

HOW TO BRIDGE DIVIDES + BUILD CONNECTIONS

Presented by
Mindbridge Institute
In Partnership with



BRAIN BASICS

Implicit bias is the automatic or neurobiological process underling unconscious stereotyping and prejudice guiding the perception and attitudes towards social groups.



DUAL-PROCESS THEORY

Our Brains Have Two Systems:

System 1 (the river):

- Fast
- Unconscious
- Associative
- Automatic pilot

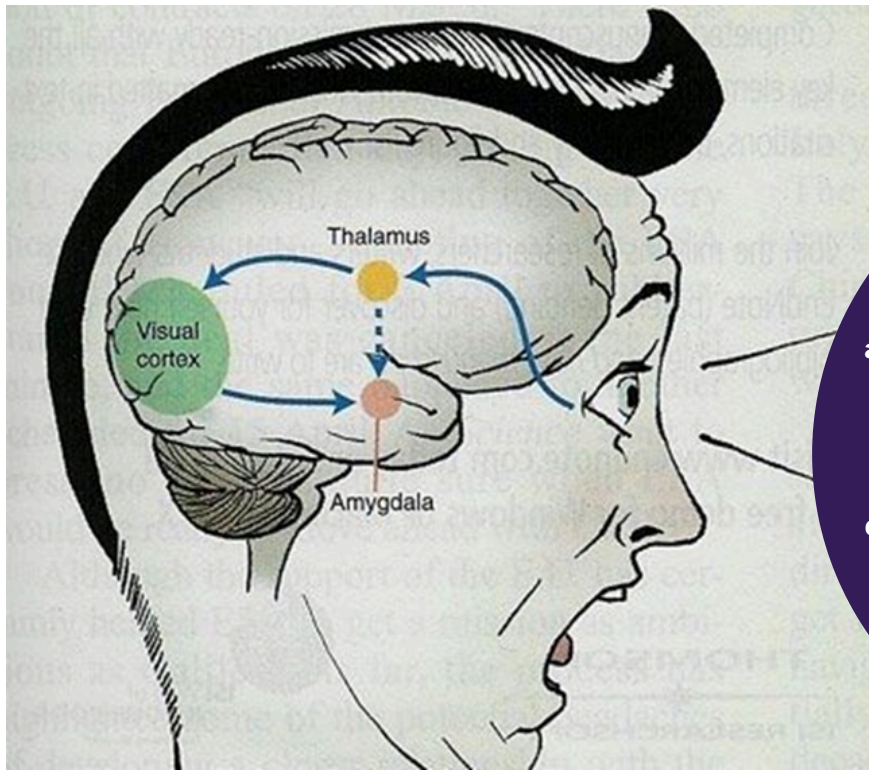
System 2 (traveler in the boat):

- Slow
- Takes effort
- Logical
- Integrates Information

At any given moment, our brain receives 11 million bits of information.
Consciously our brains can only process 40 bits.

To manage the remaining information overload, our brain creates a series of unconscious mental shortcuts, or implicit processes.

BRAIN BASICS



The Amygdala is most often associated with the perception of “fear”

BUT...

