



“Vacations are most effective when you change your focus from doing to being.”

Ben Michaelis, Ph.D.

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Secrets for self-control without suffering.

by Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

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Why Trying Not to Be Prejudiced Backfires

New study: being told to "control prejudice" makes people more racist.

Published on July 10, 2011 by Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D. in The Science of Willpower

Cognitive psychologist Daniel Wegner first demonstrated the ironic effects of thought suppression by asking college students not to think about white bears. The more students tried to push white bears out of mind, the more they became obsessed with them. *Don't think about a white bear. White bear. Stop it! Stop thinking about white bears! White bear white bear white bear. Oh my God, I can't stop thinking about white bears!*

It's a funny, quirky finding when the thought being suppressed is white bears -- but not so funny when it comes to prejudice. A new study by psychologists at the University of Toronto has found a similar "ironic rebound" effect for racism.

The researchers were inspired by anti-prejudice public service messages like "Racism: Stop It!" and "Stamp Out Prejudice" that seemed to support thought suppression as the solution to discrimination. Skeptical of whether such an approach could work, they put together two different persuasive pamphlets about prejudice. One, titled "Cracking Down on Prejudice in Our Society," took a suppression approach. It said things like "In today's society, you must control prejudice," and "We should all refrain from negative stereotyping." It warned, "Teachers and students caught displaying racist attitudes and behavior can face serious consequences, such as termination or expulsion."

The other pamphlet took what the researchers call an "autonomy" approach. It emphasized the positive values of diversity, fairness, and non-prejudice. The pamphlet said things like, "Being open-minded is a real advantage to our mood and well-being," and "You are free to choose to value nonprejudice....In today's increasingly diverse and multicultural society, such a personal choice is likely to help you feel connected to yourself and your social world."

These may seem like two different ways of saying the same thing, but the persuasive messages had very different effects. 109 undergraduate students were randomly assigned to read one of the two anti-prejudice pamphlets, or to a no-persuasion control group. They then completed a measures of racism and prejudice.

In the graph, you can see the effect the two messages had on racial bias, compared to the control group: Being told to "stop" prejudice and racism led to more prejudiced and racist responses; being asked to consider the value of non-prejudice and open-mindedness lead to less prejudiced and racist responses. All differences were statistically significant.

A second follow-up study found a similar effect for the racial Implicit Association Task, a reaction-time measure that is thought to detect unconscious and automatic bias (and therefore is much harder to control one's responses, either in a more or less prejudiced way).

This isn't the first study or group of researchers to demonstrate an ironic effect for prejudice. In a previous study, participants were shown a photograph of an apparent skinhead and asked to write an imaginative story about a day in his life. If they were asked to suppress stereotypes while they wrote, they ended up writing more stereotypical stories. And when they were moved to another room to meet the man in the photograph, they chose to sit further away from him than participants who

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Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D., is a health psychologist at Stanford University.
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had not tried to suppress stereotypes. Trying to push away any type of unwanted seems to only more strongly activate it. So the person who tries to eliminate prejudice by suppressing stereotypes is more likely to act on them.

The good news is that only the "suppress prejudice" message triggered ironic rebound; the autonomy message was effective. Previous research has also shown that acceptance training can reduce racial and ethnic prejudice. Importantly, the acceptance training is directed at one's inner world-noticing and not suppressing stereotypes, negative thoughts, or biases-not at learning to "accept" the people one might be prejudiced against. When people are taught to be mindfully aware of the biases they hold, and notice those thoughts without trying to push them away, they display less prejudice and discrimination over time.

Studies described:

1. Legault, L., Gutsell, J. N., & Inzlicht, M. (in press). Ironic effects of anti-prejudice messages: How motivational intervention reduces (but also increases) prejudice. *Psychological Science*.
2. Macrae, C. N., Bodenhausen, G. V., Milne, A. B., & Jetten, J. (1994). Out of mind but back in sight: Stereotype on the rebound. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 808-817.
3. Lillis, J., & Hayes, S. C. (2007). Applying acceptance, mindfulness, and values to the reduction of prejudice: A pilot study. *Behavior Modification*, 31(4), 389-411.



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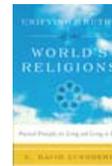
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