

Becoming Aware of and Challenging Your Biases

Objective

To increase your awareness of and challenge your biases.

What to Know

Bias refers to attitudes and beliefs about people or groups of people. Everyone has biases, but it is the unconscious or hidden biases that can be harmful because they are quick decisions based on assumptions, experiences, stereotypes, and misguided generalizations.

Your beliefs and biases are often the result of conditioning and exposure. So, growing up you were exposed to certain biases, and they continue to influence you today (consciously or unconsciously). Sometimes it is challenging to recognize and acknowledge biases in yourself. When you become aware of your biases, you can discover and correct (or avoid perpetuating) discriminatory behavior.

There are three components that are commonly referred to as the “ABCs” of bias.

Affective—prejudice, or negative feelings toward a person based on group membership

Behavioral—discrimination, or the actions taken against a person based on group membership

Cognitive—stereotypes, or generalizations about a person or group

Here are steps to become aware of and challenge your biases.

1. Accept that everyone has unconscious biases. Self-awareness and acceptance are essential. You can become aware of your own biases by paying attention to feelings that come up when you interact with others. Being honest with yourself takes courage. The more self-aware you are about your biases, the more likely you will overcome them.

2. Confront patterns. Recognize, understand, and manage your emotions—by strengthening your emotional intelligence. Take a P-A-U-S-E to disrupt bias:

Pay attention to what is happening beneath the surface. How are you reacting to the situation? Notice physical and emotional reactions and note new information.

Acknowledge your reactions, assumptions, interpretations, and judgments.

Understand other possible reactions, interpretations, and judgments. In addition, note that your bias in this situation might be learned behavior.

Seek different perspective and search for the most empowering, productive way forward.

Examine your options and make a decision. With new information and perspectives, you might rethink your options.

3. Acknowledge and explore. After you P-A-U-S-E, explore your beliefs to identify your assumptions. Ask yourself these questions.

- What core beliefs do I hold?
- How might these beliefs limit or enable me?
- How do I react to people from different backgrounds?
- Do I hold stereotypes or assumptions about a particular group?
- Do my words and actions reflect my intentions?
- Do I put myself in the shoes of the other person and empathize with their situation, even if I cannot relate to it?

4. Let others challenge your assumptions. When others challenge long-held beliefs and values, it can be uncomfortable. Instead of getting defensive, pay attention to your reactions. Before you react, take a breath, and shift your mindset. Approach the situation from a place of curiosity and positive intent. Here is how you can respond when someone points out your biases.

“I really appreciate you sharing that with me. What else did you notice that I should be aware of?”

“I hadn’t thought about it this way until you shared your point of view. Can you say more?”

“Thank you. I didn’t realize that. What else can you share with me about the impact of my actions?”

What to Do

Answer the following questions.

Write down five cultural/ethnic biases that were present in your home growing up.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

How old were you when you first became aware of these biases? _____

Who shared these biases or communicated these ideas or beliefs?

How were these biases communicated to you? Be specific.

How do you feel about these biases now?

Which biases have you released or changed? Why? Describe the situation.

If you still carry some belief in your biases, can you explain why?

List three religious or spiritual biases that you carry.

1.

2.

3.

When did you realize they were biases?

Do you still hold these biases, or have they changed over time? Explain.

What can you do to overcome your biases? Be specific.

Next, you will use the P-A-U-S-E technique when you are confronted with a bias. This might be at home, work, school, or elsewhere.

Describe what happened.

Pay attention to what is happening beneath the surface. How are you reacting to the situation? Notice physical and emotional reactions and note new information.

Acknowledge your reactions, assumptions, interpretations, and judgments. Write them down.

Understand other possible reactions, interpretations, and judgments. Is your bias in this situation learned behavior? If not, explain.

Seek different perspective and search for the most empowering, productive way forward. Describe what happened.

Examine your options and make a decision. With new information and perspectives, you might rethink your options. Explain the outcome of this situation.

Reflections on This Exercise

Did completing this exercise help you increase your awareness of your biases? Why or why not?

Did this exercise help you challenge some of your biases? Which ones?

Did anything surprise you as you completed this exercise? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this activity?
