12.2 Unconscious Bias and Mental Health

What is Unconscious Bias?

Unconscious bias is an automatic mental shortcut that helps us sort through the 11 million bits of information coming at us at any given time. We can only consciously process 40 out of those 11 million bits of information. If we had to think about everything, every moment, we would do nothing else.

Unconscious bias tells us what to ignore (what the brain has learned to interpret as safe) and what to pay attention to (the unexpected that may be dangerous).

Simply put, it helps us solve two problems:

1. Our need to turn chaos into order.

2. To help us find where and to whom we belong.

Some unconscious bias is good. But much of it is not.

Our biases affect us and our decision-making processes in several ways:

- How we perceive reality.

- How we see people and react towards them.

- How much or how little we comfort certain people in certain situations.

- Which aspects of a person we pay most attention to.

- How much we actively listen to what certain people say.

How Our Beliefs Are Influenced

There are several things that influence the things that we believe:

- Your background and how you were raised

- Personal experiences

- Cultural context
- Societal stereotypes

Stereotypes, what we believe to be true about people who have a mental health challenge, are often influenced by the images and stories that we receive through media, both traditional forms (the nightly news, magazines, newspapers) and social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram).

Myth-Busting: Common Examples of Stigma and Inaccurate Beliefs

Myth #1: Mental illnesses are not "real" illnesses.

Mental illnesses are invisible, so we tend to consider them to be not as serious or as valid as physical illnesses. Because they impact the brain and our moods, people will minimize the seriousness of depression, for example, by saying things like, "Don't be sad – you have so much to be happy about." The reality is that mental illnesses often impact both the mind and body and can be debilitating, especially when people don't seek treatment due to stigma.

Myth #2: Mental illnesses are just an excuse for bad behavior.

Symptoms of mental illness are often misunderstood. A person with an anxiety disorder may appear agitated or angry. A person with depression may appear absent-minded or arrive late for work or meetings. What may appear to be bad behavior is a sign of an illness. When we better understand mental illnesses, we can be more empathetic.

Myth #3: People with mental illness are violent and dangerous.

This myth is often fed by the stories that we see in the media – social media, the nightly news, and in movies and television shows - about violent acts and those who commit them. The reality is far different. According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, people who experience a major mental illness are two and a half times more likely to be the victims of violence than to cause it. Some of the things that cause this increase are poverty, experiencing homelessness, and substance use and addiction.

Tips to Mitigate Biases

1. Recognize Your Own Biases.

David Rock of the Neuroleadership Institute said this, "If you have a brain, you have bias." We all have bias and accepting that is an important first step in reducing or eliminating it. You can uncover your unconscious bias by taking one or some of the tests available online through the Implicit Association Test. It was created by researchers from Virginia, Washington and Harvard Universities and measures possible biases in areas such as gender, sexuality and race, among others.

2. Pay Attention.

The next time that you have a strong reaction to a person, idea, or situation, ask yourself why you are reacting so strongly. Do you hold a belief or bias that is causing your reaction? Question if that belief or bias is true, accurate and fact-based. If not, maybe it's time to set that belief aside and think in new ways.

3. Increase Exposure to Biases.

If there is a group of people, a culture, or a belief about something that you want to learn more about, you can do that in several ways. Read a memoir about a person with mental illness, watch

a documentary, listen to a podcast, or read a book on the topic. Expand your social circle or the people that you usually hang out with at work.

Remember, exposure to negative stereotypes can reinforce their influence on your behavior, even if you don't consciously agree with them, so consider providing positive images in the workplace, for example, using posters, newsletters, reports, videos, and podcasts. Surround yourself with positive words and images about people you might have stereotypical thoughts about, to help eliminate negative biases.

4. Challenge Yourself and Others.

If you are a manager or senior leader in your organization, model the behaviours that you want to see in your team. Create a culture that values curiosity and is safe for sharing different perspectives.

Sources:

1 Canadian Mental Health association. The Myth of Violence and Mental Illness. Retrieved from The Myth of Violence and Mental Illness - CMHA Durham

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