SUE | Behavioural Design Academy

Cognitive Bias Checklist

by Astrid Groenewegen

How Our Brain Tricks Us Time and Again

Here's an uncomfortable truth I must share after years of working with teams: you're going to make biased decisions. All of us are. It doesn't matter how clever you are, how much experience you have, or how ethically you try to operate.

The human brain, despite all its remarkable capabilities, has built-in shortcuts that served us well when we lived in small groups and had to make quick decisions about immediate threats. But those shortcuts can mislead us in modern decision-making, especially when we're designing for others.

This isn't a character flaw - it's simply how our brains work. But this is what distinguishes ethical professionals from the rest: awareness of these biases and systems to intercept them before they derail our judgement.

I've seen brilliant teams make terrible ethical choices, not because they lacked good intentions, but because cognitive biases clouded their thinking. I've seen projects fail because confirmation bias prevented teams from seeing contradictory evidence. I've seen overconfidence bias lead to interventions that actually harmed the very people they were meant to help.

The goal isn't to eliminate bias - that's impossible. The goal is to recognise them early and design around them. When you know how your brain can mislead you, you can build safeguards that keep your ethical decision-making on track.

This checklist isn't just academic knowledge. It's your early warning system for when your thinking might lead you into ethical trouble. That's why I wrote this: **to help you be systematically less wrong, so that your interventions are based on reality rather than biased assumptions.**

Astrid Groenewegen

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Why Cognitive Biases Are So Tricky in Behavioural Design

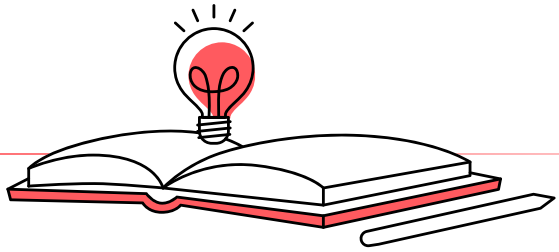
A cognitive bias is a systematic pattern of deviation from rational thinking. We create our own 'subjective social reality' from how we perceive and interpret information. In behavioural design, these biases can be particularly dangerous because:

We design for others whilst being blind to our own mental shortcuts. We think we're being objective, but we project our own thinking patterns onto users.

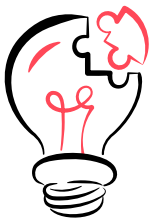
We're under pressure to deliver results, which reinforces biased thinking. Deadlines and expectations make us more susceptible to shortcuts.

We have power to influence others, making our biased decisions more consequential. One wrong assumption can affect thousands of people.

We work with incomplete information, creating space for biases to fill the gaps. Our brains hate emptiness and automatically fill in the blanks.



The Most Tricky Biases for Behavioural Designers



Confirmation Bias

We interpret new information to confirm our original hypothesis.

What it looks like:

- You search for research that supports your preferred solution.
- You dismiss user feedback that contradicts your assumptions.
- You see patterns in data that aren't really there.
- You ignore evidence that your intervention might be harmful.

The dangerous thing is that confirmation bias feels so natural. It feels like you're simply doing good research, when you're actually selectively seeking evidence.

How to catch it:

- Actively seek evidence that proves you're wrong.
- Ask yourself: "What would convince me that this approach doesn't work?"
- Have someone on your team consistently play devil's advocate.
- Test your assumptions with people who fundamentally disagree with you.

Ethical danger: You might persist with interventions that don't actually help people because you only see evidence supporting your approach.

Belief Bias

We determine truth by how credible we find a conclusion.

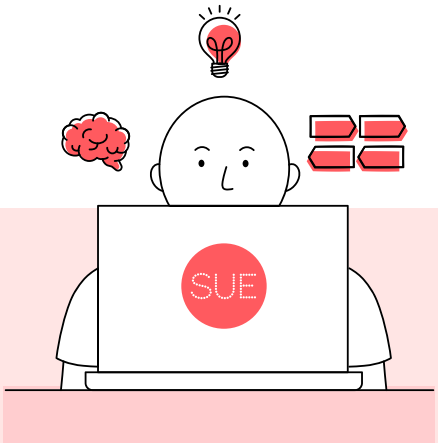
What it looks like:

- You judge research quality based on whether you like the conclusions.
- You accept weak arguments that support your position.
- You reject strong arguments that challenge your beliefs.
- You trust processes that give you the answers you want to hear.

