

## **Know your biases**

*How they can affect Security  
Risk Management*



In risk management, we often focus on the world around us - gathering information and assessing threats. Yet a significant risk to sound decision-making sits much closer to home: **our own minds.**

Cognitive biases are natural mental shortcuts that help us process information quickly, but they can also distort our judgement - *especially when operating under pressure, uncertainty, stress, or incomplete information* - a common situation for many humanitarians, journalists, researchers, and security professionals.

Unsurprisingly, prejudices on the basis of **race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, origin, class, and age**, among others, play a huge role.

We invite you to take our quick quiz: **How Well Do You Know (Your) Cognitive Biases?**

## Question 1:

A security manager believes a destination is safe because previous deployments there were incident-free, despite recent intelligence indicating increased instability.

### What Bias is this?

- A. Availability Bias
- B. Normalcy Bias
- C. Anchoring Bias
- D. Halo Effect

## Answer 1:

### B. Normalcy Bias

Normalcy Bias is the tendency to assume that things will continue as they always have, leading people to underestimate the possibility or impact of disruptive events.

*e.g. In August of 2021, the Taliban's return to power took many organisations and stakeholders by surprise.*

## Question 2:

An analyst develops an early assessment and continues to rely heavily on it even after receiving new information that contradicts the initial conclusion.

**What Bias is this?**

- A.** Anchoring Bias
- B.** Groupthink
- C.** Survivorship bias
- D.** Optimism Bias

## Answer 2:

### A. Anchoring Bias





Anchoring Bias occurs when people rely too heavily on an initial piece of information and fail to sufficiently adjust their views when new evidence emerges.

*e.g. you have made the difficult decision to cancel an important event in Dubai following the temporary closure of their airspace. When can you assess and decide that subsequent events can now be organised there?*


### Question 3:

Confirmation Bias means: we tend to seek, interpret, and remember information that supports our existing beliefs while ignoring contradictory evidence.

#### What situation best illustrates this?

-  **A.** Following the majority opinion during a meeting
-  **B.** Searching only for reports that support your initial risk assessment
-  **C.** Assuming tomorrow will be like yesterday
-  **D.** Judging risk based on the most recent incident

## Answer 3:

-  **B.** Searching only for reports that support your initial risk assessment





Confirmation Bias leads us to favour information that reinforces our existing views while discounting evidence that challenges them.

*e.g. how frequently do you read media sources you don't agree with?*

## Question 4:

Availability Bias means: we judge the likelihood of an event based on how easily examples come to mind.

### What situation best illustrates this?

-  **A.** Ignoring minority viewpoints in a team discussion
-  **B.** Refusing to change a plan once it is approved
-  **C.** Overestimating kidnapping risk because of extensive recent media coverage of a single case
-  **D.** Believing a country is safe because you visited it years ago

## Answer 4:

- **C.** Overestimating kidnapping risk because of extensive recent media coverage of a single case

Availability Bias causes recent, vivid, or highly publicised events to disproportionately influence our perception of risk.

*e.g. do you recall any times where the risk assessment (the stats) and the risk mitigation (what we do about them) don't add up?*

*How about prioritising the safety of travellers from the global north over that of nationally contracted staff in the global south?*

## Question 5:

Which bias is most likely present when a team avoids challenging the leader's view in order to maintain harmony and consensus?

**What situation best illustrates this?**

- A. Groupthink
- B. Confirmation Bias
- C. Anchoring Bias
- D. Availability Bias

## Answer 5:

### A. Groupthink

Groupthink occurs when the desire for consensus and cohesion suppresses critical evaluation, dissenting opinions, and alternative viewpoints.

*e.g. when was the last time you last thought the following:*

*“I want to be done with this meeting, I’ll keep this disagreement to myself”*

*“I don’t want to get on the boss’ bad side”*

*“Why do I feel bad about this? Never mind, if they all think this is fine, it probably is...”*

## **Why does this matter?**

The challenge is not simply that we have biases. The social and professional bubbles we inhabit also shape our thinking. Over time, the assumptions, narratives, and biases of the groups around us can become our own without us even noticing.

This is why critical thinking is not a one-time skill but a continuous discipline. It requires actively questioning assumptions, seeking alternative perspectives, and being willing to challenge our own conclusions.

## What can be done?

Awareness of cognitive biases is a powerful first step. Equally important is fostering an organisational culture that values dialogue: meetings where diverse views are encouraged, respectful debate is normal, dissenting opinions are welcomed, and collective decision-making is prioritised.

No organisation can eliminate cognitive biases entirely. But by combining awareness, critical thinking, and healthy organisational dialogue, we can significantly reduce their impact and make better decisions when it matters most.

Which **cognitive bias** do you think has the greatest impact on risk management decisions?

Where are your **blind spots**?

👉 **Let's talk.** If you or your organisation are looking to review or bolster your security culture, we'd love to hear from you.