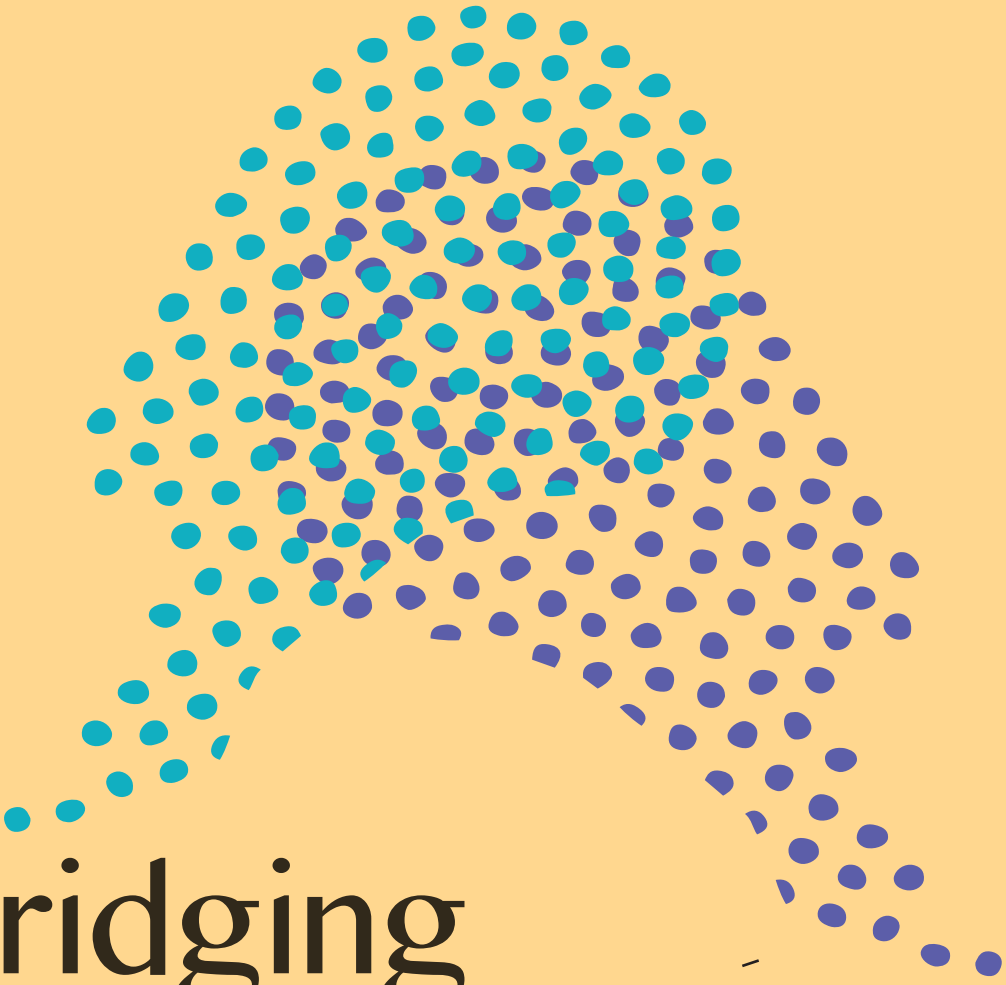

Bridging Differences Playbook

Learn research-based strategies to promote positive dialogue and understanding

Greater Good Science Center

BRIDGING DIFFERENCES

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01

An Invitation to Bridge Differences

Recent surveys suggest that partisan divides in the United States are on the rise. The resulting polarization has widespread effects: It can harm our personal relationships, spark violence motivated by racial or religious prejudice, and even undermine our democracy.

But it doesn't have to be this way. There is a growing movement of individuals and organizations—Bridge Builders—who are working to foster more constructive dialogue and understanding across group lines, bringing us together at a time when so many forces are pulling us apart.

Bridge Builders close the psychological gaps between Us and Them, encouraging others—and themselves—to recognize that their differences don't need to define or divide them and that they can disagree with someone without dehumanizing them; instead, they work to promote empathy and understanding, find common ground when possible, and identify shared goals and values.

At UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center (GGSC), we are mixing science and storytelling to both illuminate and support the important work of Bridge Builders across the country.

Drawing on cutting-edge research and insights from trailblazing programs, our Bridging Differences program is highlighting the key skills and strategies for overcoming divides. This Bridging Differences Playbook shares lessons learned from our work.

What Is the Bridging Differences Playbook?

Under our Bridging Differences program, we have reviewed decades of scientific studies, interviewed dozens of leaders, and surveyed the landscape of relevant programs. From this work we have collected enduring wisdom and best practices for bridging political, racial, religious, or other divides. It has led us to identify a set of skills and strategies that support positive dialogue, relationships, and understanding between groups or individuals.

The Playbook synthesizes these core skills and strategies. For each of the 14 skills that we identify, we first briefly explain the main steps involved in how to practice it. Then we explain why and when this skill is useful and offer caveats to keep in mind when you try it out. Finally, we cite research that supports this skill and organizations that use it in their work, along with other resources where you can learn more about it.

We have organized the Playbook's skills into three main categories:

1. **intrapersonal skills** that you can try on your own, to build your capacity for more positive interactions with other people and across groups;

2. **interpersonal skills** to make those interactions go more smoothly; and

3. **intergroup skills** that you can use when bringing other people or groups together—these skills are especially relevant to leaders or facilitators trying to guide others toward better interactions and deeper understanding of one another.

Taken together, these skills are not supposed to constitute a formal curriculum or rigid list of requirements. Instead, we offer them as a set of flexible principles that people can adapt and apply in different settings, from public debates and political discussions to our most intimate relationships. They can serve as the backbone for a new initiative or help to explain why an existing program already works. Not every skill is appropriate in every circumstance. Like players on a basketball court, sometimes you have to dribble, and other times you have to shoot.

We also recognize that this collection of skills may evolve over time, keeping pace with new findings from the research and new innovations in the field. But for now, we believe that it offers a strong foundation. We are confident that the more we practice these skills, the better we'll get at bridging differences.

We know that the work of bridging differences can feel daunting, and it's not often clear where to start; that's what this Playbook is for. Indeed, each entry is a springboard to further exploration, and we identify a number of organizations throughout the Playbook that can help you go even deeper. Given the urgency of this work, we hope it gives you the confidence and tools to take an important first step toward overcoming divisions and divides, whether within families, between groups, or across our nation.

02

Before You Begin

What "Bridging" Is . . . and What It Isn't

Before you dive into this Playbook, we want to clarify a few important aspects of bridge building and what it means to be a Bridge Builder.

BRIDGING IS NOT ABOUT PERSUASION; IT IS ABOUT UNDERSTANDING

The true goal of bridging differences isn't 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.

Instead, the heart of bridging work lies in trying to understand someone else's perspective, even if it's not your own. 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 requires asking questions and a willingness to suspend judgment.

BRIDGING RECOGNIZES COMMON HUMANITY

Bridge building does not mean that you always find common ground or compromise. You may disagree with another person, sometimes 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 like you do. Without that basic recognition of your shared humanity, constructive dialogue—to say nothing of problem solving—is unlikely to happen.

BRIDGING REQUIRES MODESTY AND HUMILITY

To bridge differences, you usually need to start by accepting that you don't have all the answers or a monopoly on the truth. 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; that's true whether you're talking about major historical events or your own family's history.

BRIDGING IS NOT ALWAYS REVOLUTIONARY; IT'S SOMETIMES ABOUT SMALL SHIFTS

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

"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."

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 on our own.

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

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. 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 Rev. Bailey. "I don't think you can walk away from a bridging scenario, particularly when you're bridging differences, and remain exactly the same."

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.

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. So while we hope this Playbook is a useful tool for many, we recognize that it's not for everyone.

What Are the Benefits of Bridging?

Bridge building is vital to healthy relationships and healthy institutions. And it helps counteract the trends toward greater polarization that we have been seeing for years in the United States.

Polarization is not the same as disagreement about how to solve public policy problems; those disagreements are natural, even healthy, in a democracy. Polarization is about more than just having a different opinion than your neighbor about certain issues. Polarization occurs when we refuse to live next to a neighbor who doesn't share our politics, or when we won't send our children to a racially integrated school.

Research suggests that polarization affects families, workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and religious organizations. It stresses the fabric of our society. Antagonism might feel necessary in conditions of injustice. But being aware of the price we all pay for polarization might motivate us to reduce it, before the worst effects take hold.

Here's a few reasons why bridging differences is beneficial for our lives and society.

- **It improves our health.** Research has found that individuals who harbor racial prejudices and fears experience elevated levels of stress and other physiological responses that, over time, can wear down their muscles and damage their immune systems.

- **It strengthens families.** A recent study found that Thanksgiving dinners were significantly shorter in areas where Americans share meals across party lines. The effect was worse in areas with heavy political advertising. The researchers estimated that 34 million person-hours of cross-partisan discourse were eliminated in 2016 thanks to this polarization effect.

- **It makes us smarter.** Studies have found that when people with different backgrounds or beliefs work together, they make better decisions and solve problems more creatively than more homogenous groups do.

- **It reduces violence.** In polarized situations, we stop seeing people in competing groups as human

beings—and that is very dangerous. Since the 2016 election, hate crimes have risen and more Americans seem to be endorsing the idea of intergroup violence.

- **It's good for the bottom line.** When organizations convey to their employees that they have a shared fate—meaning that they're all going to succeed or fail together as a group—diverse teams are more productive and creative than homogenous ones.

- **It supports good government.** On issue after issue, Americans are closer to agreement than they appear, but polarization prevents us from seeing that and passing effective legislation. Researchers have noted that the 112th Congress, for instance, passed fewer laws than any Congress stretching back to the 1800s. By getting past intense partisanship, our political representatives are more likely to get things done.

03

How to Use This Playbook

Bridge Builders don't come in a single form or model. Some work as mediators or lead groups devoted to cross-group understanding; others are K-12 educators, local politicians, workplace managers, or leaders of faith-based groups or other community-based organizations. They span ages, neighborhoods, and backgrounds. They broker difficult conversations at the holiday dinner table and suggest solutions with broad appeal at a community town hall.