How to catch it:

- Evaluate evidence quality separately from how attractive the conclusion is.
- Ask yourself: "Would I accept this reasoning if it led to a different conclusion?"
- Focus on methodology first before looking at results.
- Have others assess your logic without knowing your preferred outcome.

Ethical danger: You might base interventions on poor evidence simply because the conclusions feel right.



Optimism Bias

We underestimate the likelihood of negative events and overestimate favourable outcomes.

What it looks like:

- You assume your intervention will only have positive effects.
- You systematically underestimate project timelines and budgets.
- You believe "this time will be different" despite previous experience.
- You dismiss potential negative consequences as unlikely.

Optimism bias is particularly treacherous because optimism is normally a good trait. But in behavioural design, it can lead to interventions without adequate safeguards.

How to catch it:

- Systematically consider what could go wrong.
- Look at base rates: how often do similar projects actually succeed?
- Build buffer time and resources into all plans.
- Conduct pre-mortems: imagine the project failed and work backwards to understand why.

Ethical danger: You might launch interventions without adequate safeguards because you're too optimistic about outcomes.

Hindsight Bias

After an event, we see it as predictable, despite little objective basis for prediction.

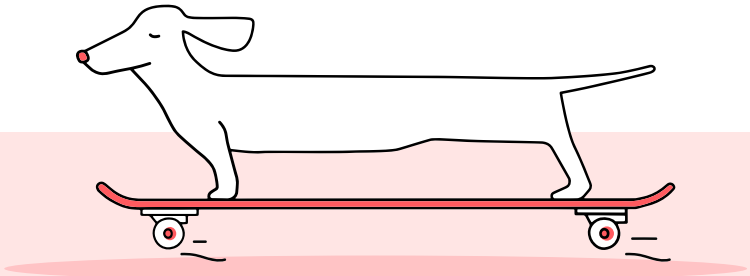
What it looks like:

- "I knew all along that intervention would work."
- You claim you predicted problems that you didn't really foresee.
- You rewrite history to make your decisions seem more logical.
- You fail to learn from mistakes because you convince yourself they were inevitable.

How to catch it:

- Document your predictions and reasoning before you see results.
- Systematically compare your original assumptions with actual outcomes.
- Ask yourself: "What did I think would happen when I made this decision?"
- Consciously separate what you know now from what you knew then.

Ethical danger: You might not learn from ethical mistakes because you convince yourself you saw them coming.



Framing Effect

How information is presented influences our opinion of it.

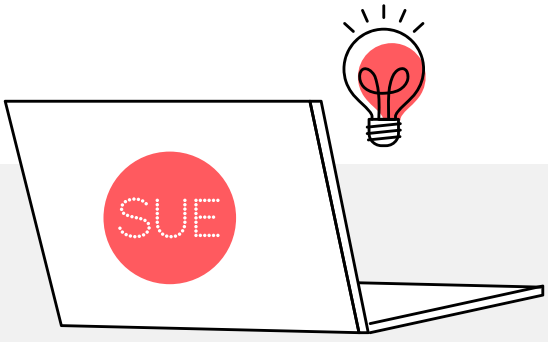
What it looks like:

- You present data in ways that support your preferred conclusion.
- You're influenced by how clients frame problems.
- You choose metrics that make your work look better.
- You let presentation style influence your judgement of content quality.

How to catch it:

- Consciously present the same information in multiple ways.
- Ask yourself: "How would this look if it were framed differently?"
- Focus on raw data before considering how it's presented.
- Have others assess your framing choices.

Ethical danger: You might make different ethical choices based on presentation rather than actual content.



Loss Aversion

We prefer avoiding losses to acquiring equivalent gains.

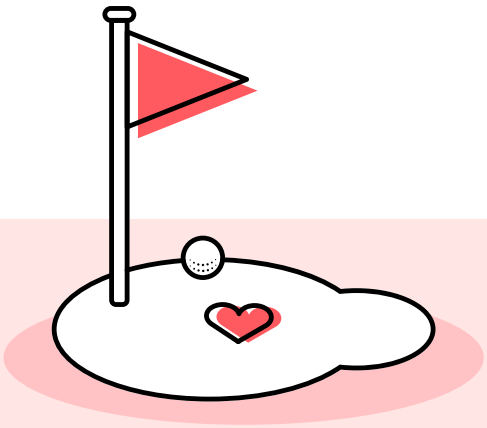
What it looks like:

- You avoid necessary changes because of potential downsides.
- You weigh criticism more heavily than praise.
- You stick with familiar approaches even when better options exist.
- You become paralysed by fear of making mistakes.

