

Common Cognitive Biases

Common patterns in how we think, and more helpful alternatives

Cognitive biases are systematic, predictable tendencies in how we notice, interpret and remember information. They're a normal part of how everyone thinks and often help us judge quickly, but they can quietly skew how we read situations, judge people and make decisions. The aim isn't to eliminate them, but to notice them when it matters.

1 Notice a strong conclusion →

2 Name the bias →

3 Pause →

4 Try the alternative



Taking in information

Confirmation bias

Noticing what supports our existing beliefs, and overlooking what doesn't.

CAN SHOW UP AS

After deciding a colleague dislikes you, you notice every short reply and forget the friendly ones.

TRY INSTEAD

Look for one piece of evidence that doesn't fit your view.



Judging people

Fundamental attribution error

Explaining others' behaviour by their character, while overlooking their situation.

CAN SHOW UP AS

Assuming a driver who cut you off is selfish, not rushing to an emergency.

TRY INSTEAD

Ask what circumstances might explain it, as you would for yourself.



Making decisions

Sunk cost fallacy

Continuing with something because of what we've already put in, not what it will bring.

CAN SHOW UP AS

Finishing a film you're not enjoying because you've already watched an hour.

TRY INSTEAD

Ask: knowing what I know now, would I start this today?

Negativity bias

Giving more weight to bad experiences than to good ones of a similar size.

CAN SHOW UP AS

One critical comment in a review outweighs ten positive ones.

TRY INSTEAD

Write the positives down too, and weigh them deliberately against the negative.

Halo effect

Letting one positive trait colour our judgement of everything else about a person.

CAN SHOW UP AS

Assuming a confident, polished speaker must also know what they're talking about.

TRY INSTEAD

Judge each quality separately, on the evidence for that quality.

Present bias

Favouring smaller rewards now over larger rewards later.

CAN SHOW UP AS

Scrolling late at night instead of the sleep that would help tomorrow.

TRY INSTEAD

Picture how you'll feel about the choice tomorrow, and make the first step small.

Availability heuristic

Judging how likely something is by how easily examples come to mind.

CAN SHOW UP AS

Flying feels riskier than driving after a plane crash is in the news.

TRY INSTEAD

Ask what the actual figures say, not just what's most memorable.

Self-serving bias

Taking credit for our successes while blaming outside factors for our failures.

CAN SHOW UP AS

"I passed because I worked hard; I failed because the test was unfair."

TRY INSTEAD

Ask what part you played in setbacks, and what help you had in successes.

Overconfidence bias

Feeling more certain of our judgements than the evidence supports.

CAN SHOW UP AS

Being sure you'll remember an appointment, so not writing it down.

TRY INSTEAD

Ask how often similar predictions have turned out right before.

Anchoring

Relying too heavily on the first piece of information we receive.

CAN SHOW UP AS

A first quote of £900 makes £700 feel like a bargain, even if a fair price is £500.

TRY INSTEAD

Set your own estimate before looking at anyone else's numbers.

Bandwagon effect

Adopting beliefs or behaviours mainly because many others seem to.

CAN SHOW UP AS

Agreeing with a popular opinion in a meeting before forming your own.

TRY INSTEAD

Ask whether you'd reach the same view if no one else held it.

Hindsight bias

Believing, after something happens, that we "knew it all along".

CAN SHOW UP AS

Blaming yourself for missing a problem that wasn't clear at the time.

TRY INSTEAD

Judge past decisions by what you knew then, not what you know now.

A GENTLE REMINDER

Biases aren't flaws in you; they're features of every human mind. Spotting one in yourself is a skill, not a failing. It's often easiest to practise on small, low-stakes decisions first.

MY OWN WORDS

A bias I notice in myself:

What I'll try instead:

SOURCES

Arkes, H. R., & Blumer, C. (1985). The psychology of sunk cost. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 35(1), 124-140.
 Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(4), 323-370.
 Fischhoff B. (1975). Hindsight ≠ foresight. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 1(3), 288-299.
 Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
 Nickerson, R. S. (1998). Confirmation bias: A ubiquitous phenomenon in many guises. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(2), 175-220.
 Ross, L. (1977). The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 10, 173-220.
 Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1974). Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases. *Science*, 185(4157), 1124-1131.