

# CONNECTIONS

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## Be Gentle With Yourself

By Michael McCafferty, **FEI Workforce Resilience**

I don't know about you, but I don't think I really care for this "new normal" that I keep hearing about. Let's face it: this has not been an easy year—I'll spare you the list. On the bright side, however, I have picked up some new skills and learned how to make far better use of web-based communication to help support people who are, like all of us, not having an easy time of it lately. I have facilitated discussions on self-care, mediated conflicts between co-workers and presented webinars on coping with anxiety related to returning to the workplace amid a pandemic—all without leaving my house. Except for their differences in delivery method, all these interventions are about helping individuals, teams and organizations become more resilient. A key aspect of all this work on resilience is fostering self-compassion.

When we experience a setback or go through difficult times, it's normal to react negatively by blaming others or criticizing ourselves. Unfortunately, neither response is especially helpful. Getting defensive may temporarily ease the pain, but it comes at the expense of learning. Self-criticism may feel warranted in the moment, but it can lead to an inaccurately negative assessment of one's potential, which interferes with growth and resilience.

A kinder, gentler approach would be to treat ourselves as we would a friend. With a friend who's feeling down, we're more likely to be understanding and encouraging. Directing that type of response internally, toward ourselves, is known as self-compassion. A growing body of research is showing that self-compassion is a useful tool for enhancing our resilience in a variety of settings, from business to sports, and shows clear benefits in managing challenging life circumstances, including pandemics.

It's important not to confuse self-compassion with self-esteem. While people who engage in self-compassion tend to have higher self-esteem, they are different things. Self-esteem tends to involve comparison to goals or other people; self-compassion, however, doesn't involve judgment of self or others. Instead, it fosters a sense of self-worth because it encourages us to genuinely care about our own well-being and recovery after a setback.

Self-compassion tends to show up in three main ways: kindness rather than judgment about our mishaps; recognition that failure is a shared human experience; and balanced emotions in the face of adversity, i.e., we may feel bad, but we don't let negative emotions overwhelm us.

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Hello City Employees,

The approach of the presidential election adds another layer of tension to an already strained year. We are thinking about the employees who work in the City Clerk's office and all of the other City employees and community members supporting their work. With that in mind, this month's newsletter focuses on taking care of yourself and each other. The key take-aways include:

- Have compassion toward yourself and others
- Maintain social connection, even if you tend to be an introvert
- Bring your true self to work because it benefits you and the organization
- Effectively bridge with those on the other side of an issue
- Recognize the challenges we all face as humans, offer kindness and understanding

We hope you are taking the time for self-care and finding things to be grateful for. EAP counselors are available if the stress starts to get the better of you, please don't hesitate to call for help if you need it.

~ The EAP Team



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The good news is that learning self-compassion is a resiliency skill that can be built. When troubled or facing challenging times, consider this:

## Have a mindful moment

Being mindful is about noticing what is happening in the moment and having no judgment about it. What are you feeling? Guilt? Shame? Anger? Notice the feeling, name it and just be with it. Don't try to make it go away. Just hold space for the feelings in a kind, loving way, without making the suffering disappear.

We will always have pain. But as meditation teacher Shinzen Young has noted:  $\text{Suffering} = \text{Pain} \times \text{Resistance}$ . The more we resist our pain, perhaps by trying to make it go away or denying it, the more suffering we experience.

## Don't take it personally

Often when we are struggling and in pain, we make it worse by criticizing or judging ourselves. This makes us feel more isolated and alone, like we're the only one in the world who has this challenge or who has made a mistake. But all human beings are imperfect. We all suffer. And we are all connected by our shared humanity.

One of the benefits of self-compassion is an enhanced sense of being part of the human experience, the feeling that we are all in this together. Which is much better than what a good friend of mine calls "terminal uniqueness."

## Be kind to yourself

Treat yourself like you would treat your best friend. If she had just gotten some really bad news, would you tell her to "quit whining and get over it"? Probably not. Would you say it to yourself? Remember that you are just as worthy of kindness and compassion as any other person. Often when we are caught up in anxious thoughts, we think things that are unhelpful or self-critical, such as "I shouldn't be sad," "other people have it worse" or "I should have saved more money." Don't believe everything you think!