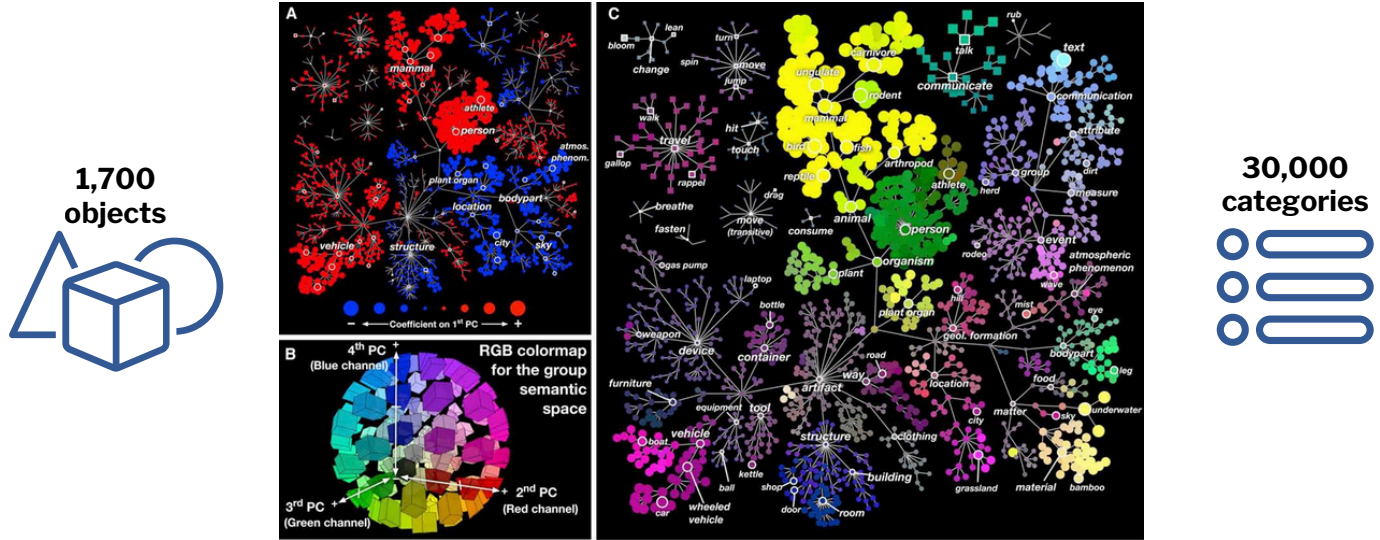
Perhaps its better thought of as a way of **deciding what sort of emotion we should associate** with a **particular idea or experience**

When you see something or someone, you are taking in that visual image and reconstructing it in your visual cortex.

After reconstructing the image, your amygdala is immediately signaled. This is to decide if what you are seeing is a threat.

So, the first thing that occurs after you recognize an image is the activation of the amygdala, which then decides what emotions you should associate with a particular idea or experience.

CATEGORIZATION



In 2012 Huth and colleagues wanted to know more about how the brain organizes and represents this overwhelming amount of data (those 11 million bits of information), so to do so, they invited participants to view movies while in an fMRI.

The movies contained over 1700 objects, which is far too many for our system 2 to consciously process. As a result, the brain categorized these items. Seamlessly and effortlessly, the brain categorized over 1700 items into nearly 30,000 categories.

This experiment showed what we long knew, that humans can see and name thousands of distinct objects in an instant. We are exceptionally good categorizers, and we do this with people as well.

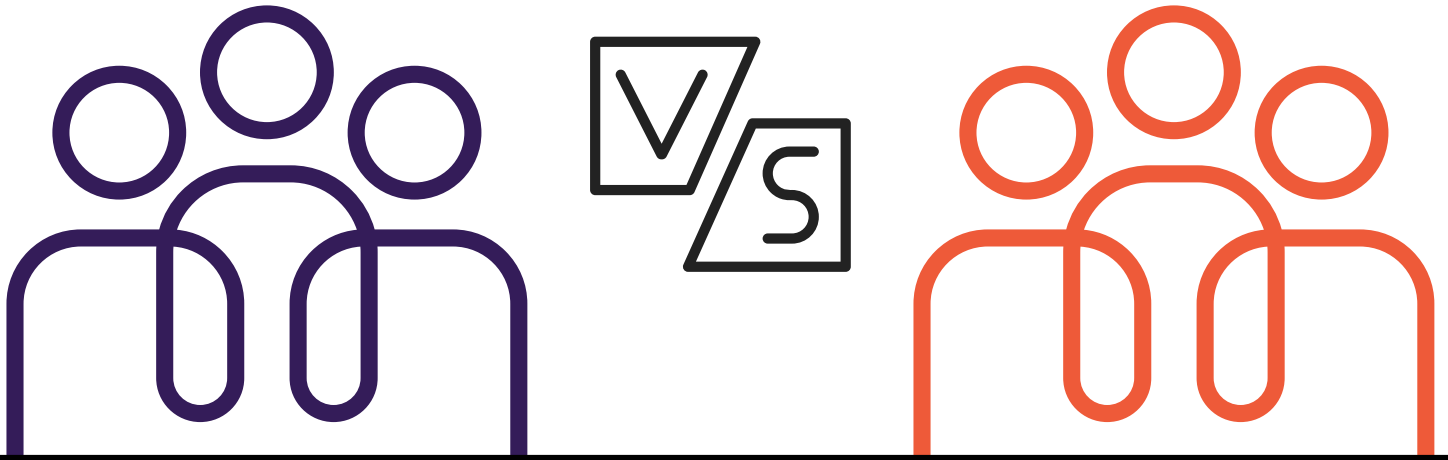
It takes
50 milliseconds
to register someone's gender
when we first see them



