



Never take the words and actions of others personally

1 July 2025

In this article I want to talk about not taking things personally. This is something I find myself having to explain to people a lot. So many of us are easily upset and hurt by the behaviour of others. Then we suffer and experience pain, because of what other people have done. And for the most part, there is nothing we can do about the words and behaviour of other people.

As human beings we have complex brains. Part of this complexity is that we interpret what happens to us and around us. Unless you are talking about the colour of some object others can see, or something you and others can hear, in other words sensory experiences, all human beings add their own interpretation to what they think, feel, say, and do. We take in information from our environment and then we interpret this information. How we interpret it is based on our values, our beliefs, our upbringing, our life experiences, the media and world around us, our personalities, and a whole host of things that make us uniquely ourselves. We call these filters. We filter the information that comes in from our senses and put our “spin” on it. We all know this. When two people who have witnessed an accident comment on it, they always give a slightly different interpretation of what happened unless they are describing information as picked up by the senses before any interpretation takes place. We know people have different sides to a story. We even come to learn that certain people will always interpret information in a particular way – what we may call their bias towards information. Yet, when someone says mean things about us or acts in a cruel way towards us, we get upset and think there is something wrong with us. We wonder what we did wrong. In other words, we take it personally.

Don't take things personally. Everything someone else says or does is about what is going on with them. It is about their interpretation of events which is based on their values, beliefs, experiences, personality, etc. It is about what is going on with them in their head. But we take the mean or horrible or cruel words and actions and get terribly cut up about them. It is always possible, even if you have done something terrible, to treat someone with decency. If someone does not treat you with decency and respect, it is about what is going on with them. It reflects who they are as a person, and has nothing to do with you. So, try and not take it in. If someone is abusive you can certainly stand up for yourself and respond. Some statements people have used in such situations

include: “That was not a nice thing to say/do.” “You sound like you are very unhappy.” “What were you hoping to achieve with that?” “I disagree with you, that is not how I see myself.” You can of course, also just shrug it off. What you don’t want to do is get so upset and hurt about it that it ruins your day or your week or even your year. If you do think there may be some truth in what they are saying, then check it out with another person that you trust. But don’t assume what they said must be true.

There is a story I have heard many times, and I don’t know where it originates from so I cannot give credit where it is due, however it goes like this. A spiritual man lived on top of a mountain. One day a journalist walked up the mountain and started saying mean and spiteful things about him to his face. The spiritual man just smiled and looked happy. The journalist couldn’t believe this and carried on saying even more hurtful things. The spiritual man just carried on smiling and looking happy. Eventually the journalist said to him, “Why do you smile and look happy when I have just said these terrible things to you”? The spiritual man said to the journalist, “If you give me a gift and I refuse to accept it, who has the gift”. The journalist replied, “Why, I still have it”. “Exactly” said the spiritual man. “And I refuse to accept your gift.”

All communication is projection. That person is projecting their way of seeing the world and the people in it, onto you. What we say is a reflection of who we are, even when we are talking about someone else. Whatever someone says, is not about you, it is about what is going on with them. So don’t take things personally.

In his book the four agreements, author Don Miguel Ruiz offers the following quotes. (Don’t take things personally is the second agreement).

- “Taking things personally is a set up for suffering. It makes you easy prey for other people’s emotional poison; they can hook your attention with one little opinion and feed you whatever poison they want.”
- “When we take things personally, we feel offended, and our reaction is to defend our beliefs and create a conflict. We make a big drama out of something so little.”
- “When you truly understand this and take nothing personally, it doesn’t matter who gossips about you, who blames you, who rejects you, who disagrees with your point of view. Whatever people say doesn’t affect you because you are immune to their opinions and their emotional poison.”

No one has an easy life. Especially in these times. We all experience challenges, and sometimes just getting through the day is hard. You don’t need to make it any harder for yourself. So, whenever someone wants to be mean or nasty to you, or say horrible things about you to others, don’t take it personally. Don’t get cut up about it. Don’t take their poison. Know that they are telling you about the kind of person they are. Shake it off and move on with your day.