It helps to acknowledge that you're a human being who is feeling human emotions and that this is normal and OK. Reminding yourself "I am feeling anxious right now, and it will pass" or "this is a really hard time" is a good idea. Don't have unrealistic expectations of yourself that you should somehow be just fine. In other words, be gentle with yourself.

If you need help coping with the challenges of this pandemic, please reach out for assistance. Either City of Madison EAP or our external provider can connect you or your family members with mental health counselors:

- Call City of Madison EAP at 266-6561 or email [eap@cityofmadison.com](mailto:eap@cityofmadison.com)
  - » **City of Madison EAP Website**
- Call FEI, the City's external EAP, at 1-800-236-7905
  - » **FEI Website** (Username: Madison)



# 5 Things People Get Wrong About Self-Care

By Alice Boyes, Ph.D., **Psychology Today** (Used with the author's permission)

*People who bash self-care fundamentally misunderstand it.*

The concept of self-care has been receiving some backlash lately, but that's largely based on a misunderstanding of what self-care is. Let's dispel some negative stereotypes about self-care. If you think of self-care as indulgent or selfish, you're thinking about it wrong.

## 1. Self-care isn't typically about treats or pampering.

Folks who hold negative stereotypes about self-care often think of it as about massages, facemasks, or about buying yourself gifts and treats. Occasionally self-care might take one of those forms. However, most of the time self-care is exactly what's on the label, it's going to the dentist, replacing the running shoes that have worn out and are causing your feet to hurt, spending the extra \$2 to make a healthy lunch rather eating instant ramen at your desk, or taking yourself to bed early rather than staying up all hours watching Netflix.

## 2. Self-care isn't about putting your own needs ahead of others.

Another negative stereotype of self-care is that it involves putting your own needs ahead of other people's needs. For instance, an extra job needs to be done at work, you feel overloaded so you say you can't do it and leave it to one of your equally overworked colleagues.

In all likelihood, you've met someone who uses self-care as a reason to make everyone else fit in around them and dictate terms for shared activities to other members of a group or family, such as saying, "I can't come to your baby shower because it clashes with my child's nap time and we need to stay on our schedule."

Very occasionally self-care may involve some type of inconvenience to someone else, but not generally. If the way you do self-care frequently ends up inconveniencing or dictating to others, then it's time to rethink that.

Try thinking about self-care that benefits you and other people, such as spending more time in nature with your children, getting back into bedtime routines involving reading stories (to help everyone wind down more readily), or creating soul-nurturing family rituals like making homemade pizza together once a week or whatever appeals to you. If your self-care urge is that you need to slow down, then other people can easily be a part of that.

## 3. Self-care isn't a list of behaviors; what constitutes self-care depends on the situation.

Earlier this week I needed to get a passport. I wanted to have a nice passport photo, but I also needed to get this task done and off my list, as I had already been trying to get around to doing it for three weeks. In this type of scenario, what would self-care be? It could be saying to myself, "A nice photo is important to me, I'm going to take the time to take the photo at home so I can choose a good one." Or, it could be me saying to myself, "I just need to get this done and off my list, so I'm going to run into Costco and get whatever random dude is working the photo desk to do it."

One of these choices isn't inherently more self-caring than the other, because self-care is often situation dependent. It's also related to balance. If it's been months since you took the time to do something objectively unimportant, just because it was important to you, then the most self-caring choice is likely to be to give yourself that experience. Other times, the mental freedom of removing a nagging to do might be your pressing need. Self-care is often about having the self-knowledge and psychological flexibility to make what's the best choice for you overall, which may be different at different times.

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#### 4. Self-care is as much about your thinking as your behaviors.

How self-cared for you feel will depend at least as much on your self-talk as whatever behaviors you do and don't do. In particular, there is an abundance of research on the importance of self-compassion skills. Broadly, self-compassion is about acknowledging what you feel (whether that's hurt, nervous, embarrassed, etc.) and that those emotions are part of the universal human experience. You might feel guilt, shame or regret about your earlier behaviors, but a self-compassionate person can acknowledge that everyone has experiences like that.

Someone with good self-care skills will be able to acknowledge when they're feeling anxious in the process of pursuing a meaningful goal and be able to talk themselves through how to move forward with those feelings of anxiety rather than giving up. Likewise, having good self-care skills involves knowing how to detect when you're ruminating and employ some skills for breaking free of that as well as having the capacity to notice if your perfectionism has tipped over into being self-sabotaging and being able to gently steer yourself towards an alternate path.

