



Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program

The Hidden Risks of Being Judgmental

“The ability to observe without evaluating is the highest form of intelligence.” -Jiddu Krishnamurti

Being a law student requires skills that relate to making judgments: analysis, synthesis, problem solving, writing, and critical thinking. Law students spend as many hours in a week exercising these skills as attorneys do (in some cases, even more). As a result, you might have a hard time “turning off” that way of thinking even when you aren’t at school or working on assignments.

The more we practice certain styles of thinking, the more the brain becomes accustomed to using the parts of the brain associated with that pattern. What happens to the parts of the brain that are not used regularly? We used to think that those parts would permanently atrophy. Thankfully, we now know that neurogenesis, or the regeneration of the brain, can occur if we make the effort to use all parts of the brain. One way to use different parts of the brain is to mindfully engage in different ways of thinking about the world around us.

The brain, like human behavior and the emotions we experience on a daily basis, can fall into a rut. When we fall into a rut of constantly using our critical thinking skills or ability to make judgments, that pattern of thinking will be used in areas that are outside of work. The result is that we can become critical and judgmental of ourselves and those around us, such as our friends and family. In addition, being judgmental of ourselves or others produces chemicals and hormones in the body that compromise the immune system and, over time, leave us vulnerable to disease and illness.

It can be difficult to know the difference between using critical thinking skills and being critical in general, or making judgments and being judgmental. Generally speaking, if we experience the following, we are most likely being critical and judgmental:

1. Have a strong emotional reaction to the situation;
2. Believe that another person's words or actions are wrong because we would have "done things differently;"
3. Experience thoughts that come from an "us vs. them" type of mentality;
4. Self-criticism;
5. Have a difficult time accepting "what is";
6. Comparing ourselves to others; or
7. Believe that the people around us should know what we are thinking, or what we need, and become angry with them when they don't "read our mind."

So how do we change this pattern? The first step is to become aware of our thought patterns and what skills we are using in different circumstances. At school, your job as a law student is to formulate arguments and present information in ways that will control the outcome of a case (or hypothetical). At home, however, attempting to control the people you love and care about can destroy relationships. When you are finished with school work for the day, purposely let the critical thinking and judging part of your brain rest. Start exercising the compassionate, understanding, and cooperative parts of your brain. Rather than continuing to direct and control (or argue with) those around you after you leave school or finish studying, start asking thoughtful questions and listening to your friends and family at home. You will be surprised how much happier you will become when you find that your brain, your personality, and your behaviors can be multi-dimensional and creative rather than static and predictable.

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