Similarly, there's not a single "right" way to use this Playbook. That said, we realize that the amount and variety of its content might feel overwhelming. So we put together a few "personas" to convey different types of Bridge Builders, each encompassing their own constellation of practices.

This isn't an exhaustive list of personas, but they represent many of the people we've met during our Bridging Differences initiative. We hope it expands your notion of what a Bridge Builder looks like and provides inspiration for how to use some of the Playbook's strategies in combination with one another.

THE EXPLORER

Might use these Playbook skills:

- Expand Your Activities, Expand Your Views
- Counter Stereotypes
- Assume Good Intentions

The Explorer bridges by exposing themselves to new situations that allow them to interact with different people and perspectives. They're curious and adventurous. They don't shy away from putting themselves in the potentially uncomfortable position of meeting diverse people. They attend public meetings, rallies, or other events where they're likely to encounter people different from themselves.

THE CONNECTOR

Might use these Playbook skills:

- Identify Common Goals
- Identify Shared Identities
- Focus on Solutions

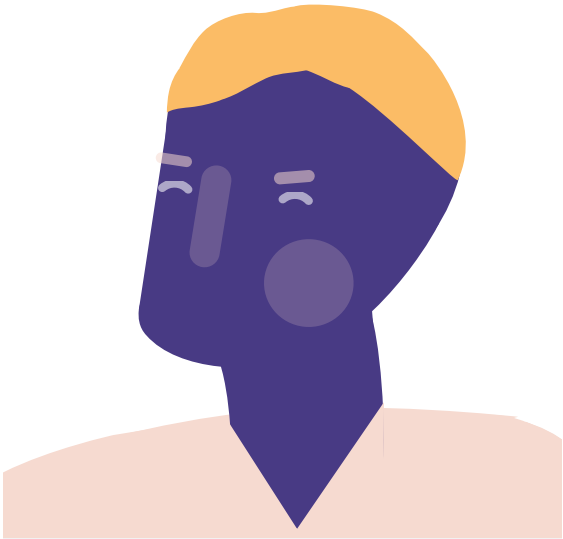
The Connector hopes to "connect the dots" among people with differences. They're great collaborators and systems thinkers who can recognize patterns. They have an intuitive ability to sense how people with different strengths and weaknesses can come together and establish common ground.

THE SEEKER

Might use these Playbook skills:

- Perspective Taking
- Understand Their Values
- Focus on Individuality
- Put People Before Politics

The Seeker is constantly learning about new perspectives and stories. They defy judgment by asking questions like: *What's your story?* They don't let someone's identities or ideologies define them. They get to the root of who someone is by inquiring about their upbringing and values.



THE MEDIATOR

Might use these Playbook skills:

- Practice Mindfulness
- Try Self-Distancing
- Listen with Compassion

The Mediator knows how to stay calm and composed in moments of conflict. They can regulate their emotions and don't get riled up when they hear something that contrasts with their beliefs or offends their sensibilities. They can listen from "above the fray" rather than rushing to a response or judgment.

Guiding Principles

As you begin using the Playbook, and perhaps even try on some of these personas, we offer a few guiding principles.

- **Center on your intentions.** Ask yourself why you're bridging and be honest about whether your intentions are genuine. Is this truly about understanding someone on a deeper level, or is it about trying to change someone's mind?
- **Don't force it.** Sometimes people aren't ready to have a bridging moment; sometimes you might not feel up to it yourself. That's OK. Better to wait for when the time is right.
- **Be flexible.** Some skills and strategies might work better in different circumstances or depending on the person. Context matters.
- **Practice compassion (and self-compassion).** This work can be emotionally taxing, and it can put a lot of stress on the people engaging in it—yourself included. If you can keep that in mind, it might be easier to extend feelings of grace, forgiveness, and compassion toward others and toward yourself. We'll all make mistakes along the way, and hopefully we can learn from them.
- **It's an ongoing journey.** These skills and strategies are like a muscle that we need to exercise. Actively reflecting on our efforts—by asking ourselves what works and what doesn't—helps us grow as Bridge Builders

Reflecting On Your Practice

As you go through the skills and strategies in the following pages of the Playbook, we offer a few questions to reflect on. These prompts, which you can ask yourself before and after trying each of the Playbook's skills, aim to make your practice more focused and deliberate and refine the way you use these skills in your work and life.

BEFORE YOU TRY IT

Once you've read more about a skill, think about where and how you could apply it. How might it already show up in your life or work—for instance, in a close relationship or work in your community—and where could it come in handy? Be specific.

AFTER YOU TRY IT

Then, after you've had the chance to try it out, consider these reflection questions:

- How did it feel to practice this skill? What, if any, positive impact did it have on you or others?
- What was difficult or challenging about it? What barriers did you face in applying it, and what other barriers do you anticipate in bringing it into another part of your life or work?
- What was unclear about it? What questions do you have about its steps or its overall purpose?
- How might you improve upon it? Is there anything you'd suggest adding, revising, or removing in order to make it feel more relevant or effective?
- In what situations—in your personal life, work, or community—could you imagine using this practice in the future?

We welcome your feedback on the Playbook.

If you would like to make suggestions or share stories based on your experiences with it, please email us at bridgingcourse@berkeley.edu.

04

Skills and Strategies for Bridging Differences

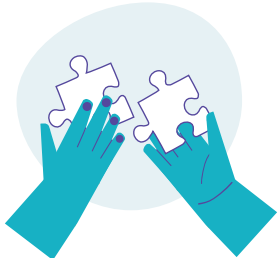
- Intrapersonal
- Interpersonal
- Intergroup

Intrapersonal

The skills and strategies in this section are those that you can try on your own, without a partner. By cultivating the mindsets and experiences that orient you toward bridging, they can deepen your capacity for more positive interactions with other people and across groups.

Assume Good Intentions

Entering a conversation with the sense that the other person dislikes or distrusts you—or has a nefarious agenda—may put you in an anxious mindset that negatively affects your interaction. By assuming that the other person is approaching your interaction from a place of goodwill, it will likely go better for both of you.



HOW TO DO IT

This practice can be done before or during an interaction. Before you engage with someone across difference, try to assume that their intentions are good and positive.

The next time you feel slighted during an interaction, stop yourself from taking offense and instead try to hear the underlying comment for what it was intended to be.

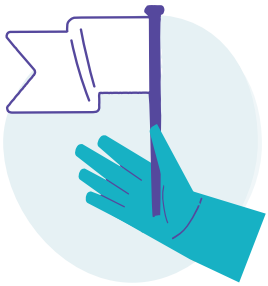
Recognize that your assumptions about others and their intentions can be shaped by your own past experiences of mistreatment. Try to detach yourself from these experiences and remind yourself that the person you are meeting is not the person who mistreated you.

PRO TIP

Set the expectation to assume good intent before or at the start of your interaction, to be clear about the mindset you'd like to adopt.

WHY TRY IT

We often instinctively assume that if an interaction makes us feel bad, then the other person must have intended to make us feel that way. This can become a self-fulfilling prophecy that causes others to distrust *you*. However, by assuming good intentions, we can sidestep any hurt we might feel and instead focus on the issues that are being raised in the discussion. This practice reduces the perception of threat—and can help you connect with people who are different from you.



KEEP IN MIND

Sometimes, people do have bad intentions. Try to remember, though, that this is rare, so those exceptions should not unduly influence your interactions.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT

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THE SKILL IN PRACTICE

- Spaceship Media works with media organizations to support conversation across divides. Their Alabama-California Conversation brought together women from California who voted for Hillary Clinton and women in Alabama who voted for Donald Trump for a two-month collaboration designed to break down stereotypes about the other side.
- The National Institute for Civil Discourse works to promote civil and productive dialogue about politics and contentious social issues. Its National Civility Network is composed of a dozen university institutes and centers that work to tackle political dysfunction and incivility.

READ MORE

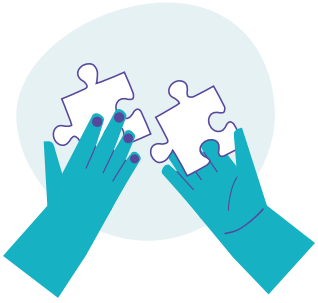
What Happens When You Give People the Benefit of the Doubt

People who view the behaviors of others in a positive light are happier, a new study suggests.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_happens_when_you_give_people_the_benefit_of_the_doubt

Practice Mindfulness

Research suggests we can reduce social biases by building moment-to-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, and surroundings through practices like meditation.



HOW TO DO IT

1. Find a relaxed, comfortable position. You could be seated on a chair or on the floor on a cushion. Keep your back upright, but not too tight. Hands resting wherever they're comfortable. Relax your gaze or close your eyes, whatever feels most comfortable for you.
2. Notice and relax your body. Try to notice the shape of your body, its weight. Let yourself relax and become curious about your body seated here—the sensations it experiences, the touch, the connection with the floor or the chair. Relax any areas of tightness or tension. Just breathe.
3. Tune into your breath. Feel the natural flow of breath—in, out. Allow your breath to flow naturally. Try to let go of need to control each breath in and out. Notice where you feel your breath in your body. It might be in your abdomen. It may be in your chest or throat or in your nostrils.
4. Stay here for five to seven minutes. Notice your breath, in silence. From time to time, you'll get lost in thought, then return to your breath.
5. After a few minutes, once again notice your body, your whole body, seated. Take a deep breath. Let yourself relax even more deeply and then offer yourself some appreciation for doing this practice.
6. It might be particularly useful to try this practice before entering into a

conversation or situation where you might be at odds with someone. And over time, as you do it more often, see if you can incorporate some of its elements into a heated conversation. For instance, try taking a deep breath before you respond to an upsetting comment or notice if your body is tensing up, which may suggest you are feeling stressed and might be primed to react hastily to the other person before considering your words or actions.

