

# 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:

- What’s their favorite vegetable?
- 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?



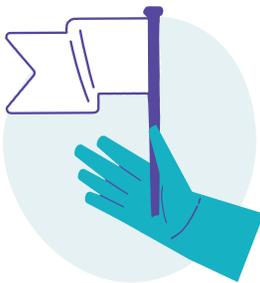
### PRO TIP

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

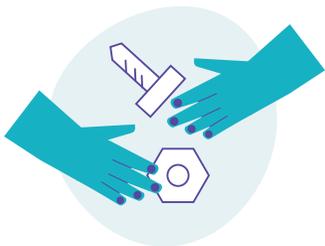
When you encounter someone new, you might be quick to categorize them by their race, gender, age, political party, or other group identity. That makes you more likely to see them as an “Other”—someone not like you—and feel threatened. The practice described here reduces that fearful response, fostering 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 monolithic 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.



### 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.



## 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.



## TO 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.