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## Thinking fast and thinking slow: what decision-making skills will help you most?

While we like to think of ourselves as rational in our decision making, the truth is we are subject to many unconscious biases. Being aware of them gives us a better chance of avoiding them.

“I define bias as internalized persuasion,” says Martha Muzychka, ABC\*, trainer and consultant with a specialty in diversity and gender equity training. “We may think we are objective, but our education, lived experience, community, culture, and ethnicity may weigh on us subtly to point and sometimes push us in a particular direction.”

From the study of unconscious bias, we learn that we all use stereotypes to some extent. Once we know this, we can start to become more aware of these biases when making important decisions, especially at work.

“It’s important to recognize unconscious

bias, because instead of helping you understand someone’s story, these biases can keep you from seeing the whole picture,” Muzychka says.



ask ourselves consciously.”

### Barriers to listening

“Biases keep you from listening and seeing what is really there,” she continues. “For example, why do we assume the young teen with a baby can’t cope, and think an older mom with a husband is better at managing the demands of parenthood? Do we spend more time with the older mom listening to her concerns or do we send the teen mom off with a referral to social services? Do we assign greater risk to her child if she gets upset from worry compared to an older mom? These are questions we need to

### Workplace bias and assumptions

Bias can show up in the workplace in subtle ways. Muzychka says she once worked with an organization that established seemingly objective criteria for its senior management.

“One criterion was that candidates were Masters-prepared, preferably with an MBA or equivalent graduate degree in their field,” she explains. “However, older, long-term employees were less likely to have that education level. Yet their lived experience and on-the-

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“The highest result of education is tolerance.”

- Helen Keller

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## Are your biases holding you back? Slow down, assess assumptions

There are a number of self-tests for measuring unconscious bias, including one offered by Teaching Tolerance. It is based on the work of psychologists at Harvard, the University of Virginia and the University of Washington.



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job acquired knowledge was not weighted the same as someone holding a newly minted graduate degree.”

### Make a shift in perspective

What can we do to recognize and move past our own biases? “I suggest seeing the situation from different perspectives,”

Muzychka says. “Ask yourself, if this patient was white, would I choose a different approach? If this person was younger, would I be spending less time or more than if the patient was older? Am I looking at how a person is dressed, or if they have tattoos or piercings, and making assumptions about what that means to me? If the person does not meet the norm for physical size, do I let my negative attitudes about fat inform the kind of treatments or interventions I suggest? Being open to examining your own assumptions is the best place to start. It’s often not comfortable

but it is always worthwhile.”

### The value of slowing down

In “Thinking, Fast and Slow,” Daniel Kahneman addresses the biases of intuition.

“As we navigate our lives, we normally allow ourselves to be guided by impressions and feelings, and the confidence we have in our intuitive beliefs and preferences is usually justified,” Kahneman writes. “But not always. We are often confident even when we are wrong, and an objective observer is more likely to detect our errors than we are.”<sup>1</sup>

The book examines ways we can improve our ability to identify and understand errors of judgment and choice, in others and in ourselves.

Slowing down is always a challenge. Yet it is essential, because it can keep you from making instant judgments about a patient, a student or a colleague. A slower approach will allow you to be open to information that differs from a

stereotypical view.

“Taking the time to address your biases means you will provide better care, because you are treating the patient who is actually in front of you, not a stereotype you have projected,” says Muzychka. “You are actually listening to the patient and making decisions about care for the actual person in front of you, and not making assumptions based on certain ideas or stereotypes.”

<sup>1</sup> “Thinking, Fast and Slow,” by Daniel Kahneman; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NY, 2011.

### Resources

“Project Implicit” Bias Self-Test  
[www.tolerance.org/professional-development/test-yourself-for-hidden-bias](http://www.tolerance.org/professional-development/test-yourself-for-hidden-bias)

“Hidden Bias More Subtle and Difficult to Recognize than Bias of Decades Past,” by Dana Wilkie, Society for Human Resource Management, April 25, 2017  
[www.shrm.org](http://www.shrm.org)

“35 Dumb Things Well-Intended People Say: Surprising Things We Say That Widen the Diversity Gap,” by Dr. Maura Cullen, Morgan James Publishing LLC, 2008.

“What If? Short Stories to Spark Diversity Dialogue,” by Steve L. Robbins; Nicholas Brealey, 2008.