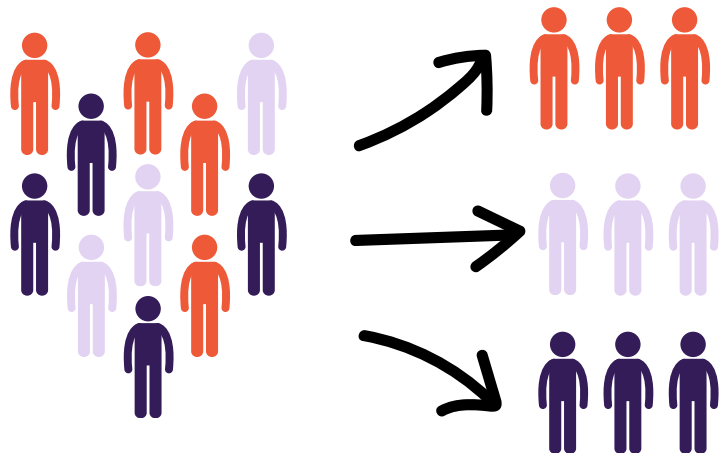
and **only twice that long** to
note their racial background.

CATEGORIZATION

The process of comparison (**for there to be an Us, there must be a Them**) has been neurobiologically encoded over hundreds of thousands of years of evolution history, resulting in **a system that views members of the in-group positively and members of the out-group with animosity.**



Our brain is
hardwired to sort
people instinctively
into different
groups based on
their similarities.



HELLO
MY NAME IS

Categorizing oneself as a
member of a group happens in
every culture...

IDENTITY + MESSAGING

Identity can be seen as a filter for how we interpret messages

People respond to messages not just intellectually, but through the lens of their identity. What group we feel part of — or excluded from — dramatically changes how we interpret messages. This is why messaging that seems reasonable can backfire if it feels like it's challenging who someone is, or what group they belong to.

It's not just **what** you say — it's **who we are** when we hear it.

Who we are is not only grounded in our personal identity and lived experience, but also the social, cultural, political, and historical contexts that shape society.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY



Social identity theory, proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, suggests that individuals strive to **maintain a positive social identity by identifying with groups and comparing their group favorably to other groups**. People seek positive distinctiveness, aiming to enhance their self-esteem and sense of worth through group membership.

Social Identity Theory explains that:

People form groups **VERY** easily

Outgroup members seen as **lesser than**

Individual identity tied to **group membership**

Winning **even at the cost** to the group

MINIMAL GROUP PARADIGM

Minimal Group Paradigm = the **minimal conditions** required for **discrimination** to occur **between groups**



Minimal Group Paradigm leads to **in-group favoritism** and **out-group bias**

Minimal Group Paradigm helps us understand just how easily group boundaries form, and how quickly bias can emerge. The theory explores the minimal conditions needed for people to start favoring their own group and discriminating against others.

Research tells us that even small, arbitrary distinctions are enough to trigger in-group loyalty and out-group bias. Our brain are wired for group-based thinking — and that wiring shapes how we see, interpret, and respond to others.

IDENTITY + MESSAGING

HOW BIAS EMERGES

Minimal group dynamics are closely linked to **motivational behavior** and **cognitive bias**. Individuals are not merely assigned to groups passively; rather, they are often **motivated to affirm and reinforce their group membership** through their actions. This may involve elevating the perceived status of the in-group or rejecting information that challenges group norms.

This motivation stems from the fact that group membership satisfies **two fundamental psychological needs: the need for belonging and the need for significance**. Once individuals identify with a group, they tend to engage in behaviors that protect and uphold that group—such as demonstrating loyalty, conforming to norms, or avoiding dissent—because the group becomes a core part of who they are.

These dynamics are closely related to **confirmation bias: the tendency to seek, interpret, and recall information in ways that affirm existing beliefs while disregarding or minimizing contradictory evidence**. Importantly, this bias is often not simply a cognitive flaw; it can be motivated by the desire to maintain identity, social cohesion, and psychological consistency.