How to catch it:

- Consciously frame decisions in terms of gains rather than losses.
- Consider the opportunity costs of not acting.
- Ask yourself: "What are we missing by staying with the status quo?"
- Focus on learning value rather than just success or failure.

Ethical danger: You might avoid innovative solutions that could help more people because you're too focused on potential downsides.



Short-term Thinking

We prefer smaller immediate rewards over larger future rewards.

What it looks like:

- You prioritise quick metrics over long-term outcomes.
- You choose interventions that show immediate results but don't last.
- You focus on what clients want now rather than what users need long-term.
- You avoid research that would delay project starts.

How to catch it:

- Explicitly consider long-term consequences in all decisions.
- Set metrics for both immediate and future success.
- Ask yourself: "What will the impact be in 6 months? In 2 years?"
- Build long-term thinking structurally into project timelines.

Ethical danger: You might create short-term behaviour change that undermines long-term human wellbeing.

Availability Bias

We think future events will happen based on examples that quickly come to mind.

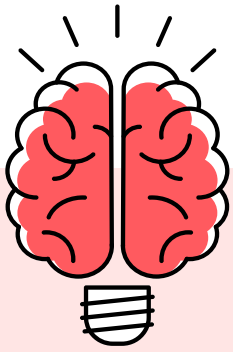
What it looks like:

- You weigh recent examples too heavily when making decisions.
- You're more influenced by vivid stories than statistical data.
- You assume patterns based on memorable incidents.
- You make generalisations from limited, recent experience.

How to catch it:

- Look at broader datasets, not just recent examples.
- Ask yourself: "Is this a real pattern or just a few vivid examples?"
- Look up base rates and historical data.
- Consciously consider which examples might not come to mind.

Ethical danger: You might design interventions based on memorable cases rather than representative data.



WYSIATI ("What You See Is All There Is")

We ignore unknown information and draw conclusions based only on visible information.

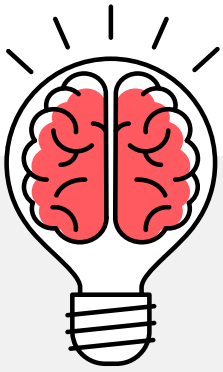
What it looks like:

- You make decisions based on available data without considering what's missing.
- You assume you have complete information when you don't.
- You draw conclusions from partial research.
- You ignore stakeholders who aren't represented in your data.

How to catch it:

- Always ask: "What information might we be missing?"
- Actively seek perspectives not represented in your data.
- Consider what you don't know before making decisions.
- Map all stakeholders, not just the visible ones.

Ethical danger: You might harm groups you don't consider because they're not visible in your decision-making process.



Small Numbers Effect

We make hasty generalisations based on small samples.

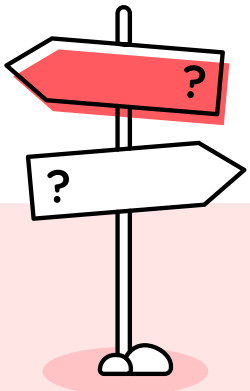
What it looks like:

- You draw big conclusions from a few user interviews.
- You assume patterns from limited data.
- You generalise from successful pilot projects to larger populations.
- You make claims about effectiveness based on small sample sizes.

How to catch it:

- Always consider sample sizes before drawing conclusions.
- Ask yourself: "How much data do we actually have here?"
- Look for patterns across multiple studies or data sources.
- Be explicit about the limitations of small samples.

Ethical danger: You might scale up interventions that work for small groups but harm larger populations.



Your Personal Bias Checklist

Before making an important decision:

Pause. Biases are stronger when we're rushed or stressed.
Give your brain time to come out of automatic mode.

Ask the bias question:

"Which bias might be influencing my judgement right now?"
Consciously go through the list and check if any of these patterns are at work.

Seek contradictory evidence:

"What information would prove I'm wrong?"
If you can't find contradictory evidence, you probably haven't looked hard enough.

