive regard, which he described as the following:

*...experiencing a warm acceptance of each aspect of the client's experience as being a part of that client... It means that there are no conditions of acceptance, no feeling of "I like you only if you are thus and so." It means a "prizing" of the person, as Dewey has used that term. It is at the opposite pole from a selective evaluating attitude -- "You are bad in these ways, good in those."*

With this frame in mind, let's say your 15 year-old client (or daughter) has just let you know that last night at a party she lost her virginity via having casual, unprotected sex with a senior she just met. Although I would clearly have a more charged reaction if it were my daughter, even if I were working with a client I certainly would have concerns that reflected my values and opinions about the wisdom of this act. This brings us back to my father's basic point, which is that we are constantly viewing others' actions through evaluative lenses. And shouldn't we be doing so? I certainly judge the actions of my kids, students, wife, etc. It would be impossible not to. Even in the therapy room, I will be nodding and encouraging of my clients when they voice certain things I see as adaptive (e.g., "It was pretty impressive that you did that", "That took a lot of courage to say", "I think you are getting better with managing that."), and question other acts that I see as maladaptive (e.g., "I wonder if that was the

best approach”, “It seems your impulsivity might have got the best of you”, “Do you think a part of you might regret that later?”). Indeed, most would argue that even the great Carl Rogers was constantly making statements that reflected his judgments about the way people ought to be ([see here for an interesting clip involving Rogers](#)). So that brings us back to the original question: What is the difference between making judgments and being judgmental?

If you look up the word judgmental in the dictionary, there are generally two meanings, which help us sort out the issues. One has to do with making judgments; so, yes, at a basic semantic level making judgments is being judgmental.

The other meaning of judgmental has to do with being overly critical in an unhelpful way, and it is this separate meaning that allows us to get to the heart of the issue. It is when we make judgments in ways that have harmful or negative consequences that we are being judgmental in ways that are best to avoid. How do we know how to make constructive as opposed to problematic judgments? This is a very complicated question, but below are eight key dynamics that are useful to keep in mind when judging others.

**1. The empathy dynamic.** When evaluating someone else’s actions or personality, it is crucial that you understand where they are coming from, their perspective, history, and the experiences that went into the current situation. In the above example of the 15 year-old, at some point it would be crucial to be very clear about her narrative and understanding what she was thinking and feeling when she made that decision.

**2. The values-frame dynamic.** Related to the empathy dynamic, this dynamic refers to whose values are being used to frame the evaluation and why. Are those value-frames absolute, or idiosyncratic and relative? For example, if you claim that it is wrong to be a homosexual, what value-frame are you enacting? What if that person does not get their values from the same place?

**3. The power dynamic.** Obviously, the dynamics are very different if your judgments potentially carry much influence, as opposed to if they do not. So, it is crucial to keep in mind what is the direct and potential impact of your judgment.

**4. The person vs. situation dynamic.** Research shows that when judging others we tend to over-attribute acts to people’s personalities rather than to the variables in the specific situation. For example, if someone cuts in line, we will tend to see that person as a selfish and insensitive. Of course, if we cut in line, we will have the situational need very clear in our heads (“I am in a hurry and need to do it just this once!”).

**5. The person vs. the act dynamic.** Even at his most nonjudgmental, Rogers certainly would agree that not all behaviors are created equal. To maintain a nonjudgmental attitude toward an individual's essence, many therapists will separate problematic acts from the person. In short, judge the sin, not the sinner.

**6. The open vs. closed dynamic.** Although we need to be cautious about being gullible, it is crucial that if new data emerge that challenges our initial opinions we remain open to changing our evaluations.

**7. The shallow vs. expert knowledge dynamic.** Ideally, our commitments to our judgments ought to be based on the depth of our knowledge. Unfortunately, people often form strong judgments basic on snapshots and stereotyped frames. Indeed, it is not at all uncommon that the more you know the less certain you become.

**8. The optimistic vs. pessimistic dynamic.** Although overly optimistic judgments about others can surely create potential problems, it is probably also the case that pessimistic judgments about others are more likely to be damaging or injurious.

So, to answer my father's question, someone is being judgmental when their judgments are power-driven, unempathetic, based on their own idiosyncratic values or tastes, overly based on other people's character, and are closed, shallow, and pessimistic, and ultimately have the consequence of making the other person feel problematically diminished. Given these reflections, perhaps I will defer to him to decide if he has ever made judgments in a problematic way.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/theory-knowledge/201305/making-judgments-and-being-judgmental>

In today's society there are many different cultures, nationalities, races. It is sometimes hard to cope with the fact that there are people out there who look, act, talk differently from yourself. These steps will help you overcome judging others because they are different. Following are some of the **Steps**

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**Think.** If you were born from another mother how different would you be as opposed to now. The answer is obviously you would be a completely different person. Everyone has a different mother and father. Even brothers and sisters appear to be different in many ways. Twins may look the same, but over time develop their own ideas and thoughts. This is the way it is with every single person.

