



# Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

## Issue #2:

### IDENTIFYING PREJUDICE AND RACIAL INJUSTICE



We're all humans with different viewpoints and experiences that have influenced identities, our interactions, and our beliefs. It's a natural part of life that we enjoy gathering and socializing with other like-minded individuals. It's also normal for our human brains to want to organize "people, ideas, and objects into different categories to make the world simpler and easier to understand."<sup>1</sup> But even with having an established process to categorize information, our brains can move too quickly and result in mistakes. Research on categorization shows that the sorting process tends to be focused on "factors such as age, sex and race."<sup>1</sup>

Within a homogeneous social group, members tend to see everyone similar in the same way and create a sense of belonging. It becomes problematic when a group begins to look critically at the differences within other groups or individual people. Negative attitudes and feelings based on "faulty beliefs" can develop without any logical basis and can lead to discrimination, pre-made judgements, or prejudices.<sup>1</sup>

Taking time to listen and understand others' experiences helps us broaden our understanding of how the world works and questions other people's prejudgments. Learning about the challenges some people face daily in merely existing can tell us a lot about ourselves and encourage the growth of character, empathy, and action. Having the courage to correct

misinformation and address mistakes in judgement comes from being able to identify prejudice in its many forms: racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, nationalism, religious intolerance and xenophobia.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, we will look at ways to recognize discrimination and provide some suggestions on how to address it to change behaviours, attitudes and take action.

#### The problem with prejudice

It's human nature to be influenced by ideas. We are either fully aware of that influence or not. When ideas begin to shape our beliefs about other people and get stuck in negative thinking patterns about how they are so different from us, we're experiencing the effects of internalize prejudices. But where do these attitudes come from, and why are they so harmful?

"We are all products of our environment" is part of a quotation by author C.J. Heck. It continues stating that "every person we meet, every new experience or adventure, every book we read, touches and changes us, making us the unique being we are."<sup>2</sup>

We learn these preconceived ideas and judge people against them, forming beliefs about race, sexual orientation, gender stereotypes, nationality, economic status and religion. The problem with prejudice is that we quickly become fixed on the negative and have trouble seeing beyond it. Then, our actions are fueled by discrimination. We can fall vulnerable to others within groups that promote these negative associations and act on them outwardly, sometimes without being fully aware of the damage.

There are many forms discrimination can take. Racism, heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism and xenophobia are ones that we see with increasing regularity today. All of these actions are intended to single people out and deny them access and equal opportunities.

### **Racism**

People experience racism when they are the targets of negative actions arising out of biased thoughts devised primarily from their physical characteristics and appearances. They are treated unequally and can experience varying degrees of racialized acts such as stereotyping, profiling, and carding. Often, racialized groups have been dealing with discrimination for years. Unfortunately, it has become part of their life experiences to build a protective response within their communities to deal with the oppression. Educating youth about what they should or should not do to avoid confrontation and be perceived as antagonistic or retaliatory is commonplace. It's necessary to try and keep them from harm or experiencing violence. We've seen aggressions and responses in Canada and the US throughout 2020 related to civil rights, indigenous rights, and perceived "accountability" for the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic. They are all examples of how quickly racialized situations can spiral out of control. For example, support for human rights through movements like #BlackLivesMatters is working hard to extinguish these polarizing and misinformed beliefs.

### **Heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia**

It's a similar story with heterosexism, where people assume that everyone is heterosexual and societal and cultural biases favour opposite-sex/gender relationships, viewing them as socially superior and heteronormative. By contrast same-sex/gender relationships, people's sexual orientation and gender expression are the targets of sexualized prejudices through homophobia, transphobia.<sup>3</sup> For years, members of the LGBTQ2+ community have

experienced discrimination from people and groups who oppose what they perceive to be lifestyle choices. They've experienced homophobia, confrontations in response to bullying, violence, stereotyping, and oppression have been unavoidable. Still, movements like #Pride help to break down barriers and allow people to live as their true selves.

### **Sexism**

Sexism is another form of discrimination that most frequently targets women and girls and arises from dominant masculinity concepts that are popularized in society around the world. Prejudices and stereotypes about menstruation, fertility and even pregnancy, for instance, are rampant. Women and girls are often shamed or harassed and can experience sexual violence and degradation, plus be denied access to resources and education, entirely based on the views perpetuated in our cultures.

### **Xenophobia**

Xenophobia can be a more extreme form of discrimination that clouds someone's perceptions and inspires hostile conflict and severe reactions based on a deeply ingrained fear of strangers. It overlaps with nearly all forms of discrimination. The actions arising from xenophobia are often intended to hurt, deny, or deprive people from having similar life experiences. Xenophobic beliefs may be a kind of superiority complex, though "whether [it] qualifies as a legitimate mental disorder is a subject of ongoing debate" in psychological communities.<sup>4</sup> Rejecting or even appropriating cultural traditions, objects, language, clothing, music, religion and people based on different beliefs are hallmarks of both racism and xenophobic discrimination. It can have damning effects and lead to "persecution, hostility, violence, and even genocide."<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, many examples in recent and past history can be linked to xenophobia. They were orchestrated to spread misinformation and hatred and encourage societies to discriminate against certain groups. It's a phenomenon that's occurred on every continent on the planet and created some of our darkest moments as a species.

