Combating Bias: S.O.D.A.


Practicing emotional self-management involves being aware of one's feelings and using this awareness as information to manage and adjust one's emotional state. From neuroscience, we know emotions are contagious, so if one person in the classroom gets emotionally hijacked, it's likely others will be infected with anxiety, resistance, or disengagement. There are steps you can take to prevent this spread of toxic emotion and to calm your amygdala.

Identify what sets you off, and if you know you're going to be in a conversation or situation that will trigger you, take some time in advance to ask yourself: “What am I trying to do in this situation and how do I need to show up to make that outcome likely? How do I want to respond when that person does something that pushes my anger button?” Use that foresight to create an “early warning system.” By paying attention to signs and emotions you can take action early rather than allowing the amygdala to completely take over. Notice your physical reaction (a tightened jaw, a flush feeling in your face, etc.) to give you a cue that you need to step back and regroup. The S.O.D.A. strategy is helpful to gain control of your emotions when you feel triggered.

**Stop.** This first step simply asks you to stop and pause rather than react in habitual ways. When you enter an interaction that feels challenging, work hard to stay open-minded. Open-mindedness means being open to other points of view, other ways of doing things, and staying open to changing your own viewpoint. This might mean not allowing a certain cultural display such as a students’ animated verbal exchange trigger you.

**Observe.** In the second step, check yourself. Don’t react to what is going on. Instead, take a breath. Use the 10-second rule. When the brain gets triggered, it takes stress hormones approximately 10 seconds to move through the body to the prefrontal cortex. In the pre-hijack stage, the biochemical cortisol and adrenaline are just beginning to kick in. There is still some “wiggle room” to listen to your wiser self and begin using stress management techniques to interrupt the amygdala take-over effectively. Try to describe to yourself what is happening in neutral terms. It is during this step that you can recognize that
what was originally perceived as a threat isn’t really a threat.

**Detach.** Sometimes when we get triggered, we get personally invested in being right or exercising our power over others. Deliberately shift your consciousness to more pleasant or inspirational images. If those techniques fail, go get a drink of water, literally take a few steps back to shake yourself up a bit. When we can detach from the goal of being right or defending ourselves, we can redirect our energy toward being more responsive rather than reactive.

**Awaken.** When our amygdala reacts, it’s because we are trying to protect ourselves. Shifting focus from yourself to the other person in front of you helps you “wake up” or become present in the moment. Try to see the other person as someone with his own feelings. He might be scared and reacting out of fear. Ask yourself a few questions about the other person. What are they thinking? How are they feeling in this moment? Shifting over to their perspective will get you out of your own reactive mode and will put you in a better position to have a positive interaction.