



# SPHERE

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

## Bias Bite #4: The Availability Heuristic

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### Overview

This mini-lesson is designed to help your students recognize and better understand the availability heuristic. This cognitive shortcut can help with quick decision-making based on readily available information in our memory, but it can also lead to biased judgments that may overestimate or underestimate the frequency or probability of events.

The following activities will guide students in an exploration of how the availability heuristic works, when it happens, and most important, how to recognize it in themselves. By developing this self-awareness, students can become more open to different perspectives and engage in more thoughtful, civil discussions both in and out of the classroom.



## Driving Question

Why do we make decisions based on information that comes to mind quickly and easily?

## Objectives

- Explain the bias.
- Provide examples of the bias in practice.
- Construct strategies for overcoming and dealing with the bias.

## Materials Needed

- Data about global problems of concern (see Activate)
- “Which are Deadlier: Sharks or Horses?” video
- Mental Notes graphic organizers for students

## Bias Description

The availability heuristic is a cognitive shortcut that people use to make decisions and judgments about the future. The brain likes to save energy, so it makes decisions quickly using easily recalled information, or a heuristic. A heuristic is a “rule of thumb” that our brains use to help us make decisions more easily and quickly. The availability heuristic occurs because we tend to think that if something can be recalled more quickly it is more common or likely to happen.

### PROS AND CONS OF THE BIAS

#### Pros

- We can make quick decisions and judgments based on readily available information in our memory.

#### Cons

- Can lead to biased judgments by overestimating the frequency and probability of events that are easily remembered and underestimating those that are not.

### REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES OF THE BIAS

- After watching a documentary about shark attacks, a person begins to believe they are common because the image of it is so vivid in their memory.
- A recent post on social media about a local robbery moves a person to believe their neighborhood is more dangerous than it statistically is.

## Learning Activities

### OPEN

Have students write the name of the day's bias and the driving question on their Mental Notes graphic organizer.

### ACTIVATE

- Divide the class into groups of 3–5 students and have them quickly brainstorm and list as many examples as they can for 1 of a list of global topics (environment, happiness, poverty, disease)
- Then have each group estimate the annual number of deaths caused by each event in the United States.
- Encourage students to discuss their estimates within their groups.
- Have data ready for each topic and present the data about annual deaths to the class.
- Ask groups to reflect on their estimates versus the actual numbers.

### EXPLAIN

- Show students the "[Which are Deadlier: Sharks or Horses?](#)" video.
- Describe the availability heuristic and explain why it occurs. Tell students that we can explain the availability heuristic using dual process theory, which states that we have 2 distinct cognitive systems for decision making, 1 that is automatic (System 1) and 1 that is effortful (System 2). The availability heuristic is a product of the automatic system, arising from our affective state. Our emotions can also alter our perception of the risks and benefits of a certain outcome, swaying how likely we are to choose it.
- Tell students that they can effectively deal with the availability heuristic in the following ways.
  - Actively seek out diverse sources of information when making decisions rather than just relying on personal experiences or recent events. These sources can include research studies, expert opinions, and data analytics.
  - Actively seek out information that contradicts your initial impressions. If you're relying on a handful of vivid examples, search for data, research, or other experiences that provide a more balanced perspective.

A faint, light gray background graphic consisting of a network of interconnected nodes and lines, resembling a molecular structure or a web. The nodes are represented by circles of varying sizes, and the lines are thin and gray, creating a complex, geometric pattern across the entire page.

## **DISCUSS**

Break students into groups and have them discuss the following questions:

- In what situations can the availability heuristic be helpful? Harmful?
- When have you seen this bias in action?
- When are people most susceptible to this bias?
- How can people recognize when they are being affected by this bias?
- What are some ways to overcome and deal with this bias?
- What is the relationship between this bias and humility? In what ways can our awareness of this bias improve our relationships with others?

## **SYNTHESIZE AND CLOSE**

Ask each group to share what they discussed for at least 1 of the questions. Revisit the driving question and make sure each student has responded to the driving question in their Mental Notes for the day.