#### 5. Self-care isn't just about doing solitary activities, it's often social.

One of the most nurturing things people can do for themselves is to seek human connection in response to stress rather than isolating themselves. This applies even to introverts.

Often people's idea of self-care is that it's something they do privately, like sitting in their PJs applying Korean skincare or spending 20 minutes meditating. Even if you're an introvert, reaching out to others when you're under stress is a behavior that should be in your repertoire.

Self-care often involves letting others into your inner world a little bit, touching base with important people you haven't seen recently enough, or actually seeing or speaking to any close friends who you tend to communicate with primarily through the Internet.

If your self-care is mainly something you do privately, try thinking about what more social forms of self-care might be for you. It could be catching up with a friend one-on-one who you only see in groups or in other contexts that aren't conducive to deeper conversations. Or, it could be finding a sport that involves other people, so you can feel more sense of community, rather than always exercising alone.

At times, solitary self-care will be exactly what you need to recover from an overstimulating day, but introverts and other people who value emotional self-sufficiency shouldn't overlook the benefits of social forms of self-care. If you crave connection but also need a break from other people, then connecting with nature by keeping a plant on your desk and looking at it when you're stressed may help decrease your stress hormones.

If you buy into a commercialized definition of self-care that's all about pampering or into a definition that is all about withdrawing from the world, you'll overlook forms of self-care that are easily accessible to you and potentially very helpful.

Alice Boyes is the author of two books, **The Anxiety Toolkit** and **The Healthy Mind Toolkit**.



# Being Yourself at Work: Choosing Belonging Over Fitting In

By Dorothy Suskind, Ph.D., **Psychology Today** (Used with the author's permission)

*The power of choosing authenticity over conforming to group norms.*

## Fitting In vs. Belonging

When done intentionally, belonging is a spiritual practice, a stamp of authenticity, inviting you to sit within yourself and be. It is awash with personal values, an alignment of actions and beliefs (Hooks, 1996).

Fitting in, on the other hand, is a verb. It is precarious and on the move, a target that changes depending on the company and climate. Research shows that where you fall on the belonging to fitting in continuum is largely an outgrowth of your groups' cultural norms (Brown, 2018).

## Forced to Fit In: Groups That Stagnate and Stifle

Groups with narrow and tightly enforced norms create a fitting in culture. There are often unwritten rules regarding belief structures and agreements on who the "good people" are and who to watch out for. Straddling diverse social groups is discouraged and a framework of us vs. them is clearly established.

Cohesion in fitting in cultures is often nurtured by liking and hating the same people and standing lockstep when considering what projects to support, what curriculum to teach, and what protocols to follow. Such cultures, according to Brene Brown (2018), share Common Enemy Intimacy, in which groups build inner membership cohesion by jointly targeting, disparaging, and excluding individuals with divergent ideas.

Since camaraderie within fitting in cultures is built upon disliking the same people, dissenting opinions are rarely tolerated and group-think is rampant, stifling original thought and innovation. Research shows that some people possess a higher need to belong than others, placing them at greater risk for conforming to group expectations even when those expectations conflict with their own personal values (Eck, Schoel, & Greifeneder, 2017; Beekman, Stock, & Marcus, 2016).

Inside fitting in cultures, employees are often forced to decide if they will conform or open themselves up to be targeted. These all or nothing decisions tend to extinguish employees' diversity in thought, actions, and relationships and hamper the organizations' ability to move forward and promote its mission.

## Big Tent Belonging: Groups That Question and Create

Contrary to fitting in cultures, some organizations cultivate an environment I describe as Big Tent Belonging. Such places emanate psychological safety. Psychological safety, according to Edmondson (2019), a professor at the Harvard Business School, "is broadly defined as a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves. More specifically, when people have psychological safety at work, they feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution. They are confident that they can speak up and won't be humiliated, ignored, or blamed."

A common misconception is that psychological safety is about being polite, nice, and agreeable. Quite the opposite, psychological safety requires employees to use candor, give justice to injustices, and engage in difficult conversations. This daring work is only possible in organizational cultures that value and practice honesty, authenticity, and creative problem-solving.