For example, in the context of political partisanship, individuals may reject factual information not due to lack of knowledge, but because accepting it could be perceived as disloyal to their group. In this way, biases serve protective psychological functions.

Groupthink and in-group bias reinforce these dynamics, fostering feelings of **certainty, moral alignment, and psychological safety**. These feelings can be more compelling than factual accuracy. As such, cognitive bias is not solely an intellectual issue—it is deeply social and emotional, rooted in identity and belonging.

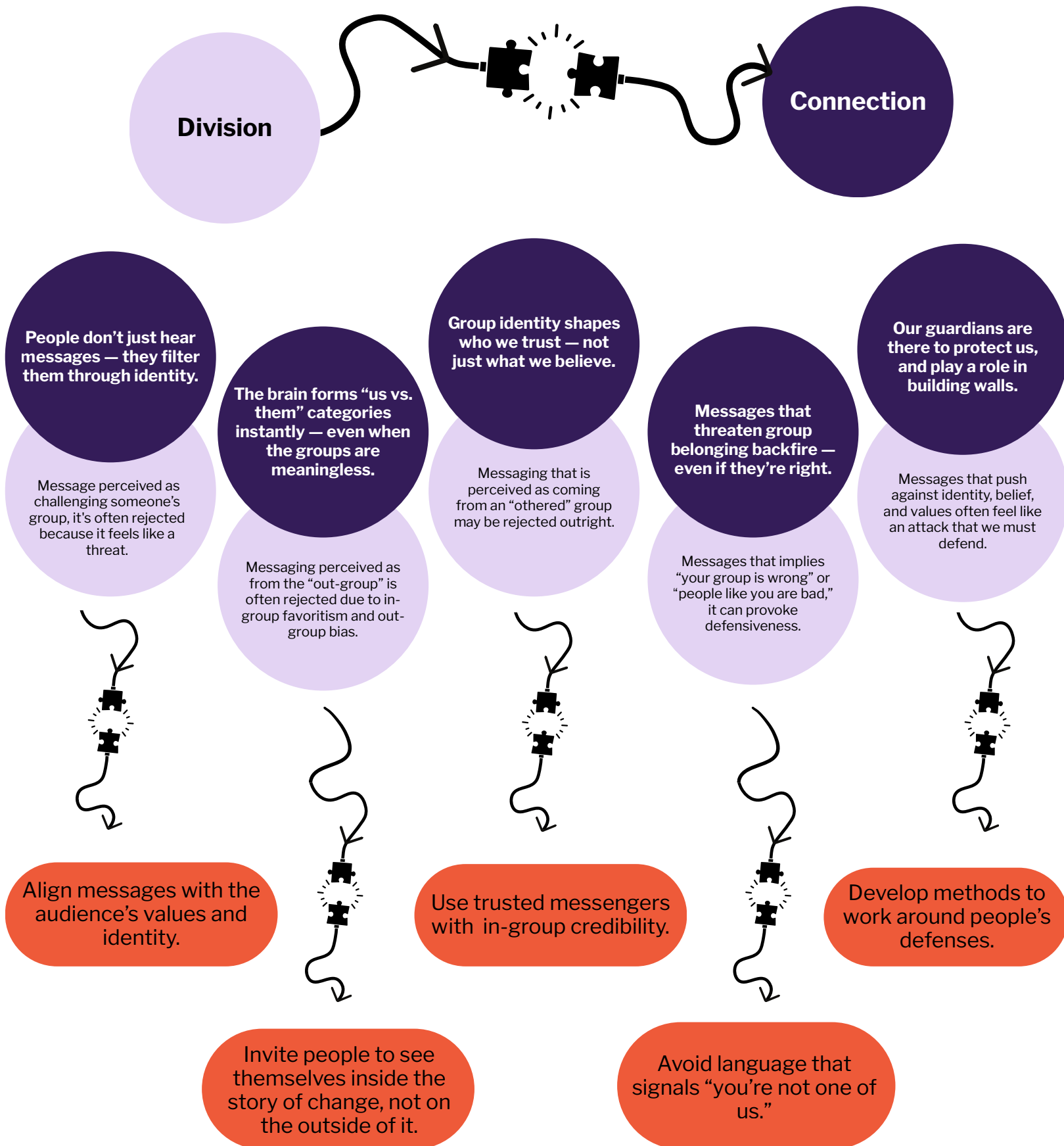
Efforts to address or disrupt these patterns cannot rely on information or logic alone. **Meaningful change requires creating psychologically safe conditions in which individuals can explore alternative perspectives without feeling that their core identity is under threat.**

Confirmation Bias:

The tendency to gather evidence that confirms preexisting expectations, typically by emphasizing or pursuing supporting evidence while dismissing or failing to seek contradictory evidence.

