

Mindful Summer: Awakening to Implicit Bias

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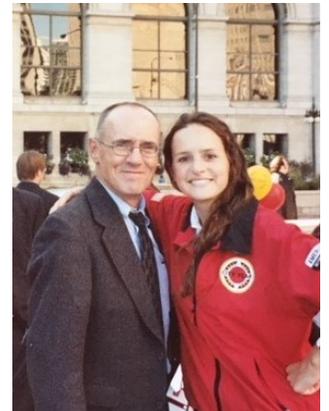
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Welcome to [Mindful Summer \(http://community.mindfulschools.org/\)](http://community.mindfulschools.org/)! We can't believe that we're already at the last week of Mindful Summer. As you practice mindfulness, you might discover thought patterns, feelings, and physical sensations that you didn't notice before. Mindfulness provides the space for us to discover more about ourselves and how we relate to others, including the narratives that we inherited through our families and our childhoods. This week we are talking about awakening to our implicit biases. If you're completely new to mindfulness, you might want to check out this [Introduction to Mindfulness \(https://community.mindfulschools.org/posts/introduction-to-mindfulness\)](https://community.mindfulschools.org/posts/introduction-to-mindfulness) article first.

Sharing a Story



with my dad in Chicago, 2005

I was 22 years old, working and living on my own for the first time in downtown Chicago. I'd gotten a speeding ticket and planned to go to court to get it removed from my record. My dad, an attorney in the city like my mom, offered to join me. As we walked into the courtroom, an African American woman was representing herself before a white male judge. We overheard the sentencing – a high penalty. And then it was our turn. As we approached the bench, the judge smiled at my dad and greeted us warmly. In a matter of minutes, my hearing was over, and I was let off with the gentle consequence of attending traffic school.

As I turned to go, relieved for myself, I glimpsed the woman again. She was still in the room, now watching us leave, a grim expression on her face. I can't know what she was thinking or feeling, but in that moment, I felt ashamed and horrified. For the first time, I was intensely aware of the privilege so deeply ingrained in my everyday life – the implicit bias that regularly and unjustly favored me.

How many times had similar scenarios played out without my noticing? And what harm had been done over the years because of my unconsciousness? As a white, heterosexual, cis-gender, non-disabled, college-educated, US-born, English-speaking woman, raised in an upper-middle class household in suburban Chicago, privilege had protected me from the negative effects of bias. Privilege had enabled me to remain ignorant of the bias that I regularly benefited from at the expense of others. The experience in the courtroom was an awakening for me – *an awakening to bias and to my responsibility to challenge it.*

As I began to explore bias more consciously, I encountered it everywhere, especially in the lives of the people I love: my mom's stories of being one of few female lawyers in the 1970's; the kind of treatment a family member is regularly subjected to as a waitress; the outrageous comments people make to a friend who uses a wheelchair; the exhaustion of a Black friend attempting to educate her white colleagues about racial inequality. On a broader scale, implicit bias plays out every day in politics, business, law enforcement, communities, schools, and families. Bias, when unexamined and uncorrected, generates pain, suffering, and even violence.

This article is an opportunity for us to explore implicit bias together. What is it, and how can mindfulness help us to challenge it? Simply noticing bias is a critical first step, but how do we notice something that is unconscious? What follows is a brief description of bias, its implications, and five suggestions for using mindfulness to transform it.

What is Implicit Bias?

"Implicit bias (<http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias/>)" refers to attitudes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These attitudes are expressed as judgments of others based on their social identities. Our biases tend to favor the social groups to which we belong ("in-group") and target those which are less familiar ("out-group"). We've already internalized bias by the time we are toddlers (<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.621.9728&rep=rep1&type=pdf>), and bias continues to develop throughout our lives in interactions with family and friends, schools and other institutions, media, and the broader culture.

Implicit bias doesn't necessarily reflect our conscious values. We may believe that diversity is a great thing, but the unconscious mind still creates categories of "us" and "them." ([Read more on how the brain makes automatic assumptions based on bias \(https://www.mindful.org/beware-biased-brain/\)](https://www.mindful.org/beware-biased-brain/).) Although bias exists within every one of us, it's when bias is combined with social privilege (in terms of race, class, gender, age, educational status, ability, etc.) that it becomes more powerful and its effects more dangerous.

