

When judgment gets in the way of love

Letting go of the past and being mindful in the present can help people to lead lives with less emotional pain



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

With the permission of one of them, I am sharing parts of her essay, one of the 30 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 me greatly in my daily life and yet, I was oblivious to the cause of my unhappiness as I was never mindful of these 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 16, 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 to my parents. My home slowly grew into a cold and silent place, although we were all living together.

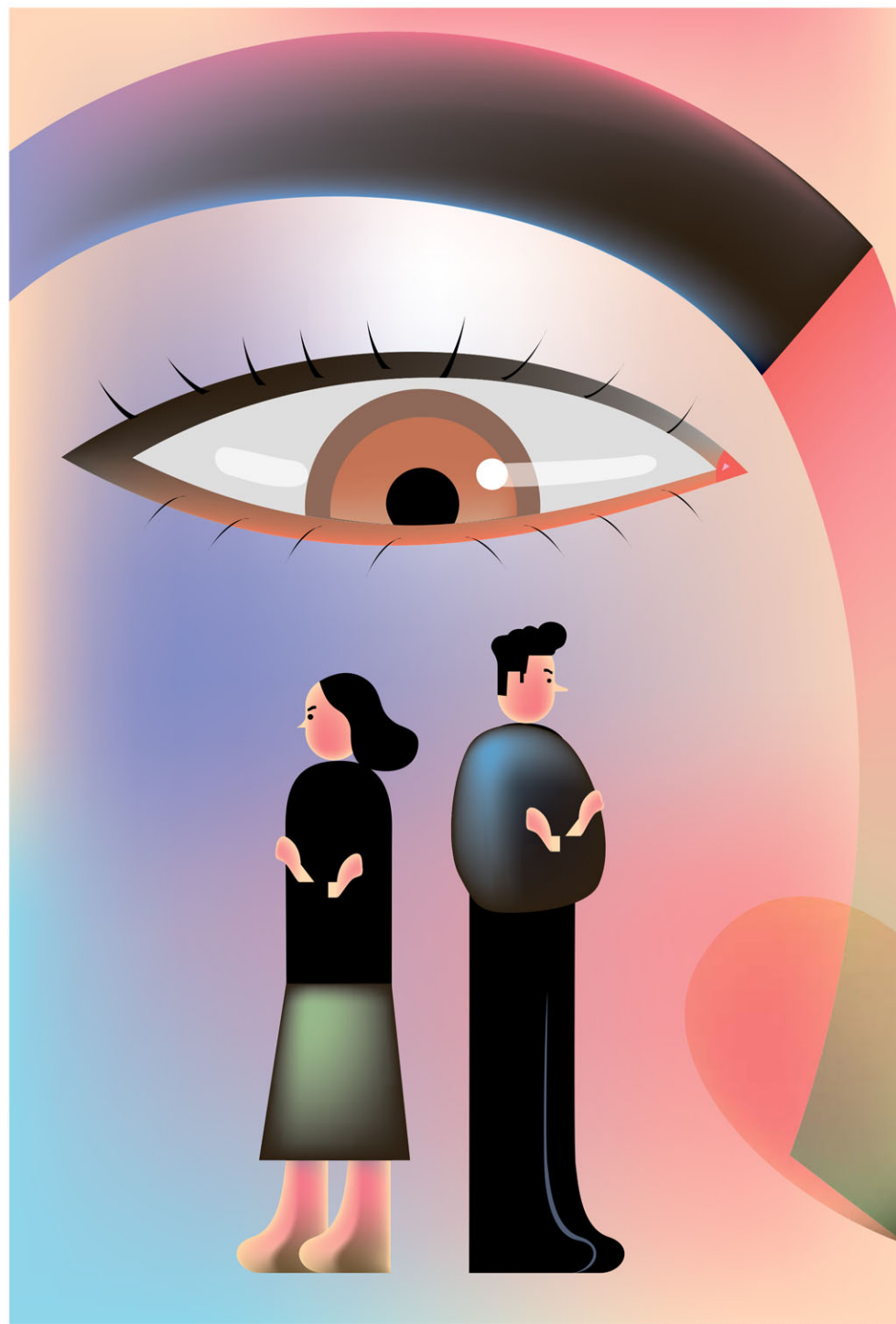
Ever since I started my mindfulness journey, I wanted to focus my efforts on making home a place of warmth and love again. This would begin with me realising how judgmental I was of my parents.

At home, I tried to be less judging 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 could not let go of the angry, unhappy and judgmental person I had been for four years – change was frightening to me.

I was afraid to accept change, for fear of how my family may react to my new self. When I realised this, it took me many weeks and great courage to become a more accepting person.



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

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

While I know I would require 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 baking, exercising and having meals.

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

I found myself sharing more about my life as well as listening 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 a young child and their work. While they shared fervently with me, I found myself being more on the reserved end as I was still ‘faking it’. To avoid letting them worry, I would share the good sides of my life and avoid talking about my problems.

I realised 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.

It hurt me to think that these people, whom I’ve trusted for so many years, turned into people I grew the most afraid of in the past four years. Due to the lack of communication with them previously, I found myself dealing with many big dilemmas on my own.

Looking to curb this, I attempted to develop trust in my parents (again). When facing dilemmas regarding school, I would approach my parents individually for their advice, and while I may not agree with all their advice, I tried to be

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accepting towards them.

I found myself opening up more about the stress of my school and social life with them. This was when I began to feel gratitude towards my parents, for being accepting of my changed self and listening to my worries.

While they may not be perfect partners to each other, I feel grateful that they are doing their best as parents to my brother and me.”

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 life experiences.

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

Mindfulness is about paying attention in the present moment in a non-judgmental way. It is to be practised with foundational attitudes and tools that help us to transform our minds.

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

When we practise putting aside our judgments, we are able to better understand the intricacies of life instead of finding blame. Blame and grudges come from holding on to our judgments and they weigh us down.

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

Most of the “catastrophes” in our lives are largely created 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.

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