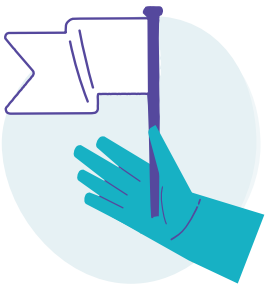
PRO TIP

You might notice that your mind starts to wander during a mindfulness practice. This is natural. Just notice that your mind has wandered and then gently redirect your attention back to your breathing. You might also feel yourself having a strong emotional reaction to what a person says. This is also natural. Watch those feelings like you'd watch clouds in the sky, knowing that they pass and change.

WHY TRY IT

MIndfulness can help us bridge differences in a couple of different ways. First, it can help us slow down in tense or challenging interactions, enabling us to respond with greater thoughtfulness and equanimity rather than reacting more hastily to what the other person says or does. It can also help us attune to our thoughts, feelings, or bodily sensations that suggest we're getting anxious or angry, enabling us to manage those emotions before they get the best of us. Second, research also suggests that mindfulness can reduce our unconscious biases. When we encounter

strangers, we're prone to taking mental shortcuts in evaluating them—and sometimes, these shortcuts become stereotypes. Asians are good at math, Muslims are terrorists. Being mindful of these mental shortcuts can help us avoid such cynical, reactive judgements. In effect, practicing mindfulness encourages our minds to wake up and pay attention to the details that make other people unique. It can be a tool to strengthen our feelings of kindness and connection toward others—even those who are different than us.



KEEP IN MIND

There are many kinds of mindfulness practices, many of which you can find in our library of research-tested practices, Greater Good in Action. And the type of practice you select, and the language you use to teach it, may depend somewhat on the context in which you're using it. If you're introducing mindfulness to people new to it, you may want to avoid anything that feels too esoteric—a simple mindful breathing exercise might be a good start.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT

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THE SKILL IN PRACTICE

- The Engaged Mindfulness Institute trains professionals and volunteers to use trauma-informed mindfulness practices as they support individuals and communities that have been marginalized and underserved.

READ MORE

How to Avoid the Social Media Outrage Trap
Six ways to keep your cool on social media, drawing on skills of mindfulness.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_avoid_the_social_media_outrage_trap

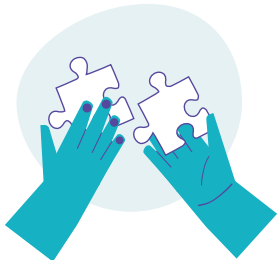
LISTEN IN

Trying Compassion on Capitol Hill
In this episode of our podcast, Congressman Tim Ryan tries a practice to help him reach across the aisle.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/podcasts/item/congressman_tim_ryan

Expand Your Activities, Expand Your Views

Through exposure to new people, events, and experiences, we can broaden our own sense of what's comfortable and familiar to us. Popular ways to do this include traveling or consuming media outside of your typical feed.



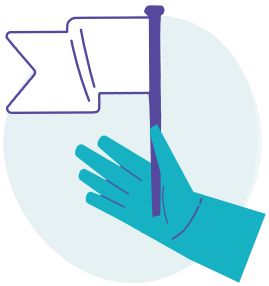
HOW TO DO IT

In many respects, this exercise is really just a matter of moving toward things that make you uncomfortable. Do you tend to have a low opinion of gun owners? Pay a visit to the local shooting range and sign up for lessons. If it's liberals you don't like, consider attending panel discussions hosted by liberal organizations.

It's important to approach these events with questions and an open mind. Don't arrive hoping to make other people like you, or looking for things to criticize. The next step, beyond that, is to bring others like you into your new experiences. In this way, you can reduce misperceptions and biases, and create warmer feelings between people.

WHY TRY IT

We tend to fall into ruts, becoming complacent about how we see the world and other people. If we're always doing and reading what seems familiar, and hanging around people who make us feel comfortable, then prejudices and stereotypes are more likely to fester. But breaking out of your comfort zone can help you to grow and expand your personal identity—and perhaps break down some social barriers. In fact, research suggests even having a friend from your own group befriend a member of a different group can reduce your own prejudices.



KEEP IN MIND

Superficial exposure will have limited impact; it often requires deeper, ongoing engagement.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT

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THE SKILL IN PRACTICE

- OpenMind is an interactive online educational platform that equips people with skills to think clearly and communicate constructively across differences. The platform has been used across more than 200 universities and dozens of organizations worldwide, helping to address political polarization and promoting more positive intergroup dialogue.
- The National School Climate Center at Ramapo for Children provides educators with ideas, activities, research, and coaching to build inclusive environments where students with different needs and identities can come together to form positive school cultures.
- AllSides exposes people to information and ideas from all sides of the political spectrum so they can better understand the world—and each other. They provide balanced news coverage, media bias ratings, civil dialogue opportunities, and a technology platform that's available for everyone.
- StoryCorps records the stories of Americans and syndicates them through public radio channels. Its One Small Step program invites people with differing political views to interview each other to encourage listening from outside your own perspective.

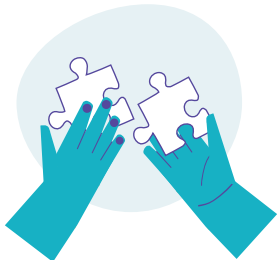
READ MORE

How We Can Fight Prejudice Against Muslims
Lessons learned from interfaith programs suggest ways to foster acceptance toward minority groups.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_we_can_fight_prejudice_against_muslims

Seek and Promote Counter-Stereotypical Information

The stereotypes we hold about other people or groups can dictate how we treat them. But as we're exposed to information that challenges those stereotypes, our views can become more positive—and our behavior may follow.



HOW TO DO IT

It's important to start by acknowledging that we do hold stereotypes about individuals, based on their group identities. If we become more aware of the stereotypes we hold, we can ask where they come from. The next step is to make a concerted effort to find information that challenges these assumptions.

You could take a direct approach by getting to know someone who is a part of a different group. You can ask, "What's a common misconception or stereotype people on the outside have about you because of the groups (e.g., race, faith, or gender) you belong to?" You can follow up with a question like, "What's something about you that challenges this stereotype?"

You can also make a deliberate effort to expose yourself to counter-stereotypical information through the news or content you consume. For instance, if you notice you have stereotypes about hunters and anglers—you think they don't care about the environment, for instance—you could learn more about organizations where communities of anglers are protecting rivers and oceans from pollutants.

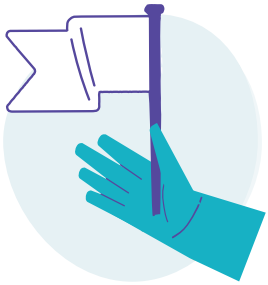
PRO TIP

The goal of exposing ourselves to counter-stereotypical information is to challenge our own assumptions and broaden our perspectives, not to create new stereotypes.

WHY TRY IT

Our assumptions about other people are often based on available stereotypes, perhaps ones you've seen in the media or heard from friends. For example, we might have a perspective from the news about refugees but never met one in real life.

We can expose ourselves (and others) to counter-stereotypical information by replacing our general impressions with first-hand experiences and understanding—for instance, instead of just relying on others' accounts of refugees, we can try to meet them in person, attend or watch a public hearing featuring the voices of refugees, or read more detailed accounts about their experiences.



KEEP IN MIND

Questions you have for people unfamiliar to you might betray your stereotypes about them, which could feel offensive. It's important to clearly state your intentions up front for asking those questions and remind them it's acceptable to choose not to respond. You may even provoke irritation; try to take it in stride. Even if that conversation is difficult, you'll be better equipped to have another one.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT

- Paolini, S., Wright, S. C., Dys-Steenbergen, O., & Favara, I. (2016). Self-expansion and intergroup contact: Expectancies and motives to self-expand lead to greater interest in outgroup contact and more positive intergroup relations. *Journal of Social Issues, 72(3), 450-471.*

THE SKILL IN PRACTICE

- Braver Angels holds events all over America to engage liberals and conservatives in thoughtful and empathetic conversations. One of their projects, the Red-Blue Workshops, enlist five to seven Democrats and five to seven Republicans to attend day-long events designed to understand one another's experiences and points of view, including their views of the other party.
- CoGenerate A five-year plan to make cogeneration a compelling alternative to age segregation.
- Welcoming America works with communities to cultivate a culture that allows for newcomers of all backgrounds to feel valued and to fully participate alongside their neighbors in the social, civic, and economic fabric of their adopted hometowns.

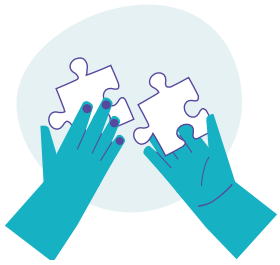
READ MORE

What the Struggle for Gay Rights Teaches Us about Bridging Differences
In just a few decades, GLBT+ rights moved from the margins to the mainstream. Here's why.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_the_struggle_for_gay_rights_teaches_us_about_bridging_differences

Focus On Individuality, Not Group Identity

We often see others in terms of their group membership: He's old, she's white, they're immigrants. But according to research, when we view people in terms of their own individual tastes and preferences, we feel less threatened by those who might seem "not like us."



HOW TO DO IT

The essence of this practice is to shift away from seeing another person as an anonymous member of a group and instead view them as a unique human being. This could mean looking for those features and quirks that define them as an individual, just like you.

To get into that mindset, ask yourself questions about that person's particular tastes and preferences. You don't need to discover the actual answers to those questions—just thinking about them can be enough. For instance:

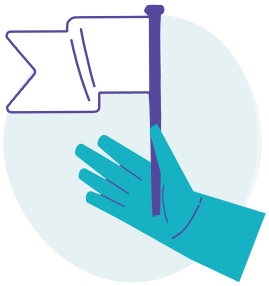
- Do they prefer carrots or broccoli?
- Do they prefer dogs or cats?
- How do they like to exercise?
- What's their favorite color?
- What do they like better, staying up late or waking up early?

PRO TIP

Be aware of the tell-tale signs that you're feeling threatened: faster heart rate, quicker breaths, sweat. If those happen when you meet someone new, it's time to try this practice!

WHY TRY IT

When you encounter someone new, you might be quick to categorize them by their race, gender, age, political party, or other group identity. That makes you more likely to see them as an "Other"—someone not like you—and feel threatened. This practice reduces that fearful response, fostering a greater sense of connection and making your own experience less stressful.