Cultures that invite their employees to show up as their full-hearted self encourage diverse ideas and opinions, and establish a foundation built atop trust and care. Inside these safe spaces, employees get comfortable being uncomfortable and learn to seek out and learn from criticism (McClure & Brown, 2008). In other words, if a culture practices "high care," they create an environment that encourages and accepts "high criticism." Interestingly, as reported by Rozovsky (2015), People Operation Leader at Google, the most predictive characteristic of successful teams is psychological safety. Additional traits include dependability, clear plans and goals, engagement in meaningful work, and the ability to impact change.

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## Leaders Who Resist Big Tents in Favor of Fitting In

Organizational leaders are largely responsible for drafting and enforcing group norms. Brene Brown's (2018) research, documented in her book *Dare to Lead: Brave Heart. Tough Conversations. Whole Heart.*, identified specific institutional behaviors, passed down from leadership, that extinguish psychological safety and incite innovation paralyzation.

Such organizations are often headed by leaders who avoid tough conversations, resulting in them spending an inordinate amount of time smoothing over and covering up issues, as opposed to, addressing the underlying cause. They often opt out of critical conversations and instead enact solutions that are rushed and misinformed, ultimately exasperating the problem.

Leaders who insist on employees fitting in, focus on perfecting their image, and evaluating their success according to aspirations instead of concrete behaviors and data. These leaders often insist on strict hierarchies that discourage dissent and result in diminished safety and trust.

When problems do arise, fitting in leaders search for someone to blame, shame, and defame (Francioli et al., 2018). In contrast, leaders who put up a Big Tent of Belonging encourage employees to work across diverse groups, share original ideas, point out discrepancies and mistakes, operate beyond their established roles, and dare to take the intellectual risks necessary to create and innovate.



## Do I Belong Here? Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Deciding to leave a job charges one to grapple with intense feelings of confusion, anger, grief, and loss. At the ground floor of these emotions sits the nagging question, "Do I belong here?" Though there are no easy answers to this internal inquisition, there are guideposts that may help to lead the way (Singh, Shaffer, & Selvarajan, 2018). Four questions can help scaffold the discernment process:

1. Does this job allow me to show up as my full self and live into my values? In other words, can I openly express my ideas without fear of rebuke and retaliation (Brown, 2017)?
2. In this space, do I feel that I am expanding my skill set, perspectives, and expertise, or does this organizational culture make me grow progressively more silent and small (Edmondson, 2019)?
3. Do I leave my work most days energized or does this work culture negatively impact my personal life manifesting in health problems, psychological suffering, and the inability to engage joyfully in outside relationships (Hershcovis, Ogunfowora, Reich, & Christie, 2017; Liu, Kwan, Lee, & Hui, 2013)?
4. Finally, instead of asking, "How do I make this job work?" Try asking, "What do I most want to accomplish in this world?" "Followed by, "Is this organization the best place for me to do that work?"

In closing, I think Bell Hooks (1996) says it best, "I want there to be a place in the world where people can engage in one another's differences in a way that is redemptive, full of hope and possibility. Not this 'In order to love you, I must make you something else.' That's what domination is all about, that in order to be close to you, I must possess you, remake and recast you." In other words, in its truest sense, belonging invites you to launch your own audition and cast yourself in an authentic role that values and develops your character.

## References

# How to Calm Strangers Who Are Stressed or Angry

By Alice Boyes, Ph.D., **Psychology Today** (Used with the author's permission)

*Emotions are running high. Here's how to calm other people down.*

Yesterday, I had to go to a lab for some routine bloodwork. The lab was understaffed. The waiting room was full. People were waiting over an hour past their appointment times. To make matters worse, the new system allowing people to wait in their cars instead of inside the office seemed to be glitching. This resulted in several people thinking they were checked in for their appointments, but the staff had no record of them. The patients were stressed. The staff members were stressed. Several people waiting were in their 80s. Needless to say, no one wanted to be there in the middle of a pandemic.

Between COVID-19 and the summer heat, many of us are finding ourselves in public situations in which people are anxious and/or have frayed tempers. Here are some suggestions for how to help defuse others' emotions in these situations and help people calm down.

**1. Be human.** This is by far the most important tip I'll mention here. In stressful situations, people often stop seeing the humanity in the other people around them and lose sight of the fact we're all humans having a shared experience. Normally, when people are sitting in a waiting room, they rarely talk to strangers. While I was waiting for my blood test, several of us began to chat with each other (from our socially distant seating and all wearing masks). One of the couples there were celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary. A little bit of chat—and acknowledging we were all feeling vulnerable in the situation—helped a great deal.

