



## Bias Bite #9: The Affect Heuristic

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### Overview

This mini-lesson is designed to help your students recognize and better understand the affect heuristic. Although this bias can allow us to make decisions quickly and efficiently, it can also promote biased responses that are based on emotions, not facts.

The following activities will guide students in an exploration of the way the affect 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 rely on our current emotions when making quick decisions?

## Objectives

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

## Materials Needed

- "Heuristics and Biases in Decision Making" video
- Mental Notes graphic organizers for students

## Bias Description

Our brains use heuristics or "rules of thumb" that help them make decisions more easily and quickly. The affect heuristic refers to our tendency to base decisions on emotions rather than evidence. Although this approach enables us to arrive at conclusions swiftly and effortlessly, it can also lead to distorted reasoning.

### **PROS AND CONS OF THE BIAS**

#### **Pros**

- We can make decisions quickly and easily, saving time and cognitive effort.
- Emotions can drive action and motivate us to make decisions, even when we might not feel like it.

#### **Cons**

- Emotional responses may result in biased decisions, leading to irrational or suboptimal choices based on feelings rather than facts.

### **REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES OF THE BIAS**

- Students may be perceived as "bad" if they are frequently disruptive, leading teachers or peers to overlook their strengths because of frustrations with them.
- A person chooses which college to apply to simply because their close friend is going there, letting their positive feelings overlook important facts about the school.

## Learning Activities

### OPEN

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

### ACTIVATE

- Ask students to think of a time when they made a decision emotionally. Then have them turn and talk with their partners about what happened and what the outcome was.
- To encourage student sharing, you might tell a story about when you as a teacher made a decision on the basis of emotions rather than facts. Be sure to include details about what happened, your emotions, and what the impact was.

### EXPLAIN

- Show students the "[Heuristics and Biases in Decision Making](#)" video.
- Describe the affect heuristic. Tell students that we can explain the affect 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 affect heuristic is a product of the automatic system, arising from our affective state. In this state, our emotions can alter our perception of the risks and benefits of a certain outcome, swaying how likely we are to choose it.
- Share this example of the affect heuristic to help students understand.
  - Public health campaigns have used the affect heuristic to deter people from engaging in unhealthy behavior by sharing scary or disturbing information. For example, some anti-smoking campaigns place information about the consequences of smoking and pictures of diseased gums and lungs on cigarette packages. A survey found that the more negative emotions people felt in response to these warning labels, the more likely they were to cut back on smoking or even quit altogether.
- Tell students that they can effectively deal with the affect heuristic in the following ways:
  - Actively seek out information and arguments that challenge your initial emotional response. This action can help you move beyond knee-jerk reactions.
  - Collect and analyze relevant data and information before making a decision. This activity can help ground your judgment in objective evidence rather than in emotions alone.
  - Employ frameworks like the cost-benefit analysis or decision matrix to structure your thinking and weigh facts rather than just emotions.
  - If you feel emotionally charged about a decision, take a break before making a choice. The break will give you time to cool down and consider things more rationally.

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 circles of varying sizes, and the lines are thin and gray, creating a complex, geometric pattern across the entire page.

## **DISCUSS**

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

- In what situations can the affect 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.