



Judging What it Really Means to be Nonjudgmental

The importance of being non-judgmental as a counselor is well-documented and well-known. Clients simply do not respond well when they feel that they are being judged, therefore a nonjudgmental stance is critical in the therapeutic relationship. Most individuals would agree with that statement regardless of their background or personal experience. A nonjudgmental interpersonal approach is at the foundation of the process of helping others to feel accepted and emotionally safe, which then is a doorway into open and honest personal sharing and communication. People tend to be defensive and guarded when they perceive that they are being judged, whereas when one senses nonjudgmental empathy and understanding from another person, it is much easier to form a bond of sincere trust. To put it in a personal perspective, when you think about your closest friends, it is likely that one of the reasons you are close with those persons is because you do not feel judged by them thus enabling you to be yourself and share your innermost thoughts and feelings openly and honestly.

However, in spite of the importance of being nonjudgmental in the counseling setting, it is important to ask some simple but incredibly valid questions: Is it possible to be completely nonjudgmental? Is it even reasonable to cast aside all forms of judgement? After all, isn't there some value in both possessing and utilizing good judgment? In order to answer these questions, let's consider what it really means to be "nonjudgmental" as a counselor. A good place to start is by clearly defining what it means to be nonjudgmental and then determine reasonable expectations for counselors based on this.

First, there are several definitions of "nonjudgmental". For the sake of this discussion, one definition we **do not** want to use is:

Nonjudgmental, adj: *Of, relating to, or denoting an attitude, approach, etc., that is open and not incorporating a judgment one way or the other*

A challenge to that particular definition is to question if it is even possible to have an attitude or approach that completely does not "incorporate judgement in one way or another" As humans we are always subject to filter situations through our own personal experiences, values, morals, opinions, and feelings, to some degree. Therefore, on some level, even if it is minute, some degree of judgement is inevitable. Consider the following examples:

Judgement is affected by experience: Suppose a person who loved dogs from an early age, reached out their hand to what looked like a friendly dog and then that person unexpectedly got their hand bitten by this dog with a seemingly friendly appearance. That individual may continue to love dogs, just the same, but it is unlikely he or she will ever feel the same about putting their hand out to an unknown dog again, at least not for a long while. That person's judgement of dogs has been impacted by experience, even if their overall love for dogs as a whole has not been diminished.

Judgement is influenced by values: Again sticking with a similar example, consider a person who holds the care and safety of animals in high esteem. An individual who highly values kindness to animals would likely face some degree of challenge if he or she was asked to work with someone who has deliberately hurt animals. This does not mean that a counselor who was an animal lover could not work with someone who has committed some form of animal cruelty. To the contrary, a trained counselor can still work on practicing empathy even when there is disagreement in values. It is possible to try to understand where someone is coming from even if we completely disagree with that person's actions and motives. However, getting back to the topic of judgement, in this example, it is unrealistic to expect that the counselor who highly values animal rights, could completely suspend all judgement. Some degree of judgement at least on an internal level, is inevitable for any human with a strong sense of values in one area or another. Even if that counselor did not let their internal judgment based on their value of animals to affect their behavior or attitude toward the animal abusing client, nonetheless, there is still some judgement present internally that inevitably must be dealt with.



Therefore, a much better definition of *nonjudgmental* is: ***tending not to judge other people harshly or unfairly: not too critical of other people***

When considering this more practical, reasonable and applicable definition, it removes the sense of an absolute when it comes to measuring judgement. This definition does not expect or require a complete absence of judgement to be nonjudgmental. Rather, it acknowledges that one can be successful by “tending not to” lean toward judgement and one can be “not too” critical of others. It is much easier to accept that we can prevent ourselves from being overly critical and we can strive to avoid being unfair even when these tendencies may be present in a particular situation. Therefore, this more realistic view of what is involved in being nonjudgmental makes a lot more sense. This definition allows for those natural yet challenging instances when we feel a personal sense of judgement internally, provided we just do not allow those tendencies to direct or control our attitude, speech or behavior toward others as counselors

So as counselors and as human beings in general it is a basic truth to acknowledge that we all may feel judgmental from time to time. Sometimes we can sense this coming and at other times it may catch us by surprise. Rather than to blindly state “I am completely nonjudgmental” and then try to convince yourself that you feel the same way about all people, it is more pragmatic to focus on our attitude and how we treat people. In other words, our internal experience about different clients is going to vary to some degree. Basic human nature includes a tendency to have preferences and aversions; likes and dislikes. However the way we behave toward others comes first and foremost in the effort to display a nonjudgmental attitude. In other words, the end result of our personal experiences with judgement involves *demonstrating* a nonjudgmental approach to counseling. It is essential that we treat all clients fairly and equally. It is our ethical obligation to do the best we can for each and every person we serve as counselors, regardless of our personal feelings about that individual. It would be unethical to only help the clients we like or the ones we feel closest too or just those whom we identify with. However, to believe that the effort involved is going to be the same with every individual that we work with is a form of self-denial. When it comes to displaying a nonjudgmental attitude, sometimes we have to try harder than at other times from one person to the next.

