When judgment gets in the way of love

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I teach a mindfulness-based module, The Undivided Mind, at the National University of Singapore. It has given me a peek into the minds of some of the students.

With the permission of one of them, I am sharing parts of her essay, one of the 20 testimonials shared by the students in the last semester.

“Midway through my mindfulness journey, I arrived at an epiphany that the biggest habit I had to overcome was being overly judgmental of myself and others.

Before I became mindful of this habit, my life was often unhappy as I constantly judged myself for my actions and thoughts, as well as judged others for their actions and words.

I would let these judgments affect negatively in my daily life and yet, I was oblivious to the cause of my unhappiness as I was never mindful of those judgmental thoughts going on in my mind.

There were many small judgments on my friends, acquaintances and even people I have never met before but merely saw on social media. However, the biggest and most painful judgments were laid on my parents.

Since my parents agreed to live separate lives while cohabiting when I was 18, life has never been the same for me.

My judgments of them brought me and my family much unhappiness, as I would show them in my sharp words and ignorant actions towards my parents. My home slowly grew into a cold and silent place, although we were all living together.

Ever since I started my mindfulness journey, I wanted to focus my efforts on making home a place of warmth and love again. This would begin with me realizing how judgmental I was of my parents.

At home, I tried to be less judgmental of my parents by being mindful of negative thoughts about them. I would think twice before succumbing to rash reactions against them.

However, it soon became clear that the problem was not solely about my judgments of them, but also my judgments of myself. I couldn’t let go of the angry, unhappily married judgmental person I had been for four years – change was difficult and daunting.

I am afraid of a change, for fear that I won’t know who I am.

When I realized this, it took me many weeks and great encouragement to become a more accepting person.

While the process was painful, the outcome was surprisingly positive. I found myself feeling less unhappily than before and letting go of small judgments and worries.

It took me more time to become more accepting of my parents, and I was still struggling with the pain that they have brought into my life. The first step I took was to ‘fake it till I make it’.

While I knew I would regret more time to reconcile with myself, I wanted to improve my relationships with my parents first. I began to be more in touch with them over text and at home, initiating more things to do with them individually such as walking, exercising and having meals.

Though I was initially averse of the vulnerability and their reactions, they welcomed my initiatives so lovingly and warmly.

I found myself sharing more about my life as well as learning more to what was going on in their lives after a few weeks.

I would ask them about their school days, memories of when I was still young and their work. While they shared fervently with me, I found myself being more on the reserved end as I was still ‘taking it’. To avoid offending them or hurting them, I would share the good side of my life and avoid talking about my problems.

I realized that this stemmed from my lack of trust in my parents. I did not trust them to listen acceptingly to my problems, and neither did I trust their advice. Hence, I did not seek any.

I had to learn to think that these people, who’ve been dear to me for so many years, would support me and not feel hurt, despite the lack of communication.

I found myself dealing with my problems and anxieties on my own. Seeking support from friends and family was rare.

When I was in school, I used to develop trust in my parents initially. When facing difficulties regarding school, I would approach my parents individually for their advice, and whilst they may not agree with all their advice, I tried to accept them. I would not even complain about my problems.

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It is common for teenagers to judge their parents harshly. The module facilitates the students’ inward journey to discover the judgments that occupy their minds and gain insights into how these judgments define their experiences.

Judgments are usually based on what happened in the past and they influence how we feel, in particular towards the ones closest to us. Our feelings in turn influence how we behave and react in situations.

Mindfulness is about paying attention to the present moment in a non-judgmental way. It is to be practiced with foundational attitudes and tools that help us to refrain us from mindless blame.

Now judging is a key foundational attitude in being mindful, now we can see things as they are instead of through biased filters.

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By being aware of how these judgments create havoc in our minds and having the tools to reflect on them and realize that we accept the past (that we can’t change) and move forward. We can then transition into living a world with less emotional pain.

Most of the “catastrophizing” in our lives are largely caused in our minds. Applying the practices and tools of mindfulness can transform our minds to be less judgmental and more appreciative of what we have in life.”

Illustration: Cel. Gluan