KEEP IN MIND

The key to shifting your perspective is to humanize the other person, giving them more individual features and agency, rather than seeing them as a stereotypical group member. So you might want to avoid questions that center on their passive social identities—Are they over or under 21?—and focus more on the active choices and preferences they express.

Similarly, try to avoid questions that can elicit cultural stereotypes. For instance, thinking about someone's favorite genre of music might just invoke the group identities of "country music lover" or "hip-hop fan" and all the associations we may have with them.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT

- Wheeler, M. E., & Fiske, S. T. (2005). Controlling Racial Prejudice: Social-Cognitive Goals Affect Amygdala and Stereotype Activation. *Psychological Science*, 16(1), 56-63.
- Harris, L. T., & Fiske, S. T. (2007). Social groups that elicit disgust are differentially processed in mPFC. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 2(1), 45–51.

THE SKILL IN PRACTICE

- Narrative 4 brings together diverse groups of people through storytelling. One project, for instance, encourages students from the Bronx, Eastern Kentucky, and Mexico to befriend each other through virtual discussion sessions.
- Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom forms bonds between Jewish and Muslim people in the United States, Canada, and England through interfaith exchange programs designed to create lasting friendships.

READ MORE

How to Beat Stereotypes by Seeing People as Individuals

We often judge people by their group membership—but research suggests another way to view each other.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_beat_stereotypes_by_seeing_people_as_individuals

WATCH THIS

Science Found a Way to Use Broccoli and Carrots to Stop Prejudice

One experiment used vegetables to show how you can overcome knee-jerk biases... and you don't even have to eat them.

https://nationswell.com/ggsc-broccoli-carrots-prejudice/

Skills and Strategies for Bridging Differences

- Intrapersonal
- Interpersonal
- Intergroup

Interpersonal

The skills and strategies included in this section are those you can deploy during interactions with other people. Some can help you step back in the heat of a moment and prevent a conflict from escalating; others can help you form stronger connections with people who you might see as different from you.

Though they seem relatively simple, it can be hard to remember to try them in the midst of a conversation, especially an intense one; it can be even harder to get them just right. But don't be discouraged: With practice, they can become more habitual and easier to execute. You can even look for opportunities to practice them when you're by yourself—perhaps toward a character in a movie you're watching or in a book you're reading—or in less heated conversations, so that they feel more natural when you're actively trying to bridge differences with another person.

Listen with Compassion

We're more likely to want to bridge our differences with someone when we feel listened to and understood by them—and we're more effective at connecting with someone when we really listen to where they're coming from. This practice helps you tune into what someone else is saying and convey that you're paying attention to them. It's a useful skill for fostering empathy and connection in our everyday lives, especially in difficult conversations.

HOW TO DO IT

Find a quiet place where you can talk with someone without interruption or distraction. Invite them to share what's on their mind. As they talk, try to follow the steps below. You don't need to cover every step, but the more you do cover, the more effective this practice is likely to be.

1. **Affirmation.** Affirming feelings or opinions—such as a simple "that makes sense" or "yes, I hear you"—helps build trust and demonstrate respect for the other person's lived experiences. Compassionate listening starts when you can remember that any person is worth listening to because that can open the door for connection and mutual growth.

2. **Be curious.** When appropriate, ask questions to encourage the other person to elaborate on his or her thoughts and feelings. The organization Youth on Board, which works with young people across the country to

PRO TIP

Avoid attending to distractions in your environment, such as checking your phone.

practice compassionate listening, encourages listeners to ask about how someone's past or childhood informs their present situation or feeling. Avoid jumping to conclusions. Instead, ask clarifying questions, such as, "When you say_____, do you mean_____?"

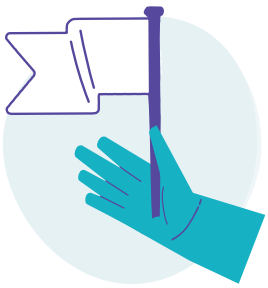
3. **Hold negative emotions.** If the other person voices negative feelings, strive to validate these feelings rather than questioning or defending against them. For example, if the speaker expresses frustration, try to consider why they feel that way, regardless of whether you think that feeling is justified or whether you would feel that way yourself.

4. **Use engaged body language.** Show that you are engaged and interested by making eye contact, nodding, facing the other person, and maintaining an open and relaxed body posture. Be mindful of your facial expressions: Avoid expressions that might communicate disapproval or disgust.

5. **Take turns.** After listening to the speaker, ask if it's okay for you to share your perspective. Express yourself as clearly as possible using "I" statements (e.g., "I feel overwhelmed when you don't help out around the house"). It may also be helpful, when relevant, to express empathy for the other person's perspective. Youth on Board has found that people are more likely to listen and remain engaged if they know they will be listened to as well. Setting up an **equal listening time** agreement, where each person gets the same amount of time to listen and to be listened to, can be an effective method of practicing and receiving compassionate listening.

WHY TRY IT

Often we'll listen to someone without *really* listening to them. In the process, we miss opportunities to connect with that person—and even risk making him or her feel neglected, disrespected, and resentful. That can complicate any attempt to bridge differences with them. This exercise helps you express active interest in what the other person has to say and make him or her feel listened to—a way to foster empathy and connection. This technique is especially well-suited for difficult conversations.



KEEP IN MIND

When you're listening, try to avoid expressing judgements or giving advice. Your goal is to understand the other person's perspective and accept it for what it is, even if you disagree with it. Try not to interrupt with counter-arguments or mentally prepare a rebuttal while the other person is speaking. Problem-solving or advice-giving is likely to be more effective after both partners understand one another's perspective and feel heard.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT

- Weger, H., Castle Bell, G., Minei, E. M., & Robinson, M. C. (2014). The relative effectiveness of active listening in initial interactions. *International Journal of Listening*, 28(1), 13-31.

THE SKILL IN PRACTICE

- The Sustained Dialogue Institute conducts workshops and trainings designed to teach people how to talk across differences. Their Sustained Dialogue Campus Network operates on 100 college campuses worldwide, helping communities bridge divides that exist among student bodies.
- Resetting the Table runs forums, workshops, and town squares to facilitate dialogue on controversial issues and heated topics. One of its programs targeted Midwestern counties that swung from Obama to Trump during the 2016 election; it brought together hundreds of people in Iowa and Wisconsin to discuss topics such as immigration and health care across differences.

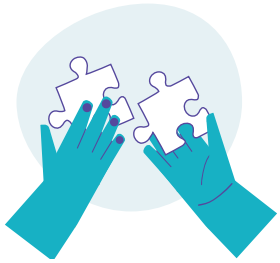
LISTEN IN

What Does It Take to Really Listen to Someone? Are you actually listening when someone is talking to you, or just waiting for your turn to talk? In this episode of our podcast, a veteran of the Iraq War practices how to truly listen to others.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_save_thanksgiving_from_political_arguments

Put People Before Politics

It can be hard to have constructive political conversations—especially when we're often quick to stereotype people based on their political views. But if you get to know the other person first as an individual, and perhaps even better understand why they developed their perspective, the conversation is likely to be more productive.



HOW TO DO IT

Many of us have been there: We're at a dinner with strangers when someone starts talking politics, and it's not long before tempers flare and insults get hurled across the table.

When you encounter someone who seems like their views differ from yours—perhaps because they're carrying a National Public Radio tote bag or wearing a Make America Great Again hat—it can be tempting to dig into a political conversation.

But if you actually want to have a productive dialogue, you'll be well-served by steering clear of politics and first learning more about them—and sharing more about yourself.
You can start by asking questions that uncover stories and experiences. The organization The People's Supper uses these discussion questions to bring diverse groups together to share a meal and get to know one another as people, before they talk about politics:

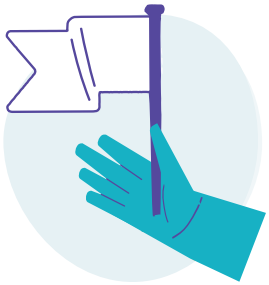
- Tell us about a moment in which you've been made to feel unwelcome, or misunderstood.
- Tell us about someone from this community who makes you proud to call this place home.
- Share a story about someone you love but with whom you disagree about something.
- Tell us about a common misconception or belief people on the outside hold about our community. Describe an experience you've had that would surprise them.
- Tell us about a recent experience that gave you hope.

If the conversations around politics are unavoidable, it's helpful to ask questions like, "How did you develop this belief?" or "Who impacted the way you see the world the most in your life?" These questions help them focus on the reasons behind their views, which builds more understanding and deeper relationships with those with whom we disagree.

WHY TRY IT

When you see the person before you as a three-dimensional human rather than an abstract representation of the "Other," you're more likely to treat them with care and respect.

When you talk about a candidate you voted for or a policy you're in favor of, others might have assumptions about you because of those decisions. By getting to know people's stories and their upbringing, we build more empathy for them and are able to navigate difficult conversations more easily.



KEEP IN MIND

The questions we ask matter, and should be adapted based on the context. "We typically tailor the discussion questions to the particular community we work in," says Lennon Flowers, co-founder of the People's Supper. "It's important to emphasize how important it is to come to the table not to convince or persuade, but to listen," adds Reverend Jennifer Bailey, another People's Supper co-founder. The goal should be to authentically learn about people before their politics because you're curious, not because you're hoping to convince or persuade them.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT

- McDonald, M. et al (2017). Intergroup emotional similarity reduces dehumanization and promotes conciliatory attitudes in prolonged conflict. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 20(1), 125–136.

THE SKILL IN PRACTICE

- The People's Supper organizes dinners for people across the political spectrum and prompts conversation over the meal that help participants get to know one another as people.
- Sisterhood Of Salaam Shalom requires a pair of Muslim and Jewish women to spend a year getting to know each other before they talk about political issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

READ MORE

How to Save Thanksgiving from Political Arguments
A new study suggests Americans are avoiding Thanksgiving because of political differences. Here are some tips for hosting a bipartisan holiday.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_save_thanksgiving_from_political_arguments

Perspective Taking and Giving

Imagining the perspective of someone from a different group—trying to see the world through their eyes and understand where they're coming from—improves our attitudes toward that other group and makes us less likely to see them as the "Other." However, for members of groups with less social power, giving their perspective to a member of a higher-status group might do more to improve their attitudes toward that group.

