

The Mindful Life

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MINDing theMIND

"I'll See It When I Expect It?"

We like to think we're objective: When we need to, we can put any preconceived notions aside and evaluate someone or something from a neutral starting point. Unfortunately, much research and experience suggests otherwise.

Suppose we're meeting someone new. Whatever we've heard about the person will serve naturally as a lens through which we'll evaluate that person's behavior. If we expect certain traits, we're liable to notice behaviors that fit those traits and ignore those that don't. We may even interpret the behavior we see in certain ways to make it fit.

In one classic study volunteers each viewed the same videotape of a man giving a formal presentation. Afterward, each research participant was asked to rate the man on several different dimensions. But like all good psychological research there was a twist. The researcher provided each rater with a brief description of what previous raters had thought of the presenter. The catch was that there were two versions of this supposed report, and both were identical except for one word: One version included the word "cold," the other the word "warm," when describing the presenter.

So, everyone saw the same videotaped presentation, the only difference was whether each rater was given a previous description of the presenter as a "warm" or "cold" person. In rating the presenter after viewing the videotape, volunteers who was given "cold" as part of the pre-video description rated the presenter as more aloof and less emotional and caring than did the volunteers who were given "warm" as part of the pre-video description. But why?

Apparently the words "cold" and "warm" tapped into peoples' stereotypes. When the volunteers watched the presentation, they interpreted some of the speaker's behavior as consistent with their preconceived notions. The pre-video description provided a lens through which the raters noticed and interpreted certain behaviors and not others.

A prime example of preconceived notions is what we expect from attractive people versus unattractive ones. In general we assume that attractive people are smarter, nicer, wittier, and more socially skilled compared to unattractive people. We're not necessarily aware that we make these assumptions, and we may be reluctant to even admit it to ourselves because we're taught that we should value people for their "inner qualities." In fact research has revealed that there are very few non-physical differences between attractive and unattractive people. So why does it seem that attractive people are better?

It may be that when we interact with attractive people we give them the benefit of the doubt. If an attractive person says something odd, we assume they have good intentions or might know something we don't. If an unattractive person says the same thing, we might interpret the comment as stupid or malicious.

Imagine how preconceived notions regarding people from different racial, religious, or social groups might lead us to expect certain things when we interact with them. It feels as though we're simply observing what is happening. We're not aware of the subtle ways in which our expectations affect our perceptions.

Call to mind some of your least favorite people. Yes, I understand that they really are stupid or insensitive or whatever. Still, can you imagine ways in which your views of these people influence what you notice and how you interpret their behavior?

Let's say your coworker Susan shares some obscure fact and seems proud of herself for knowing it. You've always thought of Susan as a show-off, so you say to yourself, "There she goes again" Another coworker, Rob, sees Susan as intelligent, so when he hears the same comment Rob says to himself, "Wow. How does she know so much?"

Bringing the issue very close to home, do you have a certain reputation at work or among your family or friends? How might this reputation lead people to expect (and therefore notice) certain behavior from you? What can you do to combat this tendency in yourself and in others? Preconceived notions aren't fair, and often they're difficult to turn around. But what's the alternative to trying?

MIND *Morsels*

*My father used to have a saying:
If you make a bad bargain, hug it all the tighter.*

— Abraham Lincoln

In a success-focused culture we cringe at the thought of our mistakes and failures. Even many self-help and motivational books promote focusing only on success. Certainly it's probably not good to wallow in failure, letting it feed depression, anxiety, and pessimism. Unfortunately, though, perhaps sometimes we are too quick to bury our mistakes, rather than spending some time analyzing them, and eventually coming to accept them. Once the mistake or failure has occurred, why not learn and benefit as much as possible from it? Doing so doesn't cost anything extra. Then, by eventually coming to accept our failures for what they are—inevitable but surmountable obstacles—we won't fear them nearly as much. And perhaps we'll make fewer mistakes and failures as a result.

Admiration and familiarity are strangers.

— George Sand

For most people it's easy to think of someone they admire, or someone with whom they would like to trade places. Much of the time, however, admiration and envy are the result of romanticizing the other person's attributes or experiences. Even when we're not exaggerating how great another person is, or how wonderful that person's life must be, we tend to be ignorant of the less-desirable traits and aspects of that person's life. All we tend to notice (or focus on) is the positive, which becomes much more difficult to do the more familiar we become with that person. Perhaps this explains why many "great" people seem humble—they're well aware of their own shortcomings. Intentionally reminding ourselves of this helps to reign in envy, which is especially useful when an overly optimistic view of someone else makes us less satisfied with ourselves.

*Many of our fears are tissue-paper-thin,
and a single courageous step would carry us clear through them.*

— Brendan Francis

Can you recall a challenge that you feared but that, for whatever reason, you tackled anyway? What was the end result? Since you're reading this, you must have lived to tell the tale. In retrospect, the fear was probably greater than the risk or the negative consequence that might have occurred. If charging ahead despite your fear actually resulted in a positive outcome (as it often does), then the initial fear seems especially silly after the fact. So when we're faced with anxiety, what keeps us from moving forward more often? The answer seems to be that first step, which is usually the most difficult one. Before that first step the catastrophe we imagine is still a possibility. After the first step it usually ends up showing itself as much less likely or less catastrophic than we imagined. To muster the courage to take that first step against our fears, perhaps recalling past successes would help. And, with practice, the ability to step through tissue-paper-thin fears might just become our norm. What might be possible then?