IDENTITY + MESSAGING

SO WHAT DO WE DO?



GUARDIANS

Our guardians are a cognitive defense mechanism designed to protect deeply held beliefs from change. Guardians are not merely opinions or biases; they are evolutionarily developed neurobiological processes that function to maintain psychological stability and ensure a sense of safety. Our guardians are in place to ensure our survival by warding off conflicting thoughts; thoughts that may change how our knowledge is interpreted and stored —because whatever we have learned thus far, both evolutionarily and in our lived experience, has kept us alive.



DEFENSIVENESS



Defensiveness plays a major role in bias mitigation and our guardians are born out of defensiveness. They are measures employed by our brains in response to those uncomfortable situations that cause us to:

- Fear a loss of social significance
- Feel lonely and/or fear losing in-group support
- Become activated by pain and/or past trauma

Their job is ultimately to try to protect us from a perceived threat.

Our defenses are a combination of our particular beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and personality that come together to allow us to rationalize and distance ourselves from feeling shame, sadness, and anger. These feelings can show up in different ways, such as in response to someone being critical of us, not agreeing with us, or pointing out our flaws.

Going unchecked, these feelings in turn become behaviors that create barriers to better understand and engage in constructive feedback and conversations. And this can look different for different people.

How Defensiveness Behaves:

- Stops listening
- Makes excuses
- Blames
- Accuses
- Justifies our actions
- Avoidance/Brings up the past
- Minimizes or dismisses other feelings and/or experiences

What It Actually Needs/Wants:

- Validation
- Non-Judgment
- Curiosity
- Willingness to share vulnerability

GUARDIANS

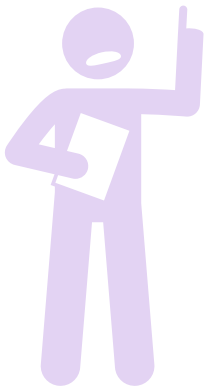
GUARDIANS OF THE STATUS QUO



When social change is on the horizon, this guardian minimizes urgency to protect comfort and stability and avoids discomfort. In doing so, it protects social standing and a sense of control by sticking to what's familiar and "reasonable" while stalling systemic progress.

"That's just not how we've done it..."

ONE + NONE



When presented with new information, the impulse or tendency to focus on ONE example that contradicts or nullifies the new information.

"Yeah, but...what about...!!"

TOO BUSY



When we continuously excuse ourselves from the "work" because life is always just too darn busy.

"I wish I could, but I've just got too much going on to even think about this stuff..."

TOOLS FOR BRIDGING

H

Hedge your claims

"I think it's possible that..."
"I wonder if..."

E

Emphasize agreement

"I think we both want to..."
"I agree with some of some of what you are saying..."
"We are both concerned with..."

A

Acknowledge other perspectives

"I understand that..."
"I see your point..."
"What I think you are saying is..."

R

Reframe to the positive

"I think it's great when..."
"I really appreciate it when..."
"It would be so wonderful if..."

NAME YOUR GUARDIAN

Step 1: Name your Gaurdian

NAME: _____

Step 2: Draw your Guardian



Step 3: List your Guardian's likes and dislikes



ABOUT MINDBRIDGE

**TO CHANGE HEARTS AND
MINDS, WE FIRST MUST
LEARN HOW TO
ACCESS THEM.**

Mindbridge is the nation's leading non-profit using **brain and behavioral science to empower human rights defenders.**

As a diverse group of **activists, scientists, clinicians, storytellers, and humans**, we conduct programming, support partnerships, and direct research at the **intersection of psychological science and human rights.**

Through these efforts, Mindbridge is growing a science-driven community that gives human rights defenders **access to the hearts and minds of those they serve.**

For more of the **Institute's programming**, including **workshops, public courses, and partnerships**, visit our [website](https://www.mindbridgecenter.org), or simply reach out institute@mindbridgecenter.org



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