

Mindfulness helps tackle cognitive bias: experts

By Brock Weir

How many of you are aware of how your body is positioned while reading this? Are you aware of the contact between your fingers and this newspaper page, your computer keyboard, phone or tablet? How many of you paused just now to double check?

If so, you're following the advice of Yuk-Lin Renita Wong, Associate Professor of the School of Social Work at York University. Ms. Wong is a firm proponent of mindfulness, an exercise making people aware of the present without focusing on the past or the future.

She recently led nearly 200 local residents through this exercise this month at the Aurora Cultural Centre at an Iftar fast-breaking dinner to mark Ramadan.

Ms. Wong was part of a four-person multicultural and interfaith panel exploring the relationship between mindfulness and combating cognitive bias in our society. She was joined on stage by Anthony Anirud, Human Rights Commissioner for the York Region District School Board, Stephen Wong of the Shan Buddhist Temple, and mental health therapist Taskeen Mansur, all of which was moderated by Michael Bowe, Supervisor of Diversity and Outreach for the York Region Children's Aid Society.

'Bias, fear, as well as prejudice are part of how we are socialized, which then become an inseparable and unconscious part of the mind in its normal processes and it helps us to categorize, perceive as well as to remember to learn about each other and the world around us,' said Mr. Bowe. 'We all embody cognitive or unconscious bias about all aspects of the world around us, which includes how we perceive and treat others who are different from us as those who are similar to us.'

But, how do we tackle it? The first step is recognizing it, according to Mr. Anirud.

'When we think of cognitive bias, the idea of bias in general is sometimes people look at it as a negative,' he said. 'We're all biased in everything, in all our actions around us. When we think of cognitive bias, we're thinking about how our brain processes information and very often we are confronted with a variety of different stimulations around us, ideas, thoughts, impressions, thousands of pieces of information that we must process very, very quickly. In that processing, we choose to simplify because simplification is actually much more important than trying to find logic out of that information. Very often that simplification actually causes us to make mistakes because we draw inferences from that simplification.'

'Very often when we are faced with an issue, it is not only the issue that confronts our bias, but also the way in which we frame that issue and the way we look at it. It actually tells us more about us than the issue itself and that is the cognitive function in terms of bias.'

From the Buddhist perspective offered by Mr. Wong, when you understand your own thought processes, you can recognize and get away from those biases within you.

'What we want to do is self-cultivation,' said Mr. Wong of Buddhist teaching. 'In people's minds, we always see the bias because we're actually at a level where we don't have the wisdom cultivated enough to see the similarities. Cognitive bias, from a Buddhist perspective, would be a self-cultivation to think about the thought process. When you understand your thought process, you can actually get away from that bias. When we understand where we crossed that line with the bias, that is where we can become a better community person or practitioner.'

For Ms. Mansur, the issue has a 'twofold' importance to her. As a Muslim, she says she is reminded and challenged on a daily basis that she has to remain mindful of her actions towards all beings and 'towards my worldly footprint all in preparation for the afterlife.'

'As a social worker who has experienced agency work and as a therapist, I have learned that in order for me to be my most effective for my community and my clients, I have to be mindful,' she said. 'We come across many diverse ways of living, believing and understanding. Cognitive bias means that we, as individuals, have difficulty with difference. I am sure all of us have experienced the direct and indirect impacts of strained community or client family relations, or the projection of another's biases upon ourselves. The here and the now is what we use to authentically assess a situation for what it truly is and the here and now is where I can assess if I am able to handle the situation and if I have the right tools to be mindful of the situation I am in. Islam teaches me in many ways to be mindful of what I am about to start before I go into it and I want to go into every situation giving off positive energy.'

'I want to go into every situation with the pretext I am going to learn from the other and I am going to collaborate with the other. If this is my goal as a service provider, I better check myself and I better check myself often, for I possess the ability to error and I always will. Therefore, mindfulness is the most powerful tool I have in my service delivery toolbox to face my cognitive biases.'

But, according to Ms. Wong, mindfulness can't really be administered in practice, or in your day to day life, until you actually

experience it. Hence, the exercise she walked the crowd through above. This continued with asking the audience to take a deep breath and exhale, following the breath out of your body for as long as you can.

?How many of you noticed that your mind wanders? How many of you noticed the content of your thoughts? How many of you were aware that even though you try and stay with your breath, the mind just goes off? How many of you noticed how your mind runs almost on autopilot before you did this exercise?? she asked. ?Basically, this very brief exercise just brings two very brief points about mindfulness ? one is for us to be mindful we need to be grounded in the body. Only the body is in the here and the now. Only when we are grounded and connected to the body are we aware about what is going on in the mind. Forget about cognitive bias; how many of us are even aware that our body is running and all these thoughts are going on? That is the starting point.?