What We Know About “Hidden” Biases

A fundamental quality of the human mind is to group objects into categories based on a wide range of discernable characteristics. This ability helped early people to distinguish friend from foe and was instrumental in our ancestors’ survival. As adaptive as this response may sometimes be, it also is the foundation of the biases, stereotypes, and prejudices that are present in our conscious and unconscious thinking.

Even when we believe that we have eliminated these biases from our thinking, they still lurk in our heads as a sort of “hidden” residue. We may deliberately strive to behave without prejudice and may be consciously committed to equal and fair treatment of our fellow human beings, but studies indicate that we continue to possess preconceived notions and stereotypes. These “hidden” biases influence our perceptions and actions. In fact, our prejudices most often reveal themselves when our efforts to consciously control our actions are thwarted such as when we are under stress, distracted, in competition with another, or even when we are relaxed.

Although biases may be persistent, there are actions that can be taken to lessen their effects on our dealings with others. These actions include:

- **becoming aware of our prejudices.** - Attitudes and beliefs we are conscious of can be changed.
- **admitting biases are learned early in life.** – Reflect on where your beliefs about other people came from and question exactly what you were taught.
- **integrating diversity into your life.** - Sharing life experiences with individuals that are different from you can dramatically affect your thinking about the “others” around you.
- **committing to self-monitoring.** - Vow to discover your personal biases and consciously take steps to eliminate these prejudices from your encounters with other individuals.

These actions may, over time, reduce the strength of unconscious biases.