Check Your Blind Spots to Fight Against Our Brain’s Built-In Cognitive Biases

From the Army Resilience Directorate

It is critically important to understand how cognitive biases, our brain’s hardwired thinking short cuts, can work against our ability to be open-minded, challenge stereotypes, and recognize our own implicit bias.

Our brain filters information on our behalf continuously, without us consciously telling the brain to do so. Even at this moment, your brain is scanning your environment and allowing you to notice certain stimuli (like this article) while disregarding other information (objects in the room around you). The brain will sacrifice accuracy for efficiency, which creates a cognitive bias. Cognitive biases are especially dangerous because they operate below our level of awareness. For example, just recently DoD announced that photographs would no longer be required for promotion boards as evidence suggests a tendency of some raters to judge a person favorably when he or she resembles the rater.

We all have cognitive biases that affect our thinking. Here are three common ones:

**Confirmation bias**: This is the tendency for your brain to favor information that conforms to your existing beliefs and discounts evidence that does not conform. This makes it incredibly difficult to change our minds.

For example, if I have the belief, “I am not prejudiced against others,” my brain will give more importance to the few times I spoke out against discrimination vs. the many times I was silent or did not notice it at all.

**Actor-observer bias**: This is the tendency to attribute your actions to external causes while attributing other people’s behaviors to internal causes.

For example, you blame your difficulty finding a job to the economy, but you attribute others' struggles to find a job as laziness.

**Halo effect**: This is the tendency to takes things at face value from people you respect.

For example, you see a news article or statistics posted on Facebook, and because you are good friends with the individual, you assume that what they have posted is accurate. You do not feel the need to be skeptical, and you accept the information at face value.

**Tips to Fight Cognitive Bias:**

- **Check Your Blind Spot**: We all have implicit bias. Refusing to acknowledge or accept that you have bias creates a blind spot.
- **Play Devil’s Advocate**: Seek out information that would contradict your initial thoughts. Listen to others who have different beliefs than your own.
• **Avoid the Ostrich Effect:** It can be uncomfortable to talk about unpleasant facts that drive negative emotions. Don’t let your discomfort cause you to stick your head in the sand.

• **Opinion vs. Fact:** When you’re feeling stuck in a disagreement with someone, try and ground the conversation in facts - fair, data-driven information, and avoid opinions.

Unfortunately, stereotyping is common and automatic, and many of these cognitive biases make it difficult to understand all of the information available to us. If you find yourself thinking, “this doesn’t apply to me!” – take the Implicit Association Test [https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/) to open your eyes to the mental short cuts your brain is making.

**Additional Resources**

ARD Cognitive Biases – Video

[ARD Cognitive Biases – Infographic](#)

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