

UNDERSTANDING AND HANDLING THE INNER CRITIC

Noel Haarburger (2024)

What is the judge?

The judge (*aka- Super-ego or Inner critic*) is a label used to describe the part of our psyche which attacks, shames, coerces, and berates us for not living up to ideal standards and expectations that it sets for us. *It is constantly evaluating our worth and rejecting our present experience now, often comparing it to an ideal standard that we 'should' measure up too in order to belong and be enough.* The judge is one of the greatest sources of our inner suffering and shaper of our psychic reality. It is responsible for generating many of our feelings of shame, guilt, disappointment, anxiety, rejection and hopelessness, often shaping many of our choices, decisions, actions and attention. If we can learn to know and unhook from the judge, we can make a massive difference to our levels of suffering.

Sadly, we can't get rid of the judge through an act of will. In fact who is it that's trying to get rid of the judge. It's the judge!! So what else can we do.? One way of learning to handle your judge is to be curious about and to get to know it really well – its voice, its effects, its function and purpose, its fears, basic assumptions and where it developed, as well as our relationship with it. The more you get to know it, the more you can question, understand and disengage from its influence. You will begin to see it for what it is – an out of date survival strategy trying to help you belong, be loved, Ok and safe – and as you see this, you can gradually let it go.

Remember the judge has probably been around for a long time and that its original role was *to help you survive, get love, fit in, be recognized and to help you maintain some level of connection, cohesion, self-esteem, and adaptation in your early family/social environment.* It learnt to reject and push away the parts of you that threatened these core needs for safety and connection being met. It is important to understand the **underlying self-preserving intention** of your judge. The voice of self-hatred is a strategy not a reality. A significant issue with the judge is that many of its assumptions, judgments and beliefs developed when you were a child or adolescent, and are now mostly out of date, inaccurate and no longer useful to your current development and circumstances. It rarely pays attention to what is true about you now!

The biggest issue is how your judge attacks and rejects you now– not whether the content of its voice holds any accurate awareness. The judge is always counter-productive when it serves out its judgment with an *attack on your worth e.g You are hopeless and useless for not getting it right. You should do things better....* It can only be useful to discover any feedback from the judge when we are not under attack and having our worth assessed. It may have accurate information for us to learn about when its not attacking us. Ultimately the task of healing is to defend and disengage from the judges attack so that you can inquire into and understand its underlying fears and concerns, and to understand and integrate the exiled parts of us that are being attacked and send down to the basement. The judge slowly then stops needing to be a substitute for our natural

capacity of awareness, discernment, growth, learning, intelligence, perception, conscience and self-regulation.

Here are some suggestions to help you get to know and separate from your judge:

- **What is it saying to you?** – What are its judgments, punishments, marching orders, conditions, rules and expectations. What are the ideals it compares you too about how you should improve, cope better, recover faster, be happier, more spontaneous, attractive, successful, thin, wise, aware, together etc.
- **What triggers it?** – In what situations does the judge emerge/disappear? – Are there particular people or situations that you notice who trigger your judge and comparing? E.g your critical boss, your partner or parent? Are there particular emotions, traits, limitations or behaviour's that you beat yourself up for? What are the exceptions? Are there people/places that you never criticize yourself around? What's different? Why? What are you doing and thinking differently when your judge isn't effecting you? Don't forgot the judge can appears in many guises – as a spiritual or personal development superego- you should be more aware, selfless and compassionate! Or as a praising parent when we measure up to its ideal standards – *You did so well for writing that book!*
- **How does it effect you?** – In your body and the way you feel? Does it strengthen you or weaken you? Does it make you feel hopeless, envious, anxious, disconnected, angry, depressed, small or deficient, ashamed? Or do you feel better, relieved, more in control, less guilty, safer or at least back in familiar predictable territory? How do you feel in your body? Exhausted, knotted up, flat, hot, relieved?
- **How do you behave and cope after or during a critic attack?** – do you become aggressive, defensive, self-punishing, withdrawn, shutdown, appeasing, silent, avoidant or addicted to something (drugs, sex, gambling, eating). * *Note – a common way is to project your judge outside yourself and see others as the judge towards you. Your reactions to others may unconsciously reflect the effect of your own judge.*
- **How you relate to your judge** - How you relate to your judge in ways that keep you unconsciously engaged with it? Do you absorb and believe its voice, or try to appease it? Do you argue with it and justify or rationalize your behaviour or feelings? Do you rebel against it and do the opposite or and counter-attack the judge getting into a mental battle? These ways of relating sometimes reflect the way we responded to and adapted to as a child to our care-takers criticisms. Do these ways of relating to your judge put an end to its attacks? In my experience, often they don't and actually stop you from acknowledging that it is attacking you

and deciding to defend against this attack simply and clearly. What would be the risk if you stopped relating to your judge in the way you have learnt?