To illustrate: Think about a teacher in a classroom. Naturally the teacher may find some students to be more engaging, charming, warm, cooperative, etc. than others. Is it reasonable to think that the teacher will like all of the children the same? In any group of students, there will be some more favorable to work with and some who require more of an effort to engage. It is appropriate to hold the teacher to the standard that he or she *treats* all of the students the same but it is unrealistic to think that the teacher will personally like working with all of them the same. A skilled, ethical teacher who is striving to be nonjudgmental looks for the good in all of his or her students, however for some students more than others, that process is just a little bit easier. To simplify this with an even more basic illustration: Consider the fact that most people eat a wide variety of types of foods. Although one may consume many different kinds of foods, some kinds go down much easier and are much more enjoyable to eat than others. It may be incredibly easy and enjoyable to devour your slice of pizza while it may take much more effort to ingest your Brussel sprouts (based of course, on your personal preferences)

Keep in mind, that the point being made is not that people automatically like or connect with the “easy” or more cooperative clients in treatment settings. To the contrary, some counselors, (myself included) both embrace and enjoy some of the more difficult, formidable and contentious individuals that we come across in treatment. Some counselors enjoy the challenges involved with working with an angry, resistant, or defiant client. It can be very rewarding to see a client who comes in with a proverbial “chip in his or her shoulder” eventually come around and start opening up and cooperating. A counselor with an affinity for working with more difficult clients may be more inclined to naturally be nonjudgmental however nonetheless, no one on earth is completely nonjudgmental. All of us have our likes and dislikes, and our comfort zone and fears. Every counselor experiences varying levels of personal reward with different types of clients as well as varying levels of distress and frustration with others. If you are actively working as a counselor right now, a good way to illustrate this is to think about your feelings when you look at your daily client schedule or group



roster. Certain names on that client list will trigger varying levels of enthusiasm or apprehension based on your personal inclinations, ideals and expectations.

Perhaps some individuals reading this may be thinking that this painfully honest viewpoint requires that a counselor be disingenuous or deceptive. To the contrary, acknowledging our personal preferences is in fact sincere, truthful and frank while ignoring our individual biases and preferences is really what would actually be considered disingenuous and deceptive. When we first acknowledge our personal biases only then can we work to overcome them. Ignoring our individual inclinations and predispositions in a blind effort to boldly declare that these biases and preferences do not exist indicates a lack of insight and self-awareness and instead is a form of self-deception. To improve as counselors, it is required that we face both our strengths and our weaknesses in a continuous effort to self-improve and grow in our abilities. Remember, the goal is not to “cherry pick” our clients by simply sticking with those we feel comfortable with. Rather, it is our responsibility to develop our abilities to work with clients who challenge us.

One last way to emphasize the point from a personal perspective is something I have learned from doing interviews as a supervisor. A common interview question in the counseling field is to ask a job candidate to speak about a client that they felt like they did good work with. Quite often most individuals faced with that scenario will speak about a client that they liked. Individuals tend to talk about a client they felt a bond with, that they enjoyed working with, and that they connected well with. To do good work with a client like that is not to be diminished, however it is much more useful to hear about a counselor who made positive progress with a client that **they did not like** and that they did not easily bond with. So a better interview question is to ask someone to describe their work with a challenging and difficult client where perhaps forming a therapeutic alliance was rough-going. Again, think of your own personal counseling experience of looking down at your list of clients for the day and perhaps seeing that one name on the list that brings feelings of stress, apprehension or even dread. It is that client that you know for sure just isn't going to be easy. It may be that client in one of your therapy groups, in which the group is astronomically easier to run on the days when he or she decides not to show up. When a counselor can discuss positive experiences working with those types of stressful situations that is a better measure of success than simply forming a bond with someone who is likeable, motivated and easy going. The former, more challenging clients being discussed in this example, often require a counselor to test his or skills at being nonjudgmental as we have been discussing up to this point.

Consider some questions for self-exploration and growth include (Complete the sentences)

“I find it challenging to work with clients who...”

“I feel frustrated when I am faced with a client who...”

“I find it easier to work with clients who....”

“I find it more enjoyable and rewarding when I work with clients who...”

“I need to work on my ability to deal more effectively with...”

“I have to admit someone can push my buttons when...”

“I am more in my comfort zone when working with....”



Strategies

What are some practical strategies for counselors working on consistently being nonjudgmental, while still using good judgement? Consider the following:

Acknowledge your biases. Learning and growth starts with honest insight and self-awareness. Therefore, rather than deny it when a client makes you feel uncomfortable, instead accept it as a simple reality that happens to everyone from time to time. Particularly in substance abuse treatment, the nature of addiction drives people toward some very objectionable behaviors and experiences that can be difficult to listen too. When you are open with yourself about your own feelings and predispositions only then can you begin to work on these personal issues and struggles.