HOW TO DO IT

Perspective taking is an excellent skill to practice when you're in conflict with someone. But in the heat of an argument, it can be hard to have the presence of mind to pause and see the world through their eyes.

That's why it's helpful to practice the steps below during more relaxed moments, when you're feeling less stressed, angry, or defensive—then work your way up to deploying this skill in moments of conflict or division.

1. Pick a person from whom you feel estranged or with whom you might be at odds—perhaps they have different political beliefs than yours, or they're not part of your ethnic or religious group, or perhaps they're a close friend or family member with whom you're having an argument.

2. Imagine for a moment that you are this person, walking through the world in their shoes and seeing the world through their eyes. If you're present

PRO TIP

Perspective taking doesn't necessarily require direct interaction: We can practice it by seeing the world through the eyes of a character in a book, movie, or another form of storytelling.

with this person, think about how you, as this person, would experience that shared situation; if you're not together, try to recall a moment that you shared, or imagine where they might be. What does the world look like from their point of view?

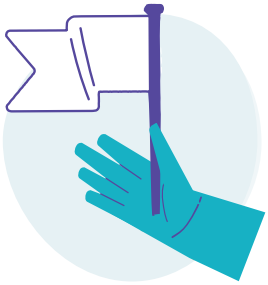
3. As clearly and vividly as possible, try to imagine how it feels to be them. What emotions are they experiencing, and how might that feel in their body? How might their feelings in the situation differ from yours? Can you imagine how their own unique life experiences could contribute to their own particular emotional response?

4. If you're in a debate with this person, try to imagine taking their side and formulate an argument on their behalf. You might have an "a-ha" moment that reveals nuances about their point of view.

5. If you have the time and capacity, even try to imagine a day in the life of this person as if you were them, looking at the world through their eyes and walking through the world in their shoes.

WHY TRY IT

Negative attitudes toward other people or groups often stem from the limits of our own perspectives: We get so caught up in our way of seeing the world that we dismiss or even dehumanize people who might see things differently. Deliberately trying to take someone else's perspective can not only help us better understand where they're coming from and empathize with them but also make them seem less foreign or alien to us—it reduces our tendency to stereotype people from other groups.



KEEP IN MIND

Your sense of another person's perspective is often based on your own assumptions. We can never *truly* know what someone else's experience is, but imagining and asking them directly are important steps in the right direction.

And if you're part of a group with less social power, it may be more important to offer your perspective—to feel listened to—rather than try to take the perspective of someone from another, more powerful group. Research suggests that, in these situations, this "perspective giving" may do more than "perspective taking" to improve attitudes toward the other, higher-status group.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT

- Galinsky, A. D., & Moskowitz, G. B. (2000). Perspective-taking: Decreasing stereotype expression, stereotype accessibility, and in-group favoritism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 78(4), 708-724.*
- Bruneau, E. G., & Saxe, R. (2012). The power of being heard: The benefits of 'perspective-giving' in the context of intergroup conflict. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 48(4), 855-866.*

THE SKILL IN PRACTICE

- Narrative 4 builds connections between individuals from different cultures by connecting them through shared storytelling. One of their projects introduced students from the Bronx in New York City to students in a rural district in Eastern Kentucky.
- All Sides is a website that works to widen perspectives by introducing readers to how different sides of the political spectrum report on and discuss news events. The organization helped create Mismatch, a resource that pairs people, particularly students, with different perspectives to have conversations with one another.
- The National Conflict Resolution Center's (NCRC) works with thousands of individuals worldwide in mediation and conflict resolution settings, encouraging both perspective taking and perspective giving as a means to resolve tensions.

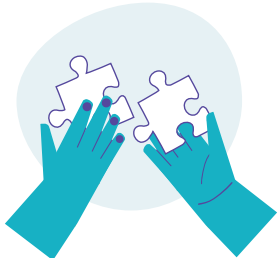
READ MORE

What Happens When You Tell Your Story and I Tell Mine?
Sometimes, empathy isn't enough. New research reveals how taking and giving perspectives can help us to bridge our differences.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/What_Happens_When_You_Tell_Your_Story_and_Tell_Mine

Find Shared Identities

Even when someone seems different from you, chances are you can find at least one important identity you have in common—it could be a group you both belong to (you're both Midwesterners) or a role you share (you're both parents). Often those shared identities are bigger and more significant than our differences. For instance, you might root for different soccer teams, but you're both soccer fans. Instead of focusing on the differences, try to find those important threads of similarity.



HOW TO DO IT

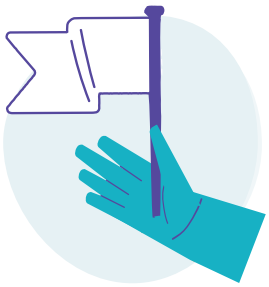
1. Before you meet with someone who seems different from you—or even during or after your interaction, if possible—make a list of the defining characteristics that you share in common with this person. These could be groups to which you both belong or identities that shape how you see yourself. Perhaps you both work or live in the same community. Maybe you are a part of different religious communities but both believe strongly in faith as a value. Maybe you have different political views but are both active participants in the democratic process. You can make this list in your head, but best to write it down.

2. Review this list of shared identities—ideally do it together. Do they feel accurate? Are there any identities missing from the list?

3. Consider: How do these shared identities make you see this person in a new light? If possible, talk with the other person about how your list impacts the way you see each other.

WHY TRY IT

Focusing on a shared identity allows people from different groups to bridge their differences by widening their sense of who they are and who is part of their "tribe." Research suggests that when we identify our commonalities, without necessarily suppressing what makes us different, we are more generous, empathic, and helpful toward other people.



KEEP IN MIND

Members of marginalized communities may not benefit from being asked to identify with members of a dominant group. If they feel that their identities or concerns are being made invisible by the larger group identity, that can harm their psychological well-being and even undermine their willingness to participate in the larger collective.

It's also important not to suppress our own varied identities in the interest of finding a bigger shared identity. For instance, at an interfaith forum between Muslims and Christians, you should acknowledge the differences between these faiths (such as their distinct practices) while encouraging parishioners to discuss where their faiths overlap (such as a belief in monotheism).

RESEARCH BEHIND IT

- Levine, M., Prosser, A., Evans, D., & Reicher, S. (2005). Identity and emergency intervention: How social group membership and inclusiveness of group boundaries shape helping behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31(4), 443-453.
- Nier, J. A. et al (2001). Changing interracial evaluations and behavior: The effects of a common group identity. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 4(4), 299-316.

THE SKILL IN PRACTICE

- Citizen University hosts programs designed to foster civic renewal and a shared sense of purpose among Americans. Its programs include Civic Saturday, where diverse people come together to build a shared sense of community and citizenship, celebrating the civic values that bind them to one another.
- Braver Angels seeks to reduce political polarization in the United States by bringing liberals and conservatives together to understand each other beyond stereotypes, forming Red/Blue community alliances, teaching practical skills for communicating across political differences, and making a strong public argument for depolarization.

READ MORE

How Americans Can Find What They Have in Common

Can we bridge differences without suppressing what makes us different in the first place? Yes, say social scientists and civic organizations.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_americans_can_find_what_they_have_in_common

WATCH THIS

What Happens When Political Opponents Get to Know Each Other?

Two people from opposite sides of the political spectrum find what they have in common.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/video/item/what_happens_when_political_opponents_get_to_know_each_other

LISTEN IN

W. Kamau Bell's Thoughts on Awkward Relationships and Bridging Divides
In this episode of our podcast, comedian W. Kamau Bell discusses the challenges of finding common ground, even with people in your own family.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/podcasts/item/w_kamau_bell

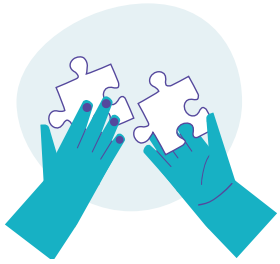
LISTEN IN

Can You Humanize a Zombie?
Should we try to find common ground with the villains in our lives? In this episode of our podcast, comedian Zahra Noorbakhsh tries to understand a "zombie" from her past.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/podcasts/item/can_you_humanize_a_zombie

Understand Values

If you're trying to appeal to people with a different ideology, try to discover what values resonate with them—then present your argument in terms of how it supports those values, not in terms of your own values.



HOW TO DO IT

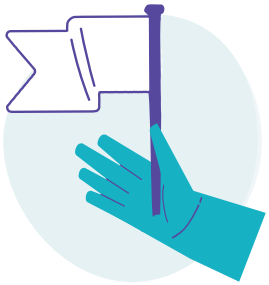
First, it's important to make sure the values or morals you believe others have aren't based on your own assumptions or stereotypes. You can do this by asking questions like, "What are important values that you try to uphold in your life?" and "Who taught you those values, or what experiences formed those values?"

Next, think about how those values might be the same or different from your own; you might discover that you have more in common than you initially thought. If they seem very different, then consider how those values might shape the issues you care about. You don't need to agree with those values. The point of this exercise is to *understand* them.

By doing this you may find it easier to convey your opinions and make sure they are understood by the other person. Even if you fail to persuade them to your position, you'll have gained something from speaking from a position of empathy rather than hostility.

WHY TRY IT

Typically, when we discuss the issues we care about, we tend to give our own reasons, based on our own morals or values. However, we sometimes forget that the people we're talking to might not share these same morals or values. The purpose of this practice (sometimes referred to as "moral reframing") isn't to simply persuade another person to agree with you; rather, it's to help them understand where you're coming from and to understand where they're coming from. Ultimately, this practice enables you to have more civil and less polarizing political conversations, even if you don't ultimately agree on the issue.



KEEP IN MIND

"Moral reframing" can be used to win someone over to your position, but try to remember that understanding, not persuasion, is the goal here.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT

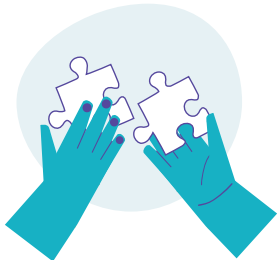
- Feinberg, M., & Willer, R. (2015). From Gulf to Bridge: When Do Moral Arguments Facilitate Political Influence? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41(12), 1665–1681.
- Graham, J., Haidt, J., & Nosek, B. (2009). Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96(5), 1029-46.

