



Healthy & Resilient You

Bridging the Diversity Divide

Break through the Fear Barrier to Inclusion and Acceptance



The only thing we have to fear is fear itself

– FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT



During the past generation, society has experienced an explosion in diversity. Modern technological miracles in communication, entertainment, and virtual education have allowed us to experience new cultures and perspectives at the click of a button.

A teenager in Iowa can watch a Bollywood musical without leaving their couch. A grandma in Croatia can learn to make Cajun or Creole jambalaya through a laptop in her kitchen.

Immigration has also brought greater diversity and cultural and economic enrichment to our doorsteps.

A family in Texas can order authentic Vietnamese cuisine from a restaurant that's literally down the street. That restaurant provides jobs, pays taxes, and helps strengthen the local business community.

Undeniably, we enjoy many social and financial benefits from this increase in diversity, yet in many ways, it feels like the cultural divide is wider than ever.

Logically speaking, positive exposure to different perspectives and cultures should make us more welcoming and inclusive, not less. So, what's sustaining this diversity divide? In a word: fear. In two words: hereditary fear.

Stranger Danger

Like many instinctive responses, hereditary fear harkens back to prehistoric times when our environment was constantly trying to kill us. As we explored the unfamiliar world around us, we learned the hard way to approach every new experience, object, or animal with an abundance of caution. Back then, other = danger.





Think about it this way; we only needed to watch our ancestral cave bro get bitten by a venomous snake once. Ever since that indelible moment, it's been an ingrained human response to jump back in startled surprise anytime we see a snake.

The trouble is, like with many instinctive reactions, this fear response doesn't always serve us well in the modern world. It can cause an automatic, unnecessary, and negative response to anyone or anything *other* or *unfamiliar*, driving cultural and ideological divides in the modern age.

The Power of Fear

Studies from organizations like NYU, Harvard, and Yale have demonstrated that our ancestral fear response has hardwired “us vs. them” thinking into our brains.


That means that once we identify with a group, we automatically start showing strong bias for those we perceive to be within our group (the “us”) and against those we perceive to be outside our group (the “them”). In a vicious cycle, this phenomenon heightens our ancestral fear of the *other* and *unfamiliar*. Ultimately influencing our subconscious in powerful and worrisome ways, making us more likely to:

-  Be unaware of our biases (good or bad).
-  Dehumanize perceived outsiders to justify our feelings of opposition and dislike.
-  Misplace our trust – giving it blindly to “us” and stubbornly withholding it from “them.”
-  See threats where there are none or blow real threats out of proportion.


Maybe worst of all, this hardwired response makes us more susceptible to manipulation and mob mentality. If anyone wants to draw us into their personal “us vs. them” drama, all they need to do is push the right fear button and point us in the desired direction.


Fighting Fire with Fire


There’s the bad news. Here’s the good: Since fear is an emotional trigger, we can take steps to **engage other emotions and use guided mindfulness** to counteract the “us vs. them” trap.


-  **Get a Bias Check** – It’s human to have biases and be completely unaware of them. Project Implicit, a non-profit research collaborative developed the Implicit Association Test (IAT)

that uses image and word associations to help determine individual levels of bias on a range of topics. You can try an IAT or two for yourself, for free, [here](#).

-  **Question Negative Thoughts and Emotions** – Consider why you feel apprehensive or judgmental towards people or things that are different. Be honest as you root out the original source of these fears. Are these feelings automatic? Are they justified? Are they helping or hurting?

-  **Practice Compassionate Understanding** – You may not always be able to empathize with someone else, but you can try to understand their perspective. Even if you’d never be caught dead in their shoes, you can still imagine what it would feel like to walk a mile in them.

-  **Get Some Guidance** – eM Life, our guided mindfulness resource, offers an on-demand program called “7 Days of Embracing Diversity” that’s the perfect resource for this topic. Log in to Concern’s Digital Platform and click through to eM Life to get started.

-  **Expand Your Definition of “Us”** – Look for common ground with others. It’s not hard. We may be from different countries, but we’re all human. We may be used to different foods, but we all need to eat. We may have different ideas about gender expression or sexuality, religion or politics, Coke or Pepsi, X or Y, but we all want to feel safe, respected, heard, and loved.

By engaging in the above actions, we can develop a more open-minded and accepting mindset, allowing us to enjoy the many benefits of our increasingly diverse world. Just remember, when we think expansively enough, there is no “them.” Only “us.”

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