

And the assumption is?

Have you ever guessed what a person is thinking only to realize you were way off the mark? Find out how to avoid the stress that can be caused by jumping to conclusions . . .

Making assumptions is part of everyday life. It's something you might do without even noticing. It's all too easy to guess at what others are thinking, saying, and doing, whether they're a friend, colleague, relative, or someone new. In the absence of specific information and details, you might find yourself imagining all kinds of scenarios, concocting stories and arriving at your own conclusions.

In making assumptions, judgments might be made about someone based on how they look, sound, and act, what car they drive, or the sort of job they do. One assumption might be that the new person in the office is unfriendly, when really they're just shy. Another might be that a loved one will forget your birthday because that's what they did last time. You might assume that a friend doesn't want to see you any more, when they're just incredibly busy right now. The imagination can run riot and lead to you forming assumptions about someone, even though you know very little about them.

Runa Magnus—a personal branding expert, best-selling author, and leader of the #NoMoreBoxes movement—believes that most assumptions are made on autopilot. She says: “You see another person, or go into a situation, and based on your prior experience—or non-experience—you make assumptions about that person and what is about to happen. It can be a brilliant tool if you're aware of your behaviors and reactions and are well connected with (and follow) your gut feeling. The problem is most of us are not aware of our behaviors or reactions. We just judge. We put people into boxes and judge them from that place.”

Indeed, this need to form a judgment about someone—to label and box that person based on what might be little more than ideas, stereotypes, and personal beliefs—is often the result of unconscious behavior, and it can quickly get out of hand.

Perils of assumptions

If making assumptions becomes a habit, there's a danger of becoming less grounded in reality. Stories are invented and out of these conclusions unfair judgments are made that can create problems for you and others. Author Mark Twain once said: “It ain't what you don't know that gets

you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so.” That's the thing about making assumptions, especially about people—instead of being consciously cautious about your thoughts, you can end up jumping to conclusions based purely on ideas, pre-set notions, and even prejudices. These non-facts can morph into judgments that have no true substance.

Sometimes it's difficult to be aware of how much your inner world and own beliefs can influence and potentially distort the truth in your outer world. It's possible to form an idea about someone and imagine what's going on in their head based largely on what's going on in your own.

If you act upon assumptions, no matter how well intended, it can create all sorts of misunderstandings, wrong judgments, erroneous beliefs, and missed opportunities. Such unconscious assumptions can stifle an individual's personal growth and get in the way of fully engaging with the flow of life, enjoying amazing friendships and experiences.

That's because assumptions can damage your capacity to relate to others. If you always assume you know how others think and feel, you stop listening and communicating, leaving those around you feeling trapped or misunderstood. This is especially so where close relationships are concerned. For example, you can assume that your partner knows you so well that you don't have to communicate your thoughts or wishes. You then become hurt, angry, and antagonistic when your partner doesn't seem to understand you as you'd assumed. And relationship difficulties, whether at work or home, can lead to stress, low self-esteem, and depression.

But most importantly when it comes to well-being, assumptions can create spirals of negative thinking. And as your thoughts create your feelings, which in turn create your actions, a head full of negative assumptions is likely to trigger repeat cycles of feeling stressed and worried.

Acting on instinct?

When you make an assumption, you tell yourself that something is true without actually having any evidence that it is. Blogger, life and business coach Anne Miller

says: "However much we feel justified in holding onto our assumption, we have to recognize an assumption is not a fact but a link that we have created."

As naturally curious and imaginative beings, it's instinctive to use links and connections to create a more informed picture of someone or something—filling in the blanks yourself. It's also a kind of primal survival instinct to want to have the measure of someone before investing in getting to know them. Besides, dreaming things up often feels easier than asking for clarification or making the effort to understand a person and the details behind any particular situation. On the whole, assumptions are born out of a need to make sense of the world around you and, as author Runa says, "to feel safe or feel we belong."

People can become so wrapped up in their own ideas and preconceptions that they only see what they want to see, and hear what they want to hear, even when the truth is staring them in the face. They let their imagination run the show because, in one way or another, it suits them or provides a feeling of being in control. You don't get the promotion at work, so you assume you aren't good at your job. You assume most people you meet won't want to be friends with you, so stop making any effort. Your parents have never understood your choices, so you assume they don't love you. These assumptions, no matter how innocent or destructive, run on a "script" or belief system that gives significant insight into the emotional state of the person making the assumptions.

Awareness is key

If making assumptions can create so many problems, not only for yourself but for those around you, what can you do about it? Runa says: "I don't think we can stop making assumptions, or 'placing people into boxes.' What we can do is be aware of the boxes we are placing ourselves and others into. There are good boxes, there are bad boxes, and there are simply ugly boxes. Awareness is the key. You need to give yourself space to really listen to the voice that's in your head and realize this is just a voice."

By making a conscious effort to be more aware of your thoughts about others in the moment, you can choose not to make assumptions. You can let go of the temptation or need to fill in the gaps and construct stories about people.

Runa has some straightforward advice for how to find a space of awareness. She says: "Stop, take a moment, pay attention, listen to what that voice is saying, and ask yourself what this judgment is doing for you. If it isn't serving you, give yourself space, and permission to change."

It also helps to remember that you, and those around you, are constantly evolving, and that any assumption you might make in the moment rarely provides a clear, complete, and true picture. Rather than jumping to imagined conclusions, it's far better to meet people, and situations, with a kind heart, open mind, and a generous spirit.

A MOMENT OF SELF-REFLECTION

Ask yourself these questions:

- When did you last find yourself making an assumption about someone?
- What assumption did you make and why?
- How did this impact you and your relationship with this person?
- Would the situation have been different if you hadn't made an assumption?
- What will you do differently next time?

How to avoid the dangers of assumptions:

- Be more mindful of the initial thoughts you have about someone. Ask yourself where these thoughts are coming from—is it out of insecurity, fear, ignorance, a belief system, or sense of inadequacy? If so, stop and focus on resolving these inner conflicts.
- Keep in mind the saying "never judge a book by its cover" whenever you feel the temptation to make an assumption about someone based on how they look.
- Realize that things are not always as they appear—even more so when you have no knowledge of a person or situation.
- Let go of the need to place people in boxes and attach labels to them. Even if someone appears to fit a particular stereotype, realize that it's unfair to judge.
- Remind yourself that it's impossible to truly know someone you haven't yet met, or had time to get to know properly. Even when you think you know someone extremely well, you can still make wrong or misguided assumptions. Be humble and accept that conclusions can be wrong.
- Do some fact checking—ask questions rather than make up the answers.
- Be aware that subconsciously you will look for evidence to support your assumptions. It's natural to want to join the dots and create a bigger picture, but recognize that your ideas are not facts.
- Keep your assumptions to yourself rather than use them as fuel for a good gossip. Talking about other people and situations when you can create arguments, conflict, judgments, and discrimination can have serious repercussions for all.