“It’s not so much the journey that’s important; as is the way that we treat those we encounter...” – **Jeremy Aldana**

Never forget: Empathy is your lifeline: When there is a tendency to feel judgmental or otherwise uncomfortable in a session, always remember that empathy is your greatest tool. Remember the critical concept of “**Empathy without Agreement**”, which states that we can work toward empathizing with and understanding things that we don’t agree with. At face value, empathy without agreement can seem controversial but instead always remember the fact that empathizing with something in no way means that you are excusing or condoning it. Using empathy without agreement means striving to temporarily put yourself in the clients’ world and viewpoint to gain understanding while keeping the focus off of your own values that may cloud your judgement in that instance. At times it means allowing ourselves to mentally go places as a therapist that we may not otherwise dwell upon in our personal time away from the client. Consider the examples below of empathy without agreement using the topic of violence as an example:

- **Violence:** It is likely you do not condone or agree with violence, but can you *understand* why someone may choose to be violent? If you were working with a client who was telling you about a violent act that he or she committed in his or her past, that you personally find reprehensible, can you put aside your personal values temporarily and try to understand why that client performed that violent act? Can you then display this empathy toward the client? Finally, at the end of the session, are you able to recuperate emotionally and mentally after this exchange? If the answer is yes, you are successfully practicing Empathy without Agreement, which is a critical skill when truly working toward taking a nonjudgmental stance in therapy with challenging clients. Empathy without agreement works across a wide array of challenging areas often faced in substance abuse and mental health counseling. You can always strive to understand even when you do not agree

Sharpen your “Strengths Radar” – When working with clients who are not so easy to work with, it is critical to make it a constant practice to remain positive in the face of negativity by maintaining a strong focus on the good in people as individuals. Again, with some people, identifying specific positive qualities can be easy, but with others, it can be a challenge. A strengths-based viewpoint is extremely helpful when it comes to practicing a nonjudgmental stance in treatment. One way to do that successfully is to learn to reframe negative qualities into positive ones. Consider some examples:

Someone who seems...



- **Annoying**, can instead be viewed as **persistent** or **enduring**
- **Demanding** can instead be viewed as **determined** or **focused**
- **Hostility** and **deceit**, in some cases can be viewed as **survival skills**
- **Manipulation** in some cases can be viewed as “**Getting one’s needs met**”
- **Argumentative** traits can instead be viewed as “**justice-seeking**”
- **Compulsive** can instead be viewed as **Driven**

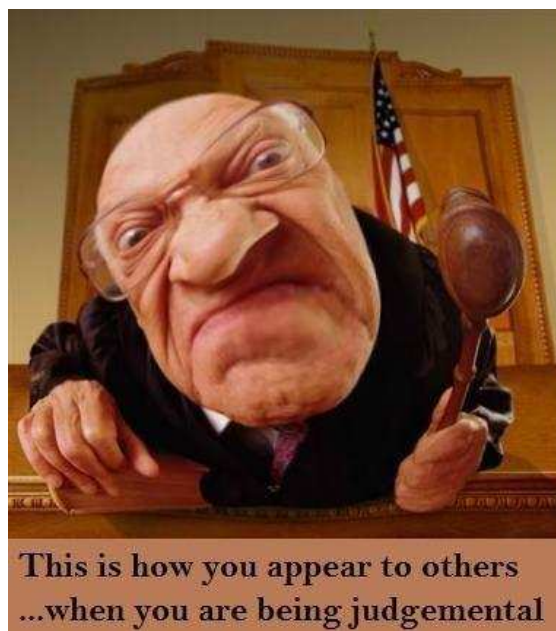
And many more...It is essential for counselors to be a reliable source of positive energy and hope by looking for the good even when things do not seem to be so good at face value.

Work also on your other positive personal qualities- Being accepting, fair, patient, understanding, welcoming, kind, and open-minded are all reasonable and attainable aspects of a nonjudgmental attitude even in the most difficult situations. Use your personal strengths to your advantage when it comes to improving your overall attitude when faced with challenging counseling interactions. .

Finally, talk to others – Supervision and peer support in challenging counseling environments is essential. After a difficult session, to be able to take a few minutes to go into your coworker’s office and confess “that was a really rough session” or admit “that is just a tough client for me” can go a long way when it comes to recharging your battery, so to speak, to resume working in a challenging environment. Keep it real and keep a sense of humor for your own emotional survival.

To sum it all up, counseling is a rewarding career, as most people drawn to the field do so because of a genuine desire to help others. However, honestly accepting the fact that at times helping others is easier in some situations is often the first step in self-awareness. Then insightfully acknowledging our own struggles and practicing the appropriate skills can help a counselor to cope and maintain a nonjudgmental stance that is critical to the therapeutic relationship

When you show deep empathy toward others, their defensive energy goes down, and positive energy replaces it. That’s when you can get more creative in solving problems. - Stephen Covey



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