When people express vulnerability, it tends to make other people's caring instinct kick in. Any type of human connection can help soothe frayed feelings. At the lab, one of the staff members mentioned that it was one of the most stressful days she had ever had at work. When she expressed this vulnerability, it helped other people see her as human, rather than as a cog in a broken machine.

**2. Tell someone they're doing a good job in a trying situation.** A little bit of kindness can go a long way when someone is stressed. For example, you see a mother who is struggling with a crying child. Parents in this situation often feel like other people are staring at them and judging them negatively. Why not say, "You're doing a good job, Mama"? Occasionally this may be unwanted or taken the wrong way. However, it might also be the boost the person needs. And, it can help them realize other people are empathizing rather than judging.

Similarly, I told one of the blood-test technicians she was doing a good job. She instantly relaxed. Again, this was about treating her as a human. Everyone can relate to feeling stressed at work. This type of strategy might not always work, but it works often enough to make it worthwhile to try it.

**3. Meet people's physical needs.** When folks are struggling to cope with a stressful situation, it's much worse if they are hot, cold, or thirsty. Try to meet these needs for people if you can. For example, if you have a waiting room, put a fridge in it with bottles of cold water. Outside of COVID times, put out a bowl of apples or bananas for people who need some sugar. Even offering someone a stick of gum when they're stressed can help. The chewing sensation can be comforting.

**4. Controlled anger is sometimes OK.** Anger can be functional. Sometimes, expressing a degree of anger when you are taking control of a situation can help other people contain their emotions.

Occasionally other people feel so out of control they need someone else to put in a boundary to help them contain their feelings. If someone keeps pushing your boundaries, some sternness can help give them the message to back off. Initially, they might not appreciate it but you expressing some anger might cause them to retreat a bit. And, in turn, them retreating may allow them to calm themselves down.

**5. Treat it as an art.** Read others' emotional needs. Although it's possible to give some tips, defusing strong emotions requires you to read the other people involved. A strategy that works great in one scenario can backfire and escalate the conflict in another. Try making a small overture and see what reception you get. Use your body language and your tone to communicate your intentions as much as your words.

Obviously, it's not wise to stick your beak into every conflictual situation you come across. However, with good skills, in some situations, you can use yourself as a tool to help others manage stressful scenarios. We're all going through a lot during COVID-19, and we all have an emotional responsibility to each other to be as human as possible in our interactions.

Alice Boyes is the author of two books, **The Anxiety Toolkit** and **The Healthy Mind Toolkit**.



## 5 Tips for Building Professional and Social Relationships

Some of us are social butterflies while others prefer a quieter, more private lifestyle. Despite these preferences, interpersonal relationships are an important part of everyone's personal and professional well-being.

Like many things in life, we can become better at building relationships by mastering a few basics:

- 1. Accept and celebrate differences.** It's easy to socialize with those who share your beliefs and backgrounds. But if you want to enlarge your social circle, it's helpful to reach out to those who are different from you. As your relationships deepen, you may be surprised to discover how much you have in common.
- 2. Communicate effectively.** Getting to know others is a matter of give and take. While it's helpful to ask open-ended questions, it's equally important to focus on their answers.
- 3. Give people your time.** While much of today's communication is done through email and texts, face-to-face interactions play an important role in solidifying relationships. Make plans to spend time with people you enjoy.
- 4. Be consistent and manage emotions.** If you're going through a difficult time, it's helpful to let others know this by sharing whatever you feel comfortable sharing. Others will appreciate your openness and honesty.
- 5. Be genuine, positive and trustworthy.** When you feel good about who you are, others will want to spend time with you. By building positive relationships, you'll feel happier, more fulfilled, connected and supported.



### Need help?

Your EAP can provide additional guidance and resources.



OCTOBER 21, 11:00 am CT  
*Relationships 101*

**REGISTER**

What is the foundation of a good relationship? Whether you're building a relationship with a co-worker, significant other or someone you just clicked with online, we'll explore the fundamentals of good relationships, discuss strategies for improving them and how you can make positive connections.

