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Key to reducing prejudice: Reach out with 'fresh thinking'

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NEWS TO USE

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Contact: Amie Thurber, director, Missoula NCBI, (406) 243-5776 or (406) 721-6545.

Editor's Note: The next Prejudice Reduction Workshop will be offered from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Friday, April 19, in University Center Rooms 326-327 at The University of Montana. Cost for the one-day workshop is \$30, which includes lunch. Registration deadline is April 12.

KEY TO REDUCING PREJUDICE: REACH OUT WITH 'FRESH THINKING'

By Brenda Day
University Relations

We often believe there is little we can do to stop prejudice, but Amie Thurber, director of the Missoula chapter of the National Coalition Building Institute, would like to change our minds about that. Reducing prejudice takes work, Thurber says, and it is an ongoing process. And it starts with us.

Prejudice -- assumptions formed about individuals or groups of people without just grounds or sufficient knowledge -- is learned, Thurber says. We often learn prejudicial attitudes from our families, our communities, our schools, our churches. For example, if we believe that all people on welfare are lazy, that prejudicial belief may be the result of hearing a family member say something like, "I'm tired of paying taxes for lazy people on welfare."

Sometimes prejudice is the result of hurtful experiences of mistreatment from the past. Prejudicial attitudes may even be the result of teasing or bullying that happened on the school playground when we were children. If we find that our prejudice results from past experiences of mistreatment, talking about them often helps.

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"We have found that the places where we have been hurt ourselves make us vulnerable to hurting others," Thurber says. "There is a connection between how we are likely to mistreat others and our own mistreatment. Telling someone about the ways we have experienced teasing or violence may reduce our own prejudice toward others."

Thurber says we all carry records about people who are different from us. Whether we learned them from our families or carry them because of past experiences, we need to pay attention to them -- and re-evaluate them.

To help us become more aware of prejudicial attitudes, Thurber recommends that we ask ourselves questions: Why do we feel uncomfortable around some people and not others? Why do we cross the street so we don't have to pass by certain people and not others? When we enter a room, why do we sit next to some people and not others?

"Every situation requires fresh thinking," she says. "If we are acting on records, that's not fresh thinking. Our records won't be able to tell the whole story about the current situation."

Prejudice exists in part, Thurber says, because we don't have accurate information about one another. She recommends reaching out to people who are different from us.

"Put yourself in a situation that might not be completely comfortable," she says. "Take risks."

Local communities offer all kinds of opportunities to reach out and get to know others. For instance, if we don't have a lot of older people in our lives, Thurber suggests hanging out at the senior center. And volunteering at local schools can be a great way to include more young people in our lives.

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When we experience prejudice, either toward ourselves or others, a common reaction is to get angry -- to avoid or shame the person who exhibits prejudicial behavior. But Thurber says another way to respond to prejudice may be to take time to listen.

"People do not change when they feel isolated and shamed," she says. "People who are hurting other people often feel bad about themselves, and if we add another injury, they're even more likely to continue to act out."

Build a bridge, Thurber says. Listening is often the only way to help someone become ready to change prejudicial attitudes. Thurber recommends starting by saying something like, "Sounds like you have some strong feelings. I'd really like to know more about that." Once people have been listened to, they may be more ready to listen to others. Often we can find a space to share a story about how prejudice has hurt us or others. And stories change hearts, Thurber says. Stories are what touch us, and they're what will touch others.

"We need to reclaim our hopefulness and our feeling that we can make a difference -- because we can," Thurber says. "We can make a difference in one person's life; we can make a difference in our communities; we can make a difference in the world."

The Missoula NCBI chapter and The University of Montana-Missoula campus affiliate offer one-day workshops aimed to increase awareness and teach specific skills to reduce prejudice and discrimination. For more information, call Thurber at (406) 243-5776 or e-mail her at amiethurber@hotmail.com.

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