Consider missing information:

"What don't I know that could change this decision?"
Make a list of missing information before deciding.

Think long-term:

"What are the consequences if this works too well? And in 2 years?"
Success can be just as problematic as failure.

Get an outside perspective:

"What would someone who fundamentally disagrees with me say about this?"
Not just someone who sees it slightly differently, but someone with a genuinely different worldview.

During team discussions:

Assign a devil's advocate for every important decision. Make this a fixed role, not an optional suggestion.

Use pre-mortems before implementing interventions. Imagine the project completely failed in a year and work backwards to understand why.

Regularly ask "What aren't we seeing?" Make this a standard question in every meeting.

Challenge assumptions by consistently asking for supporting evidence. "How do we know that?" should become a normal question.

Rotate perspectives by having team members take different positions, even if they don't agree with them.

In project evaluations:

Compare predictions with outcomes honestly. Document not just what went well, but also what didn't go well (even if that was against expectations).

Identify which biases influenced decisions. What shortcuts did your team take? Where did you go wrong in your reasoning?

Document lessons learned specifically for future bias prevention. Not just "we need to communicate better" but "we were too optimistic about timing due to planning fallacy."

Celebrate catching biases rather than just successful outcomes. Make it normal and valuable to say "we caught our own thinking errors."

When Teams Become Collectively Biased

Individual biases are dangerous enough, but team biases can be catastrophic. Teams reinforce each other's biases in predictable ways:

Groupthink amplifies biases

everyone confirms each other's biased thinking without realising it.

Hierarchy magnifies biases

junior members don't dare challenge senior assumptions, so wrong thinking patterns sail through.

Time pressure reduces checking

teams rush past bias-check routines because there's "no time."

Success breeds overconfidence

previous wins make teams overconfident about future decisions.

Building Bias-Resistant Teams:

Create psychological safety so people feel comfortable challenging assumptions. If people are afraid to be "difficult," they won't catch biases.

See the separate download on the website that can help you with this.

The Johari Window tool
can help you systematically identify these blind spots through structured feedback exercises.

Download now on our website

Institutionalise bias checks in your regular decision-making process. Make it an integrated part, not an extra step.

Reward catching bias not just successful outcomes. People who say "hang on, aren't we being too optimistic?" deserve recognition.

Regularly bring in outside perspectives to challenge team thinking. Fresh eyes see biases the team has become blind to.

Document assumptions explicitly so you can check them against reality later. Make them visible rather than implicit.

The Compound Effect of Bias Awareness

When teams consistently check for cognitive biases, something remarkable happens:

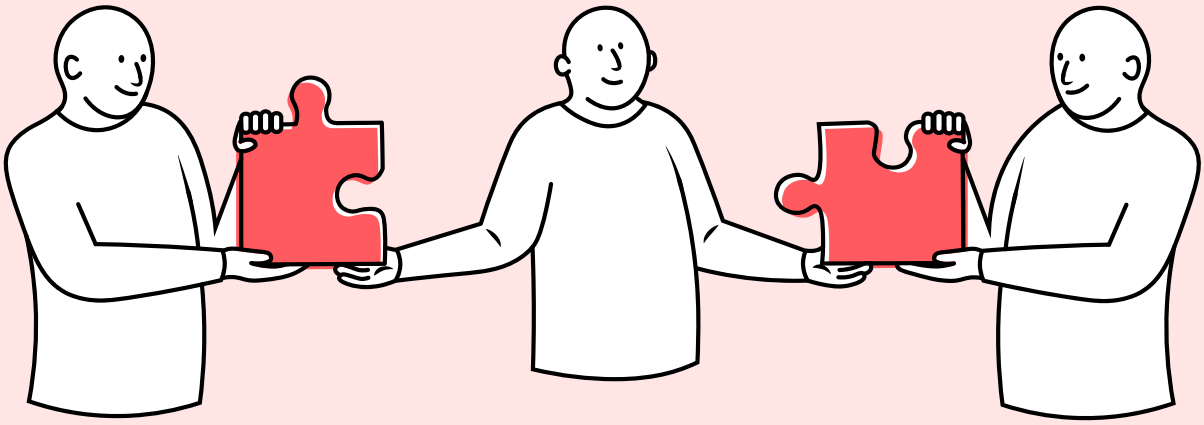
Decision-making quality improves because you work with more complete, accurate information. You see patterns that actually exist rather than patterns you want to see.