THE SKILL IN PRACTICE

- The Better Arguments Project at the Aspen Institute aims to help Americans change the way they argue with each other about political and social issues, promoting a more constructive and respectful way to have disagreements.
- Street Law is an organization that helps classrooms and communities teach about law and government. Their resources on deliberations help facilitate conversations about some of the thorniest and most controversial topics in the context of a social studies classroom.
- Junior State of America works with high school students to get them involved in civic activism and leadership. Their school chapters plan events such as voter registration drives and community service projects.

Try Self-Distancing

Sometimes we get so caught up in our own thoughts and emotions that we have a hard time considering someone else's point of view. To avoid this trap, try to think about yourself or talk to yourself in the third- or second-person instead of the first-person. Research suggests that "self-distancing" through this simple change in pronouns can help us better regulate our emotions and engage in difficult conversations with greater equanimity and less distress.



HOW TO DO IT

It can be hard to practice self-distancing in the heat of a disagreement. For starters, it might be easier to try these steps on your own, removed from a conflict, then eventually work your way up to applying them in the midst of an argument or debate. This can be a conflict you're having with someone close to you, like a romantic partner, or you can apply this skill to the way you're thinking about members of a group with whom you have differences or disagreements.

1. First, think about this conflict from the perspective of a third party who wants the best for all involved—a person who sees things from a neutral point of view. How might this person think about the disagreement?

2. As you think about the conflict, shift your perspective of what is happening from the first-person to the third-person. For example, if your name is Leo, instead of asking, "Why do I feel this way?" ask yourself, "Why does Leo feel this way?"

3. Taking this third-person perspective can be challenging, especially around intergroup conflicts—and

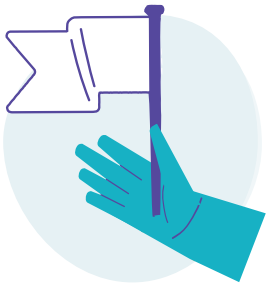
especially in the heat of the moment. Ask yourself: What obstacles do you face trying to take this third-person perspective? What might help you overcome them? For example, if you find yourself getting caught up in the heat of the moment, it might help to pause and take a deep breath.

4. Despite the obstacles to self-distancing, people can be successful in doing so—but it takes practice. Over the next few months, try your best to take this perspective during disagreements. What effect does it have on the interaction? What effects can you feel it having on your body and thoughts? How could you be more successful at it? Allow these reflections to inform your future interactions, make your disagreements more constructive, and prevent them from escalating.

WHY TRY IT

When we experience conflict with others, we typically take a first-person perspective, preoccupied with our own thoughts, feelings, and values. That can overwhelm us with emotions like anger and resentment, making it hard to engage in constructive conversation, especially around charged or polarizing issues with someone who we might see as an adversary or a threat.

But when we take an outsider's perspective on the situation, and get some distance from ourselves, we can respond from a place that is more calm and conciliatory. Distancing ourselves from the problem also helps us recognize that alternative viewpoints exist outside of our own.



KEEP IN MIND

If it feels too awkward to refer to yourself by your own name, you can use a third-person pronoun, like he/she/they, or even try a second-person pronoun ("you"). And you don't have to do so out loud—changing your perspective in your inner monologue is more than enough.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT

- Kross, E., & Grossmann, I. (2012). Boosting wisdom: Distance from the self enhances wise reasoning, attitudes, and behavior. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General,* 141(1), 43.
- Ayduk, O., & Kross, E. (2010). From a distance: implications of spontaneous self-distancing for adaptive self-reflection. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98(5), 809–29.

THE SKILL IN PRACTICE

- Learn how John Sarrouf, co-executive director of Essential Partners, applies the skill of self-distancing to their work fostering constructive dialogue across divides.
- Teresa F. Frisbie, the director of the Dispute Resolution Program at the Loyola University Chicago School of Law, promotes self-distancing as a tool to enhance mediation and resolve disputes.

READ MORE

How to Get Some Emotional Distance in an Argument
How "self-distancing" can help resolve conflicts.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_get_some_emotional_distance_in_an_argument

Skills and Strategies for Bridging Differences

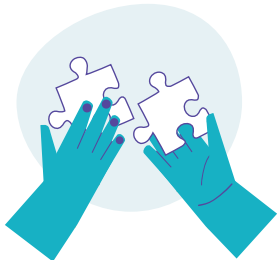
- Intrapersonal
- Interpersonal
- Intergroup

Intergroup

The skills and strategies included in this section are those you can use when bringing other people or groups together. These skills are especially relevant to leaders or facilitators trying to guide people toward better interactions and deeper understanding of one another.

Create the Conditions for Intergroup Contact

Don't underestimate the power of connection. When we come into contact with a member of a different group, we can build more positive attitudes toward that group—provided that four key conditions are met.



HOW TO DO IT

1. Think of two different groups that normally do not come into contact with each other. They might have different interests, religious or political beliefs, or life experiences. This might even be two groups who are in conflict with each other.

2. Before making an invitation for these two groups to come together, set up the following four conditions:

   a. First, the interaction should have the support of legitimate authorities. This could be a local political leader, or perhaps even a neutral mediator.

   b. Second, identify a common goal that the two parties share.

   c. Third, create a sense of interdependence—the parties should feel like they have a shared

stake in meeting that goal, giving them incentive to cooperate.

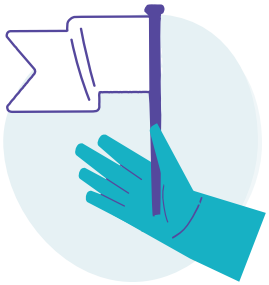
d. Lastly, create a sense of equal status. If, for instance, one group has more leverage or power over the other—either during the interaction or in their everyday lives—the interaction is unlikely to bridge their differences.

3. Ensure you're not operating off your own assumptions. Review with each group how you plan to address these four conditions and get their feedback. Make sure there's buy-in from both groups before you invite them to come together.

4. Finally, create a space for reflection so that you can learn from each group's experience and refine it for the next time.

WHY TRY IT

When people from different groups are segregated from one another, stereotypes and prejudices about each other can take hold. Bringing together members of these groups, helping them get to know one other better—that's a fundamental way of reducing misperceptions and biases, and creating warmer feelings between them. In fact, research suggests even having a friend from your own group who befriends a member of a different group can reduce your own prejudices.



KEEP IN MIND

The power of positive contact between members of different groups can have ripple effects: Research suggests that when someone knows that a member of their own group is friendly with someone from a different group, they form more positive attitudes toward that other group, even if they themselves haven't formed that positive relationship themselves. in-group members have cross-group friends and improve attitudes toward this out-group.

If people from different groups come into contact with each other and have a negative experience, that can actually reinforce and exacerbate tensions between them. Those negative interactions are more likely when the four conditions listed above aren't met. For instance, rapid increases in immigration that aren't accompanied by support from authorities can increase inter-ethnic conflict.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT

- Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751-783.
- Zhou, S., Page-Gould, E., Aron, A., Moyer, A., & Hewstone, M. (2019). The Extended Contact Hypothesis: A Meta-Analysis on 20 Years of Research. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 23(2), 132–160.

THE SKILL IN PRACTICE

- The People's Supper project has brought together thousands of Americans of different backgrounds to meet each other over a shared meal.
- Seeds of Peace brings together teenagers from both sides of a violent conflict to build friendships, engage in dialogue, and work on shared goals at a summer camp in Maine.
- Some evidence suggests this "contact" can even occur through pop culture: Research has found that the presence of gay characters in major television programming was associated with less prejudice among viewers.

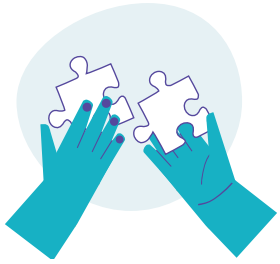
READ MORE

What Makes a Good Interaction Between Divided Groups?
An overview of how intergroup contact can help bridge divides, under certain conditions.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_makes_a_good_interaction_between_divided_groups

Identify Common Goals

When people from different groups identify a goal that they share, and they recognize that they need to work together to achieve that goal, they're capable of putting aside their differences to come together, replacing distrust with a spirit of goodwill. Though you may have disagreements, look for the goals that you have in common with members of other groups—and if you're in a position to bring different groups together, try to highlight for them the goals that they share.



HOW TO DO IT

One way to help people identify common goals is to call their attention to a big problem that is affecting both of them. There are subtle ways that you can call people's attention to the common goals they might actually share with those who they see as being different from themselves.

"The starting point is getting in the same mind space and having the right kinds of trusting relationships," says Steven Olikara, founder and president of the Millennial Action Project, which brings legislators together across partisan divides to identify common goals and solve problems in their community. "You can only start to listen to new ideas if you really trust the source," he adds. "That really starts by having a trusting relationship."

Building on that trust, once you unite people from different groups, you can guide them through the following steps.

1. **Identify individual goals.** Start by asking everyone to take a few minutes to write down their

individual goals and what they sense might be common goals shared among all members of the group. Then, each person in the group shares their responses. When someone is sharing, the other group participants should practice compassionate listening and not interrupt or respond to the goals presented.

2. **Discuss and workshop until you've identified common goals.** If the goals shared seem different, dig deeper to look for overlaps. This is exactly what happened for Millennial Action Project's work in Iowa as they brought legislators together to focus on renewable energy projects in the state. Though their goals didn't initially seem to align, ultimately Republican legislators came on board because of the high paying employment and economic opportunities, while Democratic legislators were on board because it was a concrete action to address climate change.

3. **Discuss the practical steps required to achieve these common goals, and learn how others have been successful in the past.** After they identified this common goal in Iowa, legislators then embarked on a renewable energy tour together to listen and learn from existing efforts. For example, at one Millennial Action Project summit, a legislator in Ohio methodologically explained how he framed these common goals to constituents who have different political views.