**Try not to Judge.** Being a good judge of character can be challenging. One would have to know everything there is to know about a person in order to make a sound judgment. This is an almost impossible task to accomplish when we judge people we don't really know that well or at all.

**Understand Variations.** The flowers that grow have different shapes, sizes, and colors. Every color is beautiful in its own way. The same way a human being is different and has his or her own way of being. The human family is a variation of colors and beautiful designs.

**Teach yourself to not be judgmental and to think about every action you take when it comes to judging.** The best teacher is yourself, this is the best way for you to stop being prejudice.

**Realize that you are not All knowing.** You sometimes think you know everything and every answer to every single question. This is obviously silly and a ludicrous idea. You should know that you don't have all the answers. Having this in mind how can you judge a person when you are limited to knowing certain truths about the person.

**Know that you are NOT Superior.** If you think you are superior then you should really come down from the clouds. The person you are attacking in a discriminating way is from the same human family as you are. You should learn to be humble and not try to be superior to everyone else.

**Show Respect.** If you want to be respected, then everyone should treat you with decency. In the same way you should treat others with respect even if you don't know that person. If everyone were judgmental then society would not be able to function properly.

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## **Tips**

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- Treat others the same way you want to be treated.
- Try to train yourself to be humble.
- Talk about your feelings to people who care about you.
- Think about the person not just yourself.

## **Are you judgemental?**

Many of us have fixed opinions about people or situations, that can be perceived by others as judgemental or harsh. What about you?

- 1. A colleague who always says she is broke has just announced that she's off on holiday to the Seychelles. You say:
  - ☐ How about if I come with you?
  - ☐ You lucky thing. Make the most of it!
  - ☐ It's alright for some!
  - ☐ Have you won the lottery?
- 2. One of your friends is telling you about her millionth break-up. You:
  - ☐ Daren't interrupt. She's upset
  - ☐ Say 'Aren't you bored of going over the same ground all the time?'
  - ☐ Console her and tell her that every cloud has a silver lining
  - ☐ Feel like you've heard it all before
- 3. The person you're having dinner with keeps looking around the room. You:
  - ☐ Assume you've put them off in some way
  - ☐ Assume that they're not interested in your conversation
  - ☐ Get suspicious
  - ☐ Ask them to look at you instead
- 4. During a meeting your boss seems to be bullying one of your colleagues, you:
  - ☐ Ask why he is harassing your colleague in that way
  - ☐ Lower your eyes and wait for the storm to pass
  - ☐ Say, 'Roll up, get your tickets...'
  - ☐ Say, with irony, 'Now that's how a real boss behaves'
- 5. The trousers you are trying on don't really suit you but the saleswoman says they look fabulous. You:
  - ☐ Look in the mirror again to see if she's got a point

- ☐ Tell her she's got no taste
- ☐ Let out a huge sigh to indicate that you are irritated with her
- ☐ Smile to yourself — she's only doing her job
- 6. You have been to a concert that you really enjoyed, but which your partner didn't like. You:
  - ☐ Tease him/her, saying, 'Oh, and I suppose you know what everyone should enjoy?'
  - ☐ Laugh about it. Each to their own
  - ☐ Attack him/her, saying, 'You've got no idea about music'
  - ☐ End up agreeing that it perhaps wouldn't have won any prizes
- 7. Your mother-in-law has a reputation for being obnoxious, and it's time for you to meet her. You:
  - ☐ Are nervous, but you know it's something you've just got to do
  - ☐ Prepare a few wounding come-backs
  - ☐ Think, 'Just let her try...'
  - ☐ Are looking forward to it: can she be that bad?
- 8. Before going to see a new film you:
  - ☐ Look at a film magazine to see what the critics said about it
  - ☐ Ask your friends what they thought of it
  - ☐ Trust your instincts
  - ☐ Avoid any opinion that might sway you
- 9. A colleague who has until now been quite standoffish needs you to do something for her. You:
  - ☐ Agree to do it. It'll be a way of showing her that you're a nice person
  - ☐ Point out that you're not paid to help everyone else out
  - ☐ Think it's funny that she's speaking to you now that she needs something
  - ☐ Agree to do it. That way you will get to know her better

<http://www.psychologies.co.uk/tests/are-you-judgemental.html>