This is of particular importance for us as teachers and caregivers, especially for those of us carrying more privilege: even with a strong commitment to equality and deep care for the children we serve, bias is still affecting our behavior. We unconsciously treat some children better and some worse based on their social identities ([see the research \(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/234128832_Mindful_Reflection_as_a_Process_for_Developing_Culturally_Responsive_Practices\)](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/234128832_Mindful_Reflection_as_a_Process_for_Developing_Culturally_Responsive_Practices)). And, our bias spreads. A recent study shows (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0956797616678930?journalCode=pssa>) that adults nonverbally communicate bias with children, and children pick up on these cues to form their own biases.

It is possible to mitigate the effects of implicit bias. The brain is malleable. Neural connections within the brain are constantly changing – old connections die off without use, and new connections grow with practice. Research (https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/09/mindfulness-racism_n_6288040.html) has begun to reveal that mindfulness can reduce the brain's negative associations that cause implicit bias. Studies have shown that mindfulness can decrease bias related to various aspects of our identities including class (<https://econtent.hogrefe.com/doi/abs/10.1027/1864-9335/a000212?journalCode=zsp&>), race, and age (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/294276984_Brief_Mindfulness_Meditation_Reduces_Discrimination).

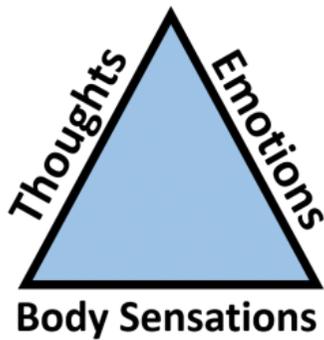
Using Mindfulness to Challenge Bias

Whether we are long-time practitioners or just starting out, mindfulness can help us to transform our implicit biases. Simply setting the intention to notice bias is a great start (see the "Homework" section below). The following are additional suggestions for using mindfulness to challenge bias in our daily lives:

1) Commit to a Daily Meditation Practice

The first step to challenging bias with mindfulness is to become more mindful in general! Mindfulness can improve our self-control and adaptability (<https://www.mindfulschools.org/about-mindfulness/mindfulness-in-education/#benefits>), making us more capable of changing old habits. Committing to a formal mindfulness meditation practice is the foundation of living a more mindful life. If you find it difficult to make a daily commitment, consider using an app (<https://www.mindful.org/free-mindfulness-apps-worthy-of-your-attention/>), joining a mindfulness meditation group (in person or virtually), or finding a mindfulness buddy to check in with regularly. ([Read more tips on starting a practice \(https://www.mindful.org/starting-your-mindfulness-meditation-practice/\)](https://www.mindful.org/starting-your-mindfulness-meditation-practice/).)

2) Use the Triangle of Awareness



Formal mindfulness practice helps to stabilize our informal practice – bringing mindfulness to each moment of our daily lives. As a practitioner, I know that this is much more easily said than done. One tool that helps me to live more mindfully is the “Triangle of Awareness.”

The Triangle of Awareness includes the primary elements of inner experience – thoughts, emotions, and body sensations – all continuously shifting. With mindfulness, we bring our attention to the rising and falling of these elements throughout our waking lives. In doing so, we gain insight into what’s happening within us on a deeper level, empowering us to respond more skillfully and intentionally to each passing state.

3) Set the Intention to Notice Bias

We set the intention to notice what’s been unnoticed – to become aware of implicit bias. As we encounter people in our daily lives, whether in-person or in some form of media, we can use the Triangle of Awareness to observe our automatic, conditioned patterns of thinking and feeling. We watch how the mind “others” people who are different from us in some way.

This “othering” can be subtle, and it depends on our identities. For example, if we are white, there may be a tendency to expect less of other people whose racial or ethnic identities are in the minority. If we identify as a person of color, we’re likely to have biases based on our generalized experiences of constant subtle or overt racism, which leads us to expect poor treatment.

