

# What? Me Biased?

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**Categories :** [Implicit bias](#), [Leadership Development](#), [Organizational and Personal Leadership](#), [Tools and Practices](#)

**Date :** July 11, 2016

Supermodel, Cindy Crawford, was her high school's valedictorian and received a full academic scholarship to study chemical engineering at Northwestern University.

How do you know if you're biased? Are you a human being? Then the answer is an emphatic "Yes!" The truth is, we all are biased. Our brains are hard-wired to be biased. Bias allows our brains to take efficient short cuts to solve problems. We don't have time to fact check everything we encounter on daily basis.

Bias allows our brains to quickly put things into common categories. We don't have to stop and

think about whether an animal with four legs and fur is a cat or a dog. Once we learn the words “cat” and “dog” our brains quickly distinguish between the two. We make the connection automatically and this efficiency is a good thing, mostly.

The problem is, our categorizations are also wrong. A lot. When I categorize something one way and you categorize it another, does that mean one of us is right and the other is wrong? Of course not. It is possible for two things to be simultaneously true. It is also possible for two things to be simultaneously false. Unless we deliberately seek to recognize our own biases; understand others’ perspectives; consider all available facts—especially those that don’t conform to our personal beliefs; and are willing to accept we are wrong, we perpetuate bias in ourselves, our families, our organizations and our communities.

So what can we do?

First, get data on our own biases by taking one (or more) of the [Implicit Association Tests](#). The IAT has been used in multiple research settings to confirm the existence of implicit bias. Further, the IAT is a “strong predictor of discriminatory behavior and a better predictor than parallel explicit measures.”<sup>1</sup>

Then, use these proven strategies to reduce implicit bias:

1. *Stereotype replacement.* Replace a stereotypical response with one that is not stereotypical. For instance, when I hear myself use a stereotype such as “young adults are lazy,” I need to stop and ask myself, “Why do I think this?” What would be a more accurate statement? A more unbiased and accurate statement may be “My son is lazy.”
2. *Counter-stereotype imaging.* Use this technique to imagine alternatives to the stereotype. Alternative images can be abstract (e.g. imagining a smart *and* beautiful woman), famous (e.g. Cindy Crawford) or personal (e.g. my college roommate.) Having these examples in our minds makes it easier to counter the generalizations that arise from implicit biases.

3. *Individuation*. Rather than make sweeping generalizations, using the individuation technique requires gaining specific information about someone in the stereotypical group. Understanding a person's specific challenges rather than thinking everyone in a group has the same experience, shifts our thinking from group-level to individual-level.
4. *Perspective taking*. This is best understood as "walking in the other person's shoes." When we put ourselves in the other person's position and take their perspective we reduce our psychological distance from the stereotyped group. How would I have responded if I were in this person's situation? What would I have thought if someone reacted to me in this way?
5. *Increase opportunities for contact*. Seek out places where you interact with people who are different from you. By spending time among people who are unlike you, you can reduce the automatic biases triggered in your brain.

What have you done to reduce your own implicit biases today?

<sup>1</sup> Patricia G. Devine, Patrick S. Forscher, Anthony J. Austin, & William T. L. Cox (2012). Long-term reduction in implicit race bias: A prejudice habit-breaking intervention. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48, 1267-1278.