



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

COURAGEOUS CONNECTIONS THAT CHALLENGE YOUR BIASES

"We must build dikes of courage to hold back the flood of fear."

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

OVERVIEW

Honestly assess your personal biases and their impact, and create a plan to face the anxieties you experience about people you dislike or avoid. Next, practice courage and openness while interacting with those individuals, and reflect on what you learned.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To grow in civil courage—brave behavior which is founded on an understanding of injustices and seeks to address such injustices
- To prepare yourself to be a better ally to people you don't know
- To become aware of your personal biases and try to reduce them
- To build a more positive school climate among staff
- To encourage positive relationships among staff, parents, and families

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 30 minutes multiple times

LEVEL

- Adult

MATERIALS

- Computer/Laptop
- Paper (optional)
- Pen/Pencil (optional)

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

You will:

- Reflect on your personal biases and the implications of your biases
- Make a plan to courageously work towards decreasing your own biases by opening yourself up to new connections
- Practice forming new connections
- Reflect on your experience and any misconceptions you may have held (or continue to hold)

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Courage
- Humility
- Bridging Differences

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Relationship skills

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused Attention
- Open Awareness
- Non-Judgment

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Before you complete the practice below, pause, take a few deep, conscious breaths, and consider the following:
- Am I ready to explore personal biases and take a courageous step towards reducing such biases? If so, how will I navigate feelings of vulnerability if they emerge? If not, what might I do to get myself ready?
 - You might consider making use of these practices before or after engaging with this exercise: [Affirming Important Values](#) or [Mindful Self-Compassion for Adults](#).

INSTRUCTIONS

OVERVIEW

Forming new connections can require courage. [Research](#) indicates that people are often afraid that their conversation partner will not enjoy the conversation or lack conversation skills, which can make such encounters challenging and/or unpleasant. In fact, our anxieties about meeting other people are heightened across different social-identity groups (i.e., race, gender, age, ethnicity, political orientation, etc.). [Researchers](#) have also found that people generally think that out-group members (i.e., people who appear different from them) do not want to connect. At times, we also feel anxiety about how we will be perceived by others (e.g., we worry about being seen as racists or being stereotyped ourselves). This practice is designed to help you practice courage in pursuing a connection with someone who you may typically avoid.

- Take a moment to reflect on three types of people you usually avoid based on appearance and stereotypes. For example, men in suits, Asian people sitting together at a mall, or people who support a politician you dislike.
- Go online, search for, and assemble three images that typify these types of individuals.
- For each of the three types of people, take a moment to reflect on the following questions:
 - Are there any negative stereotypes that you have about these types of people? If so, what are they?
 - Why do you avoid these groups?
 - What misconceptions might you hold about these types of people?
 - What impact do your beliefs about these types of people have on your relationships with the disliked group of people?
 - What broader impacts might your beliefs and behaviors towards these types of people have in our larger society, if any?
 - How might you benefit from trying to get to know these types of people better?
 - How might others around you, or our larger society, benefit from engaging in this kind of reflection and becoming more intentional about getting to know people who have different backgrounds?
- Identify someone from your daily life who exemplifies each picture. Make an intentional plan to get to know them better.
 - Depending on where you are, your plan could be to commit to having one short and friendly conversation with one or each of the individuals you identified or to spend time with them for a few hours over a couple of days. As much as possible, make your plan concrete. For instance, you should set a date for when you will approach the person, think through how you will approach them (e.g., will you extend an invitation for coffee or simply have a brief chat in the hallway?), and try to plan for any other relevant logistical details. For instance, if you end up or plan to take a substantial amount of their time, it might make sense for you to compensate them in some way (e.g., you might offer to pay for lunch or give them a small gift as a way to thank them for their time).
 - Your goal should be to stay open-minded to learning a little more about them, without judgment, so you can be someone in our society who helps build bridges with others. Take it as an opportunity for personal growth; you might gain new insights or develop and strengthen your interpersonal skills.

- If you don't have someone in your life who exemplifies the images you gathered, consider approaching a stranger at the grocery store or on the train, but be respectful of the person and their time. You should aim to enrich their life as much as your own.
- Before enacting your plan, write a short reflection predicting how you think the conversation might go—and identify any fears or concerns you hold. You might refer back to the initial questions which ask you to consider any stereotypes you might hold about individuals, and then commit to setting those aside for the interaction. Once you have done this, go ahead and set your plan into action.

CLOSURE

- After each interaction, take a moment to compare what actually happened with what you anticipated would happen. You can use the following questions to reflect on the experience:
 - Were there any discrepancies in how the interaction went versus how you thought it would go?
 - How did you feel after the interaction?
 - What was most challenging?
 - What, if anything, surprised you about the interaction?
 - What were the highlights of the interaction for you ?
 - What might you learn from this experience?

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Did you notice any changes in your perceptions of the groups you selected after engaging in this practice? Were your stereotypes accurate?
- How might you continue to practice courage in your interactions with others?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In one [study](#), 91 non-Black participants were assigned to a 12-week intervention or a control group. Participants in the intervention group spent time reflecting on their personal biases and how those biases affected their interactions with others. Researchers gave participants various strategies that they could practice to try to reduce their own biases. Results showed that the intervention helped reduce implicit biases while increasing participants' concern about the impact of discrimination on others.

In another [study](#) with 55 White male undergraduate students, those who were instructed to approach an interaction as an opportunity to learn (rather than simply allowed to engage in the interaction without any instructions) experienced less anxiety when interacting with an interracial partner.

Lastly, in [a study](#) with 44 Black and White undergraduate students, researchers randomly assigned participants to a control or intervention group. The intervention group took part in a workshop where participants set an intention to connect with members of the group with a different racial identity than their own. Participants then engaged in conversations with each other where they were instructed to try to empathize with their partner. In the control group, participants watched and discussed a documentary about race relations in America. Researchers found that Black and White participants in the intervention group reported improved mood after the workshop. Furthermore, White students also reported an increase in positive attitudes toward Black students.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

[Civil courage](#) requires an awareness of injustices and personal biases (e.g., knowledge of how unspoken norms might serve to perpetuate injustices), and a willingness to push back against norms that perpetuate injustices. This practice can support personal growth and self-understanding because it prompts us to be intentional about challenging potentially harmful implicit biases and default thinking in our classrooms, schools, and communities.

In the face of injustice, we all need allies—people to stand with us and provide support as we challenge existing norms. [Scholars](#) have long written about the importance of racial justice allies and how to foster a willingness in others to support calls for change. More recently, [Williams et al. \(2022\)](#) proposed that fostering support from others requires that we cultivate greater civil courage. Speaking on behalf of those who are marginalized necessitates courage because we run the risk of facing backlash from dominant groups (or groups in power) when we advocate for the rights of others. For instance, we might face ostracism at work if we push for greater employee diversity. Thus, it takes civil courage to decide to be an ally, and this practice helps us to grow in our own civil courage.

SOURCE

Practice adapted from Williams, M. T., Faber, S., Nepton, A., & Ching, T. H. (2023). Racial justice allyship requires civil courage: A behavioral prescription for moral growth and change. *American Psychologist, 78*(1), 1.