Discrimination and prejudices in varying degrees affect people's lifestyles, employment opportunities, and socio-economic status. Subtleties like denying someone training or the chance to advance their career, allowing unequal pay for identical roles and effort, or administering a more severe reprimand than warranted are problematic.

They all fall under the category of harder to spot signs of discrimination in the workplace. Similarly, being denied services and resources or access to facilities, education, or healthcare should have repercussions for the perpetrators.

Thankfully, for every negative preconception, there are also groups of people who dare to stand up to prejudice and name the various types of discrimination that people experience to counteract the negativity and advocate for protecting everyone's fundamental human rights.

### These are learned behaviours

Over the years, many important studies have looked at how we observe people in our social circles, watch television, read books or magazines and learn to model the behaviours we see. We are predisposed to learn others' prejudices and discrimination which in turn influences our thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and actions in what's often referred to as implicit or unconscious bias. Such biases, which may have become ingrained in us since childhood, can lead us to make judgements on age, race, ethnicity, cultural heritage, gender, marital status, disability, height, weight, where someone grew up, or even political affiliations.<sup>5</sup> In workplaces and other social settings, unconscious bias can be damaging and lead to discrimination that can "negatively impact decision-making from hiring to promotions."<sup>5</sup> However unconscious bias can also be attributed to microaggressions, or subtle acts of discrimination that may be seemingly positive, such as, where someone's "skill and capacity" or "personality and temperament", can create toxicity in a workplace.<sup>6</sup>

Discovering one's own bias takes hard work. There is a lot of reflection that must happen, so it takes time. Being willing to un-learn discriminatory thought patterns that are reflected in unconscious bias and learn new, more productive ways to think that are founded on diversity and inclusion will help to reduce and potentially eliminate prejudices and discrimination.

### Empathy is key

Investing in developing empathy could be a critical component to help address discrimination and expand worldviews. Perhaps, it could contribute to a broader antidote against these repeated "mental mistakes" that our

brains are susceptible to.<sup>7</sup> Like discrimination, empathy is a learned behaviour. There are also cognitive, emotional and compassionate aspects to balance. Understanding someone's thoughts or feelings and being able to share their feelings are fundamentals that need to be activated within a person displaying empathy. But this should also extend to taking action based on the first two conditions. Well-rounded empathy encompasses more than being sympathetic or having the ability to imagine how someone feels; it's being compelled to help that completes the trifecta. When a person lacks or has under-developed empathy, they may be more apt to neglect, ignore, or misunderstand why discrimination is fundamentally flawed and makes excuses for or demonstrate apathy instead of taking action.

### Ways to reduce or eliminate discrimination

You can do several things to take action against discrimination that you observe in public, with family, and in the workplace. Here are some first steps to help become more self-aware and recognize the privileges you may be afforded that a fellow human is not.

1. Learning to identify, acknowledge, and critically evaluate your biases is the best place to start and should not be rushed. Spotting one's own bias takes work and honest reflection. When you're ready to move forward and learn without being influenced by unconscious bias, start by looking for safe spaces to listen to understand first, then participate in dialogue that allows "different voices to be heard, acknowledged and valued."<sup>8</sup> You should also be open to being challenged or confronted about your ideas or prejudices as part of the process of learning about your unconscious bias.
2. Learn about protections for people as part of their basic human rights. These are things like equality, dignity, respect that are the same for every person, are a birthright. Human rights should never need to be earned. One place to start is by learning about the United Nations' [Universal Declaration of Human Right](#). Countries, provinces and states may all publish additional interpretations that form the basis of human rights legislation and reinforce the 72-year-old proclamation.

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3. Learn how to become an ally, then practice what you have learned in your day to day work and personal lives. This could involve educating yourself about a situation to develop common interests that will eventually facilitate discussion and your sincerity to extend help. However, remember that part of the personal development work you need to be working on in advance of any discussion includes acquiring new education, appreciating the sensitivity and respecting that those who have been affected directly by discrimination may not wish to, or be ready to talk about it.<sup>8</sup>
4. Talk to new people – beyond small talk – to find out how they are doing and about their daily lives. Ignore distractions and concentrate on listening and paying attention to facial expressions, gestures, and movements that express non-verbal communication.
5. Think about a situation from the other person's perspective. Consider all of the facts that might contribute to where that person is in the present. It's part of enhancing and strengthening your empathy.
6. Consider joining a group that works on projects to help people who have experienced the repercussions of prejudice and racialization.
7. View reputable programs that provide background, history, and discuss specific cases.
8. Have the courage to leave a group if you no longer share their beliefs. You don't need to stay silent.

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