WHY TRY IT

People are often hesitant to work with—or even interact with—people they see as different from themselves. To overcome that resistance, it can be useful to appeal to their enlightened self-interest, helping them see how those other people can actually help them achieve goals that they share. Even if they have trouble identifying commonalities in their backgrounds, identities, or other traits, focusing on common goals can shift their perceptions of one another—from adversaries to collaborators who are part of the same team.

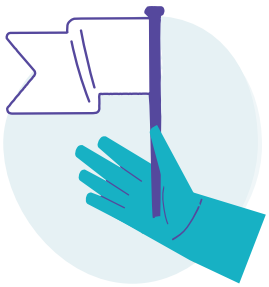
KEEP IN MIND

If you have the opportunity—for instance, if you're working with youth in a school or camp—you could even create a problem, with the goal of motivating two separate groups to realize that they have to work together around a common goal.

This is what researchers did during a famous experiment in the 1950s, when they brought boys to a summer camp and divided them into rival groups that competed fiercely with one another. Later, however, the boys were told there was a problem affecting the entire camp (a threat to the water supply) that could only be solved by working together. They put aside their differences to solve their common goal. This won't work in every context, but it might sometimes be possible to manufacture a problem that helps parties identify common goals.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT

- Sherif, M. (1958). Superordinate goals in the reduction of intergroup conflict. *American Journal of Sociology*, 63(4), 349-356.



THE SKILL IN PRACTICE

- Future Caucus works directly with our nation's leading young policymakers on both a federal and state level to bridge the partisan divide and lead a new era of collaborative governance.
- Ben Franklin Circles meet regularly to learn about each other, ask questions and discuss how to improve ourselves and the world using Ben Franklin's 13 Virtues and applying them to 21st-Century values and leadership.

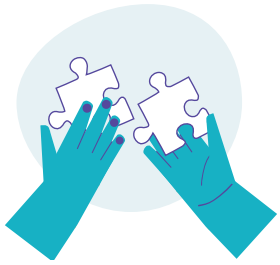
LISTEN IN

Why Shared Goals Can Bridge Divides
This episode of our podcast explores how people from different groups can get on the same page, featuring an interview with an educator and football coach.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/podcasts/item/episode_57_why_shared_goals_can_bridge_divides

Focus on Solutions, Not Identities

To reduce polarization, don't fixate on the identities someone brings with them into a conversation—that might only reinforce partisan divides. Instead, zero in on the issues affecting your community or country, and share your ideas for solutions. You might be surprised by how your ideas overlap.



HOW TO DO IT

This is an especially useful activity to try when you're bringing together people from different, supposedly "opposing" groups. They might be inclined to focus on the other person's identity—they're a Republican, she's Muslim, he's Latino—and make all kinds of assumptions based on that identity, putting themselves on edge before the interaction even begins. Whether you're facilitating this conversation—or participating in this conversation yourself—your goal is to transcend those assumptions and biases as quickly as possible, and instead surface the issues that actually matter to each person—and the solutions that they have in mind.

First, start by understanding the issues and problems people would like to address. Everyone might have a different priority—for one person it might be improving the educational system, for others it might be more accessible health care—but it's important for everyone to voice their perspective.

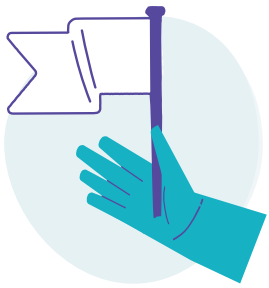
Then, start to get more nuanced and specific about those problems—for instance, ask questions like, "What about the educational system would you like

to see change?" This breaks down the issue into something more digestible. Try to understand as much as you can about why they're interested in that issue. Think about using questions like, "Why is this issue important to you?" or "What are examples of how this issue is affecting people's lives?"

Finally, invite suggestions for solutions to these problems. Talking about solutions can highlight how people from seemingly disparate groups are actually more aligned in their views than they might think. It can also build empathy across group lines as people more deeply appreciate one another's experiences and perspectives. And it can inspire hope and optimism as they rally around the shared desire to tackle issues they both care about.

WHY TRY IT

People often agree on the issues affecting their communities, and have similar ideas for the solutions to those problems, yet they still feel like they're at odds with one another based on their social or cultural identities. This has become an even greater problem in recent years, when people have developed more partisan political identities even though their actual positions on the issues haven't changed much—they have the sense that they're more different from one another than they actually are. That's why focusing on solutions instead of identities can make those conversations less charged and create a deeper sense of unity, as people appreciate the actual agreements they have.



KEEP IN MIND

Sometimes it's important simply to create opportunities for people to talk candidly about the issues affecting them, and not feel forced to introduce solutions where none readily exist. It's important at least to understand what problems all parties are trying to address, and deeper discussions can unearth new insights and approaches to solve these issues.

RESEARCH BEHIND IT

- Mason, L. (2015). "I Disrespectfully Agree": The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization. *American Journal of Political Science*, 59(1), 128-145.

THE SKILL IN PRACTICE

- Convergence is a nonpartisan organization that brings together a diverse set of stakeholders from across the ideological spectrum to identify problems and devise policy solutions.
- The One America Movement uses community projects—such as tackling the opioid crisis in West Virginia—guided by faith institutions to build bridges across divisional lines.

05

Resources

As many of the skills in this Playbook suggest, bridge building requires empathy and humility; approaching it with arrogance and too many assumptions can sabotage your efforts and even deepen divides.

Knowing the research and skills doesn't make you an automatic expert. It's important to constantly learn from others and live the experience of bridging differences so you can continue to grow. It takes real relationships, practice, and experience.

Thankfully, around the country, there are organizations nurturing the skills of bridge building and creating a network of bridgers. While the list below is not exhaustive, we hope it provides you with new leads and ideas to continue your journey as a Bridge Builder.

BE THE BRIDGE

Authentic racial bridge-builders. Their vision is that people and organizations are aware and responding to the racial brokenness and systemic injustice in our world.
https://bethebridge.com/

BEN FRANKLIN CIRCLES

Ben Franklin Circles meet regularly to discuss Ben Franklin's 13 Virtues and apply them to 21st-Century values and leadership.
https://benfranklincircles.org/

BEYOND DIFFERENCES

Beyond Differences inspires students at all middle schools nationwide to end social isolation and create a culture of belonging for everyone.
https://www.beyonddifferences.org/

BRAVER ANGELS

Braver Angels is a citizens' organization uniting red and blue Americans in a working alliance to depolarize America.
https://braverangels.org/

BRIDGEUSA

BridgeUSA is a multi-partisan student movement that champions viewpoint diversity, responsible discourse, and a solution-oriented political culture.
https://www.bridgeusa.org/

CAMPUS COMPACT

Campus Compact is a national coalition of colleges and universities committed to the public purposes of higher education.
https://compact.org/

CITIZEN UNIVERSITY

Citizen University envisions a great civic revival across our nation in which Americans are steeped in a sense of civic character, educated in the tools of civic power, and are problem-solving contributors in self-governing communities.
https://citizenuniversity.us/

CIVIC SPIRIT

Civic Spirit educates, inspires, and empowers schools across faith traditions to enhance civic belonging and responsibility in their student, faculty, and parent communities.
https://civicspirit.org/

CIVITY

Civity is a national nonprofit organization that helps leaders build and strengthen their civic networks to address problems in their community.
https://www.civity.org/

COGENERATE

As Encore.org, they helped change cultural expectations for the years beyond 50 and expand the contributions of older people. Now, as CoGenerate, they are focusing on what the vast and growing older population can do in collaboration with younger generations to solve our nation's most pressing problems.
https://cogenerate.org/

COLOSSIAN FORUM

Colossian Forum is a Christian-led organization that provides guided opportunities to have conversations around culturally divisive "hot button" issues.
https://colossianforum.org/

CONVERGENCE

Convergence pioneers a distinctive approach to collaborative problem-solving across divides, convening leaders in their fields representing wildly divergent views with a consistent record of success in building trust, forging consensus, and driving meaningful change.
https://convergencepolicy.org/

CORTICO (MIT MEDIA LABS)

Cortico aims to foster constructive public conversation in communities and the media that improves our understanding of one another.
https://www.cortico.ai/

DEPLOY/US

DEPLOY/US is a convener, funder, and accelerator of climate leadership across the political spectrum..
https://www.deployus.org/

DOHA DEBATES

Doha Debates builds on the tradition of examining complex global issues, established by Doha Debates' original launch 14 years ago, through live debates, digital videos, a TV series, blogs and podcasts on the world's most pressing challenges.
https://dohadebates.com/

EAT WITH MUSLIMS

Eat With Muslim proactively counters misconceptions and misinformation about Muslims through shared meals where guests get to connect and ask questions.
https://www.eatwithmuslims.org/

EINHORN COLLABORATIVE

Einhorn Collaborative is a nonprofit foundation dedicated to addressing America's growing crisis of connection.
https://einhorncollaborative.org/

EL EDUCATION

EL Education creates classrooms where teachers can fulfill their highest aspirations, and students achieve more than they think possible, becoming active contributors to building a better world.
https://eleducation.org/

ERASE THE HATE

Erase the Hate is a social impact campaign hoping to create an America where people feel safe from hate and discrimination.
https://www.facebook.com/ErasingHate/

EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

Everyday Democracy is a capacity building organization that provides technical assistance to individuals and groups working to build multiracial democracies within their local communities..
https://everyday-democracy.org/

ESSENTIAL PARTNERS

Essential Partners works with communities and organizations around the globe, equipping them to navigate the values, beliefs, and identities that are essential to them.
https://whatisessential.org/

FACING HISTORY

Empowering teachers & students to think critically about history & to understand the impact of their choices.
https://www.facinghistory.org/

FUTURE CAUCUS

Future Caucus works directly with our nation's leading young policymakers on both a federal and state level to bridge the partisan divide and lead a new era of collaborative governance.
https://futurecaucus.org/

FUTURES WITHOUT VIOLENCE

Futures Without Violence trains professionals such as doctors, nurses, judges, and athletic coaches on improving responses to violence and abuse in communities.
https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/

GENERATION CITIZEN

Generation Citizen believes all students have the right to civics education that prepares them to participate in our democracy.
https://generationcitizen.org/