Since setting this intention in my own life, I’ve been alarmed by the myriad stereotypes that run through my mind on a regular basis – judgments of people based on appearance, language, occupation, where they live, what car they drive, and so on. Just like in the courtroom, I am sometimes horrified by seeing these biases arise, but I no longer feel ashamed. Rather than blaming myself or others for my bias, I can accept that I’ve been conditioned in this way and be open to the opportunity to challenge it.

Bringing our biases to light with the Triangle of Awareness doesn’t make them automatically disappear. We work with bias as an ongoing practice, just like mindfulness is a practice. With intention, commitment, and compassion (see below), we watch bias arise again and again throughout each day. Over time, we train our brains to think and act differently.

4) Self-Educate

It is up to us to do the work of educating ourselves about people with other identities. When choosing a book or movie for entertainment, we can purposely choose one that is created by people with identities different from our own. We can seek diverse experiences with the intention of stepping outside our comfort zones. We can even bring up the issue of implicit bias with friends and colleagues, perhaps sharing our intention with them and seeing where the conversation leads. When initiating conversations about bias, we do so mindfully, aware of our own identities and the identities of others. Back to the example of racial privilege – if we identify as white, rather than burdening people of color to “educate us” about racial bias, we take care to explore our privilege within our own racial/ethnic group first.

We also recognize that every individual’s experience is unique and that each person holds multiple [intersecting identities](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9a9b1f0f1d40) (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9a9b1f0f1d40). Everyone relates to their own social identity groups in a personal way. We cannot know how someone thinks or feels without hearing it directly from them, so it is critical to approach this process of self-education with a commitment to openness and humility. We accept that we don’t know what we don’t know and that we are all learners when it comes to each other. (If you’re not sure where to start in this process of self-education, please check out the articles on mindfulness and bias below.)

5) Practice Self-Compassion

It is necessary to bring kindness to this process of uncovering bias. With kind-hearted awareness, the work of challenging bias is possible. Without it, we can easily slip into resistance, self-judgment, criticism, blame, guilt, and indifference which limits our ability to continue. We approach all that we don't know with curiosity, openness, and humility. We acknowledge the causes and conditions of our biases and continue to love ourselves as we work to challenge them.

“To the extent that it is possible, you must live in the world today as you wish everyone to live in the world to come.” – Alice Walker

That day in the courtroom is a painful but welcome memory. I'm grateful for its lessons, and I'm committed to continuing on this path of learning. I am inspired by Alice Walker's words, *“To the extent that it is possible, you must live in the world today as you wish everyone to live in the world to come.”* May our mindfulness practice guide us in this critical effort.



Setting an Intention This Week

This week, please set the intention to become aware of bias.

When you notice someone who appears different from you in some way (in terms of race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender, gender identification, ability, religion, language, etc.), notice what arises...

- *You may notice thoughts:* an assumption, a stereotype, an expectation. What judgments are coming up? In what ways is the conditioned mind “othering” this person?
- *You may notice emotions:* let yourself fully feel and explore these emotions with moment-to-moment awareness and compassion.
- *You may notice body sensations:* a visceral/gut feeling, a tension in the muscles, a facial expression, a shift in your posture, etc. How is your body conveying deeply-conditioned biases?

This *noticing* is the first step of challenging bias. Becoming aware is what starts to shift our patterns. Let yourself live this intention (for this week and beyond!) with curiosity and kindness.

Mindfulness & Bias Resource List

- [Can the practice of mindfulness reduce unconscious racial bias?](http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/can_the_practice_of_mindfulness_reduce_unconscious_racial_bias) (http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/can_the_practice_of_mindfulness_reduce_unconscious_racial_bias), MSU Extension
- [Disrupting Systemic Whiteness in the Mindfulness Movement](https://www.mindful.org/disrupting-systemic-whiteness-mindfulness-movement/) (<https://www.mindful.org/disrupting-systemic-whiteness-mindfulness-movement/>), Mindful Magazine
- [Does Mindfulness Make You More Compassionate?](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/does_mindfulness_make_you_compassionate?) (https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/does_mindfulness_make_you_compassionate?) Greater Good Magazine
- [Fear Less, Love More](https://www.mindful.org/fear-less-love-more/) (<https://www.mindful.org/fear-less-love-more/>), Mindful Magazine
- [How Adults Communicate Bias to Children](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_adults_communicate_bias_to_children) (https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_adults_communicate_bias_to_children), Greater Good Magazine

