

Let Go of Labels and Snap Judgments of Others

*"It is only by knowing what to let go of, that you know
more clearly what to hold on to."*

Maggie Bedrosian,

The article below is based on the book, "Get Along with Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere" by Arnold Sanow and Sandra Strauss

How do we judge thee? Let us count the ways! We judge people on the basis of what we think is true about them. Our thoughts, however, are subjective, influenced not only by past experience, but also by vague rumors, gossip, and the opinions of others. We absorb this information-filtering it through the lens of our own expectations, feelings, interests, needs, values, prejudices, and attitudes-and combine it to form a judgment about the person.

This process is how our mind understands people, putting them in frameworks that make sense to us: "Mary isn't doing much of anything today, and she seems distracted. Maybe she's tired, or worried about something." Problems arise when the judgments become rigid, and we attach too much significance to them. Instead of judging Mary's behavior, we make a judgement about Mary's character: "Mary isn't doing much of anything today, and she seems distracted. How lazy can you get?"

When repeated difficulties with the person "confirm" our judgment, we program ourselves to expect only certain behaviors. We tend to slap an invisible label on him or her, such as Grouch, Hothead, or Jerk. Once we have affixed the label, it colors our reactions with every exchange: "Watch out! Here comes Mr. Volcano! Wonder what he'll explode about today?" or "Oh, oh! Wanda the Whiner will be at the meeting this afternoon. I can always count on her to throw a wrench into my ideas."

When we label someone, we begin discounting any information that goes against the label. Often, we're not even aware of these labels, but they can dramatically color our responses to the person. We project past memories of their behavior onto our future expectations, and anticipate trouble. Although their behavior may truly be causing us problems, attaching labels only exacerbates the issue. They're stuck with our labels, and we're stuck in negative patterns of response that doom any possibility of

authenticity or growth the relationship might have had.

Parents get into the labeling act, too, perhaps as a way to explain or justify a child's behavior to others or even to garner a little sympathy for themselves for dealing with their child's perplexing or vexing actions. They assign labels such as "Our wild child," "Our willful one," or "My shy little girl." Parents also attach labels to their offspring for "star" behavior: "Our smart one" or "The athletic one," which can affect the self-esteem of other children in a family, who may internalize the message that they do not measure up to their "star" sibling. Labels stick, and children often respond by trying to live up (or down) to them, or by justifying their actions as a result of a label.

Our judgments put people in boxes and we may dismiss their behaviors, tune them out, or not give them enough credit or a fair chance. Labeling can get in the way; we might ignore the person we labeled, even if he or she truly does have a valid concern or is absolutely right, as in the classic fable, The Boy Who Cried Wolf (who everybody ignored because of his earlier misbehavior even when he really did see the wolf).

One of the challenges of responding to difficult people is breaking free from how we see and judge them. When we remove the labels, we're no longer restricted to seeing them in confining roles. By meeting them fresh with each encounter, we don't drag along our accumulated shared history. Therefore, greet each encounter with an open mind that is free of labels. Closed minds close off options.

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