GENERATION SCHOOLS

Generation Schools Network co-creates healthy school ecosystems by partnering with educators, students, families and communities to elevate the education experience.
https://www.generationschools.org/

HIGH RESOLVES

High Resolves works with students to be global citizens, embodying skills such as compassion, generosity and acceptance.
https://highresolves.org/

HORIZONS PROJECT

The Horizons team acts as organizers, conveners, facilitators, and sense-makers, striving to impact the ecosystem of social change throughout the country.
https://horizonsproject.us/

INTERFAITH AMERICA

Interfaith America inspires, equips, and connects leaders and institutions to unlock the potential of America's religious diversity.
https://www.interfaithamerica.org/

INTERFAITH POWER & LIGHT

Interfaith Power & Light inspires and mobilizes people of faith and conscience to take bold and just action on climate change..
https://interfaithpowerandlight.org/

JUNIOR STATES OF AMERICA

Junior States of America is a student-led organization where participants learn how to engage civilly in political discourse.
https://www.jsa.org/

LIVING ROOM CONVERSATIONS

Living Room Conversations is a model developed by dialogue experts in order to facilitate connection between people despite their differences, and even identify areas of common ground and shared understanding.
https://livingroomconversations.org/

MAKE AMERICA DINNER AGAIN

Make America Dinner Again brings together diverse groups of people across political ideologies to build a healthier understanding of fellow Americans through a facilitated dinner experience.
http://www.makeamericadinneragain.com/

MORE IN COMMON

More in Common works on both short and longer term initiatives to address the underlying drivers of fracturing and polarization, and build more united, resilient and inclusive societies.
https://www.moreincommon.com/

NARRATIVE4

Narrative 4 is a global network of educators, students and artists who use art and storytelling to build empathy between students.
https://narrative4.com/

NATIONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION CENTER

The National Conflict Resolution Center provides services and training that transform conflict into resolution.
https://www.ncrconline.com/

NATIONAL CONVERSATION PROJECT

National Conversation Project is mending the frayed fabric of America by bridging divides one conversation at a time. Host or join in-person and virtual conversations happening coast to coast. #ListenFirst
https://theconversationproject.org/

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR CIVIL DISCOURSE

The National Institute for Civil Discourse works to build the nation's capacity to engage our differences with civility and respect so that we can effectively address the challenges before us.
https://nicd.arizona.edu/

NATIONAL SCHOOL CLIMATE CENTER

The National School Climate Center promotes safe, supportive learning environments that nurture social and emotional, civic, and academic growth for all students.
https://www.schoolclimate.org/

NEW PLURALISTS

New Pluralists is a funder collaborative focused on supporting the growing field of practitioners, storytellers, researchers, and innovators working to foster a culture of pluralism in America.
https://newpluralists.org/

NOT IN OUR TOWN

Not In Our Town is a movement to stop hate, racism and bullying, and build safe, inclusive communities for all.
https://www.niot.org/

NUNS & NONES

Nuns & Nones is an alliance of spiritually diverse young folks, women religious, and key partners working to create a more just, equitable and loving world.
https://www.nunsandnones.org/

ON BEING'S SOCIAL HEALING FELLOWSHIP

On Being's Fellowship accompanies a cohort of leaders whose lives and voices model and inspire wisdom, moral courage, and social creativity in the urgent, yet also generational work of conversation, civilizational reckoning, and social healing.
https://onbeing.org/social-healing-fellowship/

ONE AMERICA MOVEMENT

The One America Movement builds societal resilience to polarization by bringing people together across political, racial and religious divides.
https://oneamericamovement.org/

OPENMIND

OpenMind is a free, psychology-based educational platform designed to depolarize communities and foster mutual understanding across differences.
https://www.openmindplatform.org/

PEACE FIRST

Peace First is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping young people around the world to become powerful peacemakers.
https://peacefirst.org/

PLAYWORKS

Playworks helps kids to stay active and build valuable social and emotional life skills through the power of play.
https://www.playworks.org/

RESETTING THE AMERICAN TABLE

Resetting the Table collaborates with strategic partners to build important communication across political silos in American life.
https://www.resettingthetable.org/

RESPECT & REBELLION

Respect & Rebellion is a speaker series on college campuses that's worthy of the American embrace of competing ideas to innovate.
https://respectandrebellion.com/

RURAL ASSEMBLY

The Rural Assembly connects rural leaders and helps urban-based institutions engage with rural communities effectively.
https://ruralassembly.org/

RURAL URBAN BRIDGE INITIATIVE

The Rural Urban Bridge Initiative invites all of us to think differently, talk differently and act differently in order to understand the causes of the rural-urban divide and then do something to repair it.
https://ruralurbanbridge.org/

SEEDS OF PEACE

Seeds of Peace is a leadership development organization committed to transforming legacies of conflict into courage to lead change.
https://www.seedsofpeace.org/

SISTERHOOD OF SALAAM SHALOM

The Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom builds bridges, fights hate, stereotyping & prejudice by bringing together Muslim & Jewish women.
https://sosspeace.org/

SPACESHIP MEDIA

Spaceship Media launched in 2016 with a mission to reduce polarization, build communities, and restore trust in journalism.
https://spaceshipmedia.org/

STAND FOR CHILDREN

Stand for Children focuses on ensuring all students receive a high quality, relevant education, especially those overlooked because of their skin color, zip code, first language, or disability.
http://stand.org/

STORYCORPS - ONE SMALL STEP

One Small Step is an effort to connect people so they can remember that people with whom they disagree are human beings.
https://storycorps.org/discover/ones-mallstep/

STREET LAW

Street Law is an approach to teaching practically relevant law to grassroots populations using interactive teaching methodologies.
https://www.streetlaw.org/

SUSTAINED DIALOGUE INSTITUTE

The Sustained Dialogue Institute helps people to transform conflictual relationships and design change processes around the world.
https://sustaineddialogue.org/

THE GRAND

The Grand is a community focused on navigating life's big questions by connecting older and younger adults together.
https://www.thegrand.world/

THE PEOPLE'S SUPPER

The People's Supper is housed by TDP Labs, which works to transform some of our hardest conversations and most isolating experiences into sources of community support, candid conversation, and forward movement using the age-old practice of breaking bread.
https://thepeoplessupper.org/

THE VILLAGE SQUARE

The Village Square is a nervy bunch of liberals and conservatives who believe that disagreement and dialogue make for a good conversation and a good country.
https://tlh.villagesquare.us/

THREAD

Thread creatively links students and university- and community-based volunteers to collaborators and resources in the larger Baltimore community.
http://www.thread.org

UNIFY AMERICA

Unify America creates interactive experiences to help people bust out of their bubbles, build civic muscles, and work together to tackle our country's biggest challenges.
https://www.unifyamerica.org/

VOICES FOR RURAL RESILIENCE

Voices for Rural Resilience is a portfolio of empathy building tools that seek to engage and elevate the voices of rural Americans and advance inclusive climate action.
https://voicesforrural.org/

WELCOMING AMERICA

Welcoming America leads a movement of inclusive communities becoming more prosperous by making everyone feel like they belong.
https://www.welcomingamerica.org/

WORLD SAVVY

World Savvy works with schools and communities to ensure all youth are ready for our complex global future.
https://www.worldsavvy.org/

More Resources from the Greater Good Science Center

STAY INVOLVED

There are many ways to support our mission: become a Greater Good member, make a donation, volunteer for an event, or subscribe to our e-newsletters. Learn more.

BRIDGING DIFFERENCES DEFINED

Our summary of the science suggesting why and how to bridge differences. Learn more.

BRIDGING DIFFERENCES ARTICLES

Check out our coverage of the science and practice of bridging, including articles about cutting-edge research and profiles of trailblazing programs. Learn more.

BRIDGING DIFFERENCES COURSE

Learn research-based strategies for better relationships, dialogue, and understanding across divides. Relevant to anyone navigating conflicts and differences, especially geared toward college campuses. Learn more.

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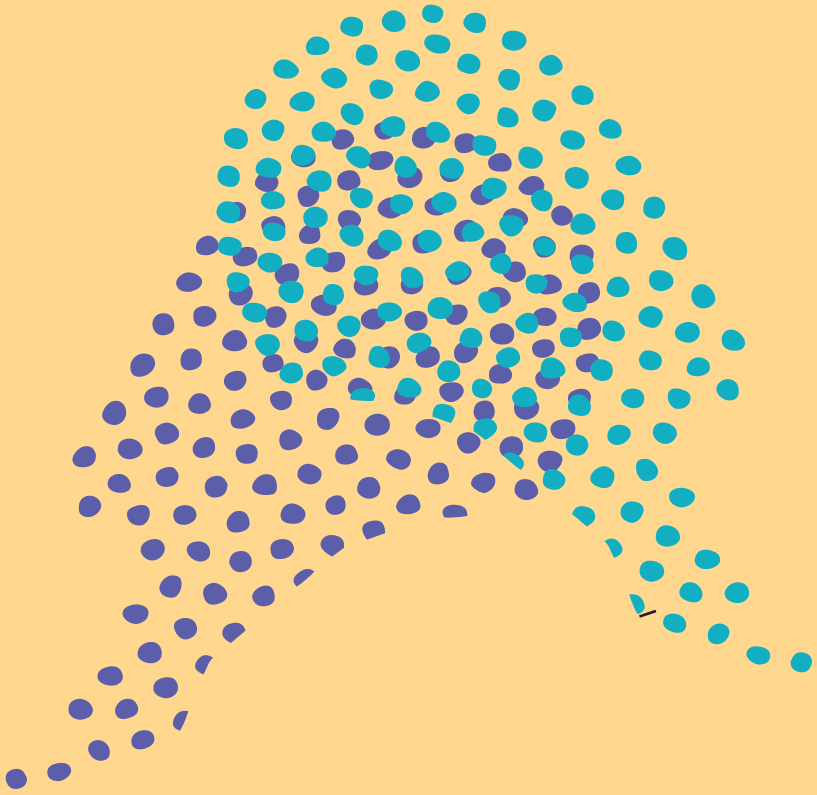

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BRIDGING DIFFERENCES