**Presented by Raquelle Solon**  
Business Solutions Engineer,  
FEI Behavioral Health



# Eight Keys to Bridging Our Differences

By Scott Shigeoka and Jason Marsh, **Greater Good Magazine** (Used with the author's permission)

*There are many misconceptions about bridging differences, so we consulted with researchers and practitioners to clarify what it is—and what it isn't.*

## Are you a Bridger?

The two of us would like to think we are. After all, over the past two years, we've helped to lead the Greater Good Science Center's Bridging Differences initiative, which has been exploring the keys to positive dialogue and understanding across lines of race, religion, political ideology, and more.

Yet this work has raised some challenging questions for us. Does "bridging differences" mean that we paper over social injustice in pursuit of social harmony? Does it require us to sacrifice our ideals in order to always find common ground with others? Or to accommodate views or behavior that we find abhorrent?

These questions have taken on even greater urgency over the past several months, as the COVID-19 pandemic has forced a reckoning with systemic racism in this country and all of the inequities that follow from it. Calls to "bridge differences" in this moment can seem to gloss over centuries of discrimination and oppression, pushing for reconciliation before fully acknowledging and addressing the experiences of African Americans.

That's one big reason—among many—why we think it's important to clarify what bridging differences actually entails. In reviewing years of research on the topic, and through conversations with some of the leading voices in the field, we have surfaced eight key principles to help explain what we think bridging differences is—and is not—all about.

### 1. Bridging starts with a recognition of common humanity

First off, it's important to stress that bridge building does not mean that you always agree with another person or even find common ground with them. In fact, you might disagree with them vehemently. But the key is that you don't dehumanize them in the process—you never reduce them to a caricature or see them as somehow less worthy of health and happiness than you are.

Indeed, bridging starts from recognizing that another person or group has their own human needs, tastes, values, goals, and worldview, just as you do. Without that basic recognition of your shared humanity, constructive dialogue—to say nothing of problem solving—is unlikely to happen.

"A lot of bridging happens because someone feels like they've been heard," says John A. Powell, a civil rights expert and the director of UC Berkeley's Ongoing and Belonging Institute.

"It means a lot to be seen, heard, and understood . . . it's very close to being loved."

By contrast, research by Emile Bruneau and Nour Kteily suggests that dehumanizing a member of another group is strongly associated with feelings of hostility and aggression toward that group—these are the types of feelings that "feed cycles of intergroup violence," write Bruneau and Kteily. Another study found that people who dehumanize their political opponents see greater moral differences between their groups and even prefer greater social distance from them—in effect, the opposite of bridging.

### 2. Bridging is not about persuasion; it's about understanding

The true goal of bridging differences is not to convince the other person of your viewpoint—or even necessarily to build consensus.

"Bridging work is not a sneaky way to convert people to your ideological position," says Reverend Jennifer Bailey, founder of the Faith Matters Network and co-founder of The People's Supper, which brings people together over dinner to broach challenging topics.

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Instead, the heart of bridging work lies in trying to understand someone else's perspective. While you might not share their views, you don't dismiss them; you dig deeper to try to appreciate where those views came from. This often requires asking questions and being willing to suspend judgment.

The benefits of this type of perspective taking are profound: One study, led by UCLA researcher Margaret Shih, suggests that when a member of one ethnic group tries to see the world through the eyes of someone of a different ethnicity, they report liking members of that group more and are more likely to help them out. Other research suggests that perspective taking reduces knee-jerk racial biases.

It's worth noting, though, that research by Bruneau has found that when there are power imbalances between two groups, it's more valuable for someone from the lower-power group to give their perspective rather than to try to take the other person's.

### 3. Bridging doesn't require abandoning your beliefs or values

The term "bridging" can often seem synonymous with compromise. To bridge your differences with someone else, the thinking goes, you need to give up your own closely held beliefs.

"Today in the national media, the notion of structural, systemic change is offered up in contrast to being 'bipartisan,'" said Steven Olikara, the founder and president of the Millennial Action Project (MAP), at a recent GGSC event on Bridging Differences. In other words, if you want to build political bridges, you can't expect to stray too far from the status quo.

But instead, in MAP's solutions-oriented work with young politicians from the political left and right, Olikara has found that the bridgers are the ones who get stuff done—even effecting changes that some people thought were too ambitious, such as ending partisan gerrymandering in Ohio.

"So that's an example where we had a radical idea about structural, systemic change," says Olikara, "but we used [Rev. Dr. Martin Luther] King's methodology of building bridges with not just people in the moderate center but from across the political spectrum, and that's how we had enough support for it to ultimately pass."