- [How Mindfulness Can Defeat Racial Bias](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_mindfulness_can_defeat_racial_bias) (https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_mindfulness_can_defeat_racial_bias), Greater Good Magazine
- [How to Train Your Brain to See Beyond Us Versus Them](https://onbeing.org/blog/sharon-salzberg-how-to-train-your-brain-to-see-beyond-us-versus-them/) (<https://onbeing.org/blog/sharon-salzberg-how-to-train-your-brain-to-see-beyond-us-versus-them/>), On Being
- [Integrating Mindfulness Into Social Justice Education and Anti-Oppression Work](http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/integrating-mindfulness-into-social-justice-education-and-anti-oppression-work/) (<http://www.decolonizingyoga.com/integrating-mindfulness-into-social-justice-education-and-anti-oppression-work/>), Decolonizing Yoga
- [Meditation Mitigates Biases You May Not Know You Have](https://hbr.org/2014/12/mindfulness-mitigates-biases-you-may-not-know-you-have) (<https://hbr.org/2014/12/mindfulness-mitigates-biases-you-may-not-know-you-have>), Harvard Business Review
- [Mindful of Equity](https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2017/mindful-of-equity) (<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2017/mindful-of-equity>), Teaching Tolerance
- [Mindful Reflection...for Developing Culturally Responsive Practices](http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/004005991104400104?journalCode=tcxa) (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/004005991104400104?journalCode=tcxa>), Teaching Exceptional Children
- [Mindfulness & the Possibility of Freedom](https://vimeo.com/117131914) (<https://vimeo.com/117131914>), Angela Davis with Jon Kabat-Zinn (Vimeo)
- [Mindfulness Can Literally Change Your Brain](https://hbr.org/2015/01/mindfulness-can-literally-change-your-brain) (<https://hbr.org/2015/01/mindfulness-can-literally-change-your-brain>), Harvard Business Review
- [Privilege and Bias: Awareness First](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/privilege-and-bias-awareness-first_us_586ac2d5e4b068764965c3bb) (https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/privilege-and-bias-awareness-first_us_586ac2d5e4b068764965c3bb), HuffPost
- [Three Ways Mindfulness Can Make You Less Biased](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/three_ways_mindfulness_can_make_you_less_biased) (https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/three_ways_mindfulness_can_make_you_less_biased), Greater Good Magazine
- [Why Intersectionality Can't Wait](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9a9b1f0f1d40) (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9a9b1f0f1d40), The Washington Post
- [Zen and the art of social movement maintenance](https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/mindfulness-and-the-art-of-social-movement-maintenance/) (<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/mindfulness-and-the-art-of-social-movement-maintenance/>), Waging Nonviolence

Join Our Online LIVE Guided Practice on August 7th

We're inviting our community to join Grace and the Mindful Schools Team for an online guided practice on Tuesday, August 7th at 4pm PST / 7pm EST. [RSVP here for more details](https://community.mindfulschools.org/events/online-live-guided-sit-on-implicit-bias) (<https://community.mindfulschools.org/events/online-live-guided-sit-on-implicit-bias>).

About Grace



Grace Helms Kotre, MSW, is a [Certified Mindfulness Instructor](https://www.mindfulschools.org/training/mindful-schools-certification/) (<https://www.mindfulschools.org/training/mindful-schools-certification/>) and the founder of [Power to Be, LLC](http://www.mindfulpowertobe.com/) (<http://www.mindfulpowertobe.com/>). She shares mindfulness with children and adults in schools, non-profit organizations, businesses, community groups and families in Southeast Michigan. Grace's empowering and nurturing leadership style, background in social work and child development, and long-time mindfulness practice inform her teaching. Grace also has training in the areas of mindful parenting, trauma-informed mindfulness, non-violent communication, intergroup dialogue, and racial justice. Contact: grace@mindfulpowertobe.com (<mailto:grace@mindfulpowertobe.com>).

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