

Cognitive Biases that Affect our Understanding, Decisions, and Interpretation

Everyone exhibits cognitive bias which are systematic errors in thinking when processing and interpreting information. The brain is powerful but has limitations, and we tend to become more vulnerable to biases when:

1. we have too much information to process
2. when we need to act quickly
3. when we become more reliant on memory
4. when we haven't formed enough meaning in a situation or context.

Because of the sheer complexity of the world around us and the abundance of information available to us, it becomes necessary to use mental shortcuts known as *heuristics* to act. Cognitive biases are often rooted in heuristics that may be accurate and can also lead to errors in thinking. Other factors that lead to bias are our emotions, motivations, and social pressures.

Here is a useful graphic of a cognitive bias codex that you can download. [Every Cognitive Bias in One Infographic \(visualcapitalist.com\)](https://visualcapitalist.com). Below is a summary of the more prominent bias that we invite you to be attuned to in your canine assisted practices.

*Cognitive Bias	Description and Example
Anchoring Bias	Tendency to rely too heavily on the very first piece of information you learn e.g., Heard German Shepherds don't like children and no longer consider this breed for canine assisted practices
Attentional Bias	Tendency to pay attention to some things while simultaneously ignoring others e.g., you choose a trainer based on a yelp review and ignore several friends advice and experiences
Availability Heuristic	Place greater value on information that comes quickly to your mind. e.g., you disregard canine's progress because you only think about earlier problems during training
Bandwagon Effect	Adopting a belief based on the number of people who hold that belief. e.g., that pit bulls are dangerous
Blind Spot Bias	Failing to recognize your own cognitive bias e.g., so motivated to partner with canines in your practice regardless of the facility not being safe for canines
Confirmation Bias	Tendency to listen only to information that confirms our preconceptions e.g., believing all golden retrievers can be effective emotional support dogs
Clustering Bias	Tendency to see patterns in random events. e.g., after seeing unfamiliar border collies all play together, expect to see more unfamiliar border collies join in
Conservation Bias	Favouring prior evidence over new evidence or information that has emerged. E.g., people were slow to accept the world was round because it was previously understood as flat.
False Consensus Bias	Tendency to overestimate how much other people agree with you. E.g., thinking other people agree with your assessment of a canine's biddability
Functional Fixedness	Tendency to see objects as only working in a particular way. e.g., not recognizing that program assistants may have leadership skills



Halo Effect	Your overall impression of a person influences your assessment of their skills and character. E.g., having a lot in common and really liking a trainer, you overestimate their training skills with your canine.
Misinformation Effect	Tendency for post-event information to interfere with the memory of the original event. E.g., eyewitness accounts can be altered by what they hear after event from other people
Optimism effect	Leads you to believe that you are less likely to suffer misfortune and more likely to achieve success. E.g., even with negative feedback, you continue to hold out that it will all work out
Ostrich effect	Decision to ignore dangerous or negative information. E.g., investors tend to check their stock less often during bad markets.
Outcome Bias	Judging a decision based on its outcome rather than how the process occurred e.g., finishing a workshop on time but rushing through content which frustrated participants
Overconfidence	Too confident about our abilities which may lead to taking more risks. E.g., continuing a training exercise with a dog who is communicating aggression, because you feel confident in your skills, and then getting hurt
Placebo Effect	Simply believing that something will have a certain effect on you causes it to have that effect e.g., taking fake pills may create same physiological effects as people given real pills.
Salience Effect	Tendency to focus on the most recognizable features of a living being or concept. E.g., interpreting dog's panting as being tired instead of many other reasons such as pain, anxiety, fear.
Self Serving Bias	Tendency to blame external factors when negative things happen and give yourself credit when positive things happen. E.g., blaming a dog's behaviour for session didn't go well, and crediting yourself when it does go well.
Stereotyping	Expecting a group or living being to have certain qualities without having real information about them. E.g., Pitt bulls are dangerous and should not be left alone with children
Selective Perception	Allowing our expectations to influence how we perceive the world. E.g., every culture loves dogs and this, wants to be around them.
Zero-Risk Bias	We tend to love certainty even when its counterproductive- and thus we sometimes can work to eliminate risk entirely even if it means some negative outcomes. E.g., not allowing children to pet dog at anytime.

*Some retrieved Sept. 6, 2021, from [What Is Cognitive Bias? \(verywellmind.com\)](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-cognitive-bias-2796187)

What can we do to reduce these tendencies?

- Be aware of your bias, and ask yourself, 'how do I know this?'
- Reflect upon your past experiences and look for patterns in your thinking
- Consider factors that influence your decision, and as yourself, 'How did I get to this decision?'
- Challenge your bias by asking, 'what am I missing?' or ask someone else
- Seek out contrary data and conclusions and compare
- Understand the noise – focus on your values, principles and important aspects of the context, situation, etc. Sometimes, meditation can help
- Test and re-test your thinking and decisions
- Be curious and look at multiple perspectives
- Assume you don't know what you don't know

[Dobelli, Rolf. 2013. "The Art of Thinking Clearly." In The Art of Thinking Clearly, by Rolf Dobelli.](#)