The power of
perception

When it comes to our behaviour, it's time to critically examine and realign some of our beliefs, writes **ANGELA HEISE**.

We started out the year with a promise: 2020 was going to be the time of perfect vision. We were going to create a brand-new future. How does the old saying go? Be careful what you wish for?

Nobody could have anticipated what the desire to see clearly would bring into focus. The coronavirus pandemic and the Black Lives Matter moment have exposed more than just our need for connection on one hand and our deep-seated separation on the other. We are becoming aware of what we believe and how these beliefs affect the world.

According to philosophical thought, we live in a dualistic universe where opposites define each other: light versus dark, right versus wrong, yin versus yang. If something is not one thing, it must be the other, creating what we call 'reality' and shaping our perception, which goes way beyond what we process through the five senses. Perception is determined by beliefs and values; standards by which we make our choices and live our lives.

Contrary to another old saying which postulates that seeing is believing, it is actually the other way around: believing is seeing. In fact, our beliefs so much determine how we perceive the world that we can literally ignore some aspects and solely focus on those we have identified as meaningful.

How does this sorting process work? With so much going on in our environment and overwhelming sensory input, the brain simply can't process the incoming information. Instead, it focuses on what happens repeatedly: if something happens once, it's an accident. If it happens twice, it's a coincidence. If it happens three times, it's the beginning of a pattern, which subsequently only requires conscious attention when something deviates from the template.

In order to make this whole process happen, we rely on a part of the brain called the reticular activating system, or RAS. You could compare the RAS to a bouncer: if something matters, your brain notices it. If it doesn't, it ignores it. What determines your RAS filters? Your beliefs. Which means you jump to conclusions much more quickly than you think you do – literally. By the time you have come to the realisation that the brain has identified something as different and therefore potentially dangerous (the primary sorting criterion), chances are you have already acted. And the more people you have around you who believe the same thing, the more these filters are reinforced and the faster you act.

This process, also known as culture, allows you from a very young age to look at the world a certain way. Shared beliefs become reality. Shared values become unconscious bias and define how we judge the world and the people around us.

We already know that the dualistic view creates polarisation: if my belief is right, yours must be wrong. Over the past months, our cultural beliefs have been challenged and we have started to change the meaning of what is right and wrong. Awareness of connection and separation is changing on many levels – 2020 may not be the year of perfect vision we had hoped for, but it is definitely the year we started seeing things differently.

Here are some suggestions to become aware of your perceptual filters.

- Notice what meaning you assign to what you see and hear and realise that you have either assigned personal or cultural meaning.
- Retrain your RAS by shifting your intent. Become aware of your biases. Acknowledge potentially limiting beliefs and adjust your response.
- Become aware of generalisations. As you will already know, words such as 'always' and 'never' are at the bottom of every stereotype, allowing you to judge groups of people and their behaviour in an oversimplifying and distorting way.

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