- **Try to discover its purpose, motivation, fears and assumptions?** – Its very important to understand what does your judge do for you? Does it have any positive intentions at all? (*Usually it does*). To maintain the status quo? To keep you in line with an ideal standard you believe you must meet to be acceptable, good enough, OK or successful? To avoid parts of yourself you consider dangerous or bad? To help you avoid a repetition of abandonment, shame, anxiety, guilty, joy, mistakes, failure, and painful memories? Does it fear and assume that if you don't live up to its ideals you will stop growing, be rejected, alienated, hurt, unwanted, disloyal, ect. *Does it assume* and hope that your only way of being lovable/safe/recognized is when you are nice, intelligent, happy, strong, funny, interesting, efficient – perfect! *Does it assume* that you are only safe from abandonment if you act a certain way, and that you cannot tolerate painful emotions without falling apart; that without it you would be a cork in the ocean with no direction, guidance, motivation, capacity and IDENTITY? Often the judge carries these underlying fears, and in order to keep the status quo, will offer us all these fear stories to get us back to the familiar ways of being.
- **Begin to discover its origins** – How long has it been around for? How and when did this voice and pattern begin to develop? How did this voice and corresponding behaviors once serve your survival, safety and need for love and connection? Where do you think it first developed? Does it remind you of the voice or messages from significant people in your past? Who told you that you must live up to these ideals or act this way? Parents, culture, society, religion, school or media?
- **Disengage** – the more you are willing to see and discover how your judge hurts, rejects and triggers more activation, shame and emotional pain, the more this awareness generates the natural strength and energy to defend, question and challenge its voice. You may notice a natural energy to tell it to back off...or to find other creative ways to disengage from it e.g through humor, paradox, assertiveness, and most importantly insight and compassionate understanding of its original job!

So now that you have started to know your judge?

Because the judge originally developed to help you survive, be OK and feel safe, it takes time for it to relax its grip and trust something deeper than itself. It also takes time to learn to understand and know it, to diffuse its power, and ultimately to replace the judge with your own integrated wisdom, natural conscience, intelligence, awareness and self-regulation capacities. It can also be scary to let it go, as it was originally our guide for telling us how to be OK in the world. Often there is a fear and lack of trust that without it, we can still function, grow and unfold into our potential?

In the long run, one important goal of healing is to develop self-compassion and understand towards your judge and the impact it has on you? As you get to face and know your critic you can naturally begin separating from it while at the same time become more present to the ways it rejects you, hurts you and keeps you cut off from your deeper self. You will discover how counter-productive it is – how it perpetuates your self-rejection, suffering, pain and sense of deficiency, and attempts to keep younger parts of yourself out of awareness. This perpetuates inner division and suffering.

As you learn to separate from your judge you may also begin experiencing deeper layers of yourself – old split off feelings, wounds, memories, identities, painful learnt beliefs about yourself and others that your judge has been trying to avoid. A task at this stage may involve developing new skills to become present to these underlying once disowned feelings, beliefs and pain. This includes building the skills to be curious, mindful, to ground yourself, to regulate and tolerate emotions, to self-sooth and to stay present in your body. You also gradually build the ability to tolerate, examine, question, understand, release and integrate old unfinished business (grief, hurt, shame, anger, fear) from the past. When this is done you may discover a deeper inner freedom and peace, and greater capacity to trust in others, and your own inner truth, inherent value, spontaneity and self-regulation.

Another way of counter-acting the impact of your judge is to develop the ability to be present and deeply curious about your experience. This might involve practicing witnessing and allowing your experience without judging it, fighting, manipulating or placing conditions upon it. This may include welcoming and being curious about the parts of you that resists doing deeper into your experience/feelings. The more you can relate to your experience with compassion, kindness and presence the more it will relax, open up and naturally transform. You can then be open to discovering deeper levels of clarity and freedom within yourself, while at the same time healing old wounds, and questioning old learnt beliefs and self-images that became etched in your memory as a child.