Your Mind on Relationships
Common biases and pitfalls that can negatively impact our relationships with others.

**Fundamental Attribution Error** – Putting emphasis on a person’s characteristics rather than their environment.

*Example: A fellow classmate, Bill, is late to class. One might conclude, “Bill must be a lazy person.” However, what if Bill was late because his car was stolen this morning?*

**Group Attribution Error** – The tendency to assume that one person in a group is reflective of the group as a whole or vice-versa (the decision made by a group reflect the individual preferences of its members).

*Example 1: Bill tends to lie. Bill is a mechanic. One might conclude, “All mechanics are liars.” Why? Bill is a unique person first, a mechanic second.*

*Example 2: Congress passes a bill to fine Americans 10,000 for each jaywalking offense. Bill is a congressman. One might conclude, “Bill supports excessive fines for jaywalking.” However, Bill may not have supported the bill or even fought against it.*

**Just World Phenomenon** – The tendency to believe that the world is objectively just and fair and that people get what they deserve. Injustice towards another is therefore explained away, often resulting in blaming the victim.

*Example: Bill had his car broken into today. One might think, “Well, did Bill park his car in a safe location? Did he leave valuable items exposed that may have enticed someone to break into his car?” While one or more of these things may have contributed, this does not change the fact that Bill was wronged.*

**Curse of Knowledge** – a bias that prevents a person who may be better-informed from thinking about problems from the perspective of those who are less-informed.

*Example: Bill comes to Sue for advice on how she bakes pizzas so well. Sue tells him, “The key is working the dough until it feels just right.” What does that feel like? Sue is aware from experience, but Bill remains clueless.*

**Empathy Gap** – People tend to under-appreciate the power of strong emotions (like anger and fear) when they themselves are calm. Similarly, people who are in the more powerful emotional states typically do not realize the extent to which their perception is being biased by them.
Example 1: Sue sees Bill storm out of the classroom. She might think, “I don’t know why Bill did that. He’s so angry. He just needs to relax.” However, she doesn’t know how Bill is feeling right now, or why.

Example 2: Sue sees Bill storm out of the classroom after he gets a bad grade on a paper. She tries to console him in the hallway, “You look pretty upset, Bill. Want to talk about it?” Bill, very upset and angry with himself, replies, “No one can help me. I’m stupid and horrible in math. I’m a failure.” This is a pretty drastic statement Bill just made about himself, and one that is probably based on his anger.