### 4. Bridging involves inner work, not just action

When we think about bridging differences, we usually think about grand gestures or breakthrough conversations. But the truth is that much of the work happens before those events ever take place. To make them possible, we often need to cultivate the right mindsets and psychological approach—and that's something we can (or must) do outside of our interactions with other people.

That's why a substantial portion of the **GGSC's Bridging Differences Playbook** is devoted to intrapersonal skills—skills you can practice on your own, to build your capacity for more positive interactions with other people and across groups.

For instance, research has indicated that practicing mindfulness can actually reduce biased attitudes and behavior against members of a different group.

### 5. Bridging requires modesty and humility

To bridge differences, you usually need to accept that you don't have all the answers or own a monopoly on the truth—an outlook that researchers refer to as "intellectual humility."

This is especially important because bridging often involves contact between people from different cultures or communities. You probably won't get very far in your bridge-building efforts if you presume that your own tradition or story is definitely the right one. This is true whether you're talking about major historical events or your own family's history: You need to recognize that your narrative isn't the only one that matters.

In fact, research has found that when people with strong religious beliefs were confronted by doctrines from another religion, those who were lower in intellectual humility argued more vehemently in favor of their own religious beliefs, and more vehemently against the other religion's beliefs, than did people higher in intellectual humility. The more humble folks showed greater openness to other people's views and experiences.

### 6. Bridging is sometimes about small shifts over time

While bridging differences might involve trying to overcome a history of conflicts—interpersonal or political—or forging an alliance between once-opposing groups to work toward a common goal, it sometimes centers on more modest shifts. That can mean just setting an intention or an openness to change down the line.

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“Bridging is sometimes just putting a flag in your land that says, ‘I’m working on it,’” says Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton, a professor of psychology at UC Berkeley and a faculty advisor to the Greater Good Science Center. “Sometimes that’s the job of the person who bridges, to make small incremental changes.”

In that vein, Powell talks about “short” and “long” bridges; the psychological and emotional distance someone needs to travel determines the length of the bridge.

With a short bridge, for instance, two people might both believe in climate change but have different approaches on how to address it.

Then there are cases where the distance between two people might feel greater and more challenging to overcome. One person might be a climate change activist while the other might deny climate change altogether. Traversing these longer bridges requires an investment of more time and trust. There’s more at stake, too.

While crossing a long bridge is an ambitious and worthwhile goal, we shouldn’t underestimate the significance, and even the challenges, of crossing some smaller bridges, as well. Indeed, crossing those short bridges can be good practice for ultimately crossing the longer ones.

### 7. Bridging is not without risk

Bridging often involves taking risks and exposing vulnerability. You may risk having your overtures rejected, and you may often need to express feelings of hurt, anger, or disappointment.

“The first person takes the greatest risk, but once that happens, others are likely to follow suit,” says Powell.

Perhaps most of all, when you truly try to hear someone else’s views, you risk being changed or influenced by what you hear.

“That willingness to be transformed is also a necessary part to do authentic bridging work,” says Bailey. “I don’t think you can walk away from a bridging scenario, particularly when you’re bridging differences, and remain exactly the same.”

### 8. Not everyone should bridge

Partly because of those risks, it’s important to recognize that not everyone can or should be a Bridge Builder, or feel compelled to build bridges in every situation. The work of bridging should not be done by demand.

It’s ethically dubious—and, research suggests, often counterproductive—to ask people to bridge differences when they’re being discriminated against or otherwise denied social power. Before they’re ready to bridge, some must heal from personal trauma. And it can be psychologically harmful, not to mention physically dangerous, to try to forge a connection with someone who fundamentally denies your right to exist or threatens you with violence.

As we’ve suggested above, bridge building shouldn’t be used as a tool of persuasion or coercion, especially not to consolidate power in order to attack or oppress others. It’s about expanding one’s sense of commonality with others, not about constricting them to adopt your worldview.

There’s one final point we should stress about bridge building: As well-intentioned as we may be, trying to bridge differences often won’t lead to the outcomes we hope for, at least not at first. It is a deeply human process, and we’ll often make mistakes along the way. It’s critical to remember to be compassionate toward ourselves and others when we encounter setbacks.

“You don’t have to resolve every conflict,” Mendoza-Denton says. “And you don’t have to have every answer.”

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