

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, is 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 you 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

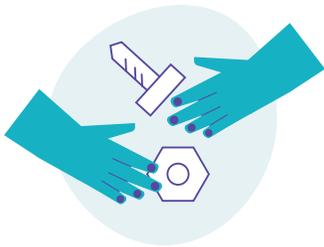
Focusing on a shared identity allows people from distinct groups to bridge their differences by widening their sense of who they are and who is part of their “tribe.” Research suggests that when we identify our commonalities, without necessarily suppressing what makes us different, we are more generous, 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 and worldviews) while encouraging parishioners to discuss where their faiths overlap (such as a belief in monotheism).



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.

[Better 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.



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 Wevaluations and behavior: The effects of a common group identity.](#) *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 4, 299-316.



TO 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.