

Feeling Judged

When what someone says and what we hear can feel completely different

One sentence can arrive with several possible meanings.

“Have you finished that yet?” might be heard as “You are too slow”, “You have failed again” or “They are judging me”. It might also mean “I am checking in”, “I need to know where we are” or simply be a neutral question. This resource is about creating a little space between the words we hear and the meaning our mind gives them.

Why this can feel so powerful

Communication is not only about vocabulary. We also interpret tone, timing, facial expression, context, previous experiences and what we expect may happen next. When we have repeatedly experienced criticism, misunderstanding, rejection, bullying or unpredictable communication, the mind may become quick to look for danger in language. For some neurodivergent people, implied meaning, indirect requests, sarcasm, ambiguity or changes in tone can add another layer of uncertainty.

Feeling judged is a real emotional experience, but the feeling itself cannot always tell us exactly what another person intended. The aim is not to dismiss the feeling. It is to slow the interpretation down enough to ask: What do I know, what am I assuming, and what could I clarify?

A useful distinction

What was said is the observable language.

What I heard is the meaning my mind attached to it.

What they intended may be the same, different, or still unknown.

The interpretation gap

Sometimes the difficult part of a conversation happens in the space between the sentence and the interpretation. That gap can be tiny: the body reacts, an emotion arrives and a conclusion forms before there has been time to check what was meant.

Example

What was said	What I heard	Another possibility
"Can we talk later?"	"I have done something wrong."	"They are busy now and want proper time to talk."
"That needs changing."	"My work is terrible."	"One part needs revising."
"Are you coming?"	"They are annoyed with me."	"They need to know the plan."

What can influence interpretation?

Current anxiety or overwhelm can make threat feel more likely. Previous criticism can prime us to expect criticism again. Literal or direct communication styles can clash with indirect communication. Rejection sensitivity can make uncertainty feel especially painful. Different cultural, family and workplace communication rules can also mean two people use the same words in very different ways.

Important: Alternative interpretations are not about talking yourself out of genuine mistreatment. If someone is repeatedly insulting, belittling, threatening, controlling or discriminating against you, clarification does not make that behaviour acceptable. The purpose of evaluation is to improve accuracy - not to excuse harm.

Quick check-in

Think of a recent sentence that stayed with you. Write the exact words if you can, without adding what you think they meant.

Fact, feeling or interpretation?

All three matter, but separating them can make a confusing interaction easier to understand.

FACT: "They said, 'I expected this yesterday.'"

FEELING: "I felt embarrassed and anxious."

INTERPRETATION: "They think I am useless."

UNKNOWN: "I do not yet know what they think about me as a person."

Evaluate the moment

1. What exactly was said or done?

2. What meaning did I immediately give it?

3. What did I feel in my body? Notice tension, heat, nausea, racing thoughts, shutdown, urge to leave, defend or explain.

4. What evidence supports my interpretation?

5. What information is missing?

Could there be another meaning?

This is not forced positive thinking. The aim is to generate possibilities before deciding which explanation is most likely.

Try the three-interpretation method

Interpretation 1 The meaning my mind went to first
Interpretation 2 A neutral or practical possibility
Interpretation 3 Another explanation I may not have considered

Questions that can loosen certainty

What else could explain this? If someone I trusted described this conversation, what possibilities would I see? Am I interpreting a tone, or do I know the intention? Is there a pattern of evidence, or is this one ambiguous moment? Could stress, tiredness, time pressure or different communication styles be affecting either of us?

When I need another person to interpret

Sometimes a third person helps not by translating the words, but by helping translate the social meaning. A trusted partner, support worker, colleague, therapist, coach or friend may help identify what is explicit, what is implied and what remains uncertain.

Needing communication support is not the same as having nothing to contribute to the conversation. A third person can act as a bridge while your own perspective and choices remain central.

Third-person interpretation sheet

The exact words:

My interpretation:

What I am worried they meant:

What the trusted person notices:

What is still uncertain:

What I want to clarify directly:

Language you can use to clarify

Clarification can be direct and respectful. You do not have to pretend you understood an implied message.

"I want to make sure I have understood you. When you said that, did you mean...?"

"I am noticing I am interpreting that as criticism. Is that what you intended?"

"Could you say that more directly for me?"

"I am not sure whether that was a request, a suggestion or feedback. Which did you mean?"

"Can you give me a moment? I need a little time to process what you have said."

"Would you mind putting the important part in writing so I can check I have understood it?"

When the other person really is judging you

Sometimes evaluation confirms that a comment was critical or judgemental. You can still separate another person's judgement from your worth. You might decide to ask for specific feedback, set a boundary, leave the conversation, seek workplace support, document a pattern, or talk it through with someone you trust. The goal is not to make every interaction feel harmless. It is to understand it clearly enough to choose your response.

My boundary or response could be:

Patterns I notice

Repeated reflection can reveal the situations in which interpretation becomes hardest. The pattern may be more useful than analysing every sentence in isolation.

Situation	What I tend to hear	What helps

My communication preferences

I understand information best when...

Ambiguous phrases that are difficult for me include...

When I look overwhelmed or defensive, it helps if the other person...

People can make communication clearer for me by...

A message from Maggie

Sometimes the words themselves are not the hardest part. It is everything our mind has to work out around them: the tone, the intention, whether someone is annoyed, whether we have disappointed them, whether we have misunderstood again.

If you often need time, clarification or another person to help you make sense of an interaction, that deserves understanding rather than embarrassment. You are allowed to ask, "What did you mean by that?" You are allowed to check an interpretation before carrying it around for the rest of the day.

And if the answer is that somebody really was unkind or judgemental, you are allowed to recognise that too. The aim is not to convince yourself that every interaction is safe. It is to give yourself enough space to understand what happened and decide what you need next.

Maggie Learoyd
Space to Breathe Therapy

Further reading

Nonviolent Communication - Marshall B. Rosenberg. A widely used framework for separating observations, feelings, needs and requests.

Thinking, Fast and Slow - Daniel Kahneman. Useful background on fast judgments and the mental shortcuts involved in interpretation.

Unmasking Autism - Devon Price. Explores autistic experience, masking and the social pressures surrounding communication and belonging.

Clinical notes & references

This resource is psychoeducational and is not a diagnostic tool. Concepts used here draw on cognitive models of appraisal and interpretation, research on ambiguity and interpretation bias in anxiety, and established approaches to clearer interpersonal communication. Useful starting points include Beck's cognitive model; Clark & Wells' cognitive model of social anxiety; Mathews & MacLeod's work on cognitive vulnerability and information-processing bias; and NICE guidance relevant to anxiety and autism support. Where communication difficulties are persistent or significantly affecting daily life, individual assessment and tailored support may be helpful.

Selected references:

Beck, A. T. (1976). Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders.

Clark, D. M., & Wells, A. (1995). A cognitive model of social phobia.

Mathews, A., & MacLeod, C. (2005). Cognitive vulnerability to emotional disorders. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 1, 167-195.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE): guidance on social anxiety disorder and autism spectrum disorder in adults.