Ethical outcomes increase because you catch harmful assumptions before they become interventions. People are protected from your unconscious prejudices.

Learning accelerates because you can see the difference between good decisions and lucky outcomes. You can repeat what works rather than what happened to turn out well.

Trust grows because stakeholders see you making careful, thoughtful decisions. They notice that you actually listen to evidence.

Effectiveness rises because your interventions are based on reality rather than biased assumptions.



Your Next Steps

This week: Start using the bias-check routine for one important decision. Choose something that really matters and consciously go through the questions.

This month: Introduce bias checks into your regular team meetings. Make it a fixed agenda item.

This quarter: Evaluate previous projects for bias patterns and build better safeguards. Where have you systematically gone wrong?

Ongoing: Make bias awareness part of your team's ethical culture. It should become normal to ask "what bias might be at play here?"

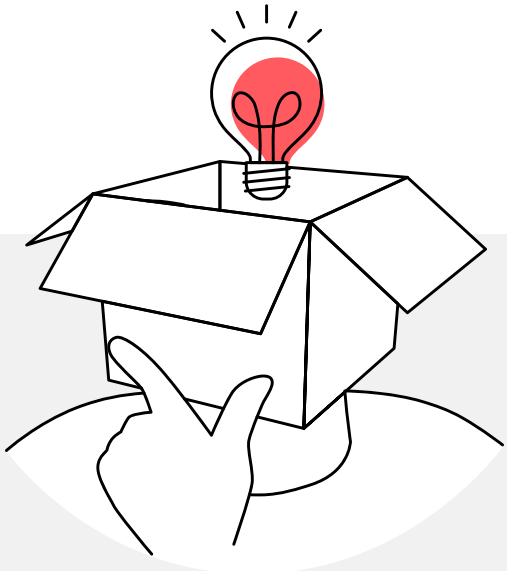
In Conclusion

The goal isn't to eliminate cognitive biases – that's impossible. The goal is to catch them early and account for them. When you know how your brain can mislead you, you can build systems that keep your ethical decision-making on track.

Ethical excellence doesn't arise just from good intentions. It emerges from good intentions combined with rigorous thinking processes that correct our natural tendencies.

Every time you catch a bias before it influences a decision, you protect people from the consequences of your imperfect human thinking. That's the responsibility we carry as behavioural designers.

Based on decades of cognitive psychological research, adapted for the specific challenges of ethical behavioural design.



HOW TO ENROLL?

Ready to start designing choices and behaviour? Here's how.

By mastering Behavioural Design, you master the art of designing behaviour. You'll understand how people make decisions and why they act—or don't.

You'll become far more effective at influencing, because you'll understand the psychology behind choices.

Our most popular training is the **Behavioural Design Fundamentals Course** (available both as an in-person edition and an online self-paced edition). Each edition fills up fast (maximum of 16 spots), so be sure to reserve your place in time and take the leap from knowing what works to making it happen.

Want to sign up individually?

Check out the training on our website (and register there):

suebehaviouraldesign.com/academy/fundamentals

Looking for team training and want to speak to someone?

Contact us and we'll call you back quickly:

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Any questions?

The SUE team is happy to help:

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Where to find us?

We host training and work from our Amsterdam location:

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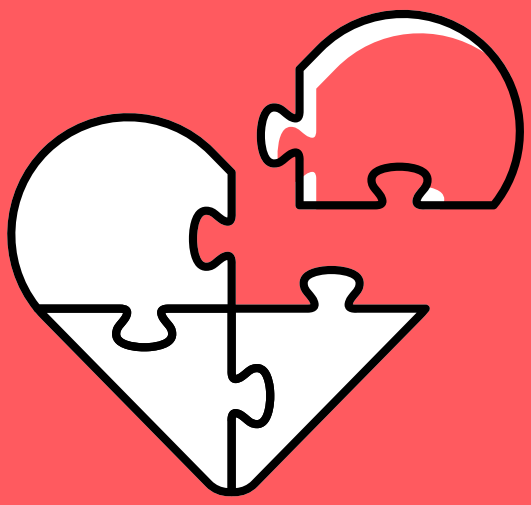

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