

Errors of judgment

By Ruth Ostrow

I WAS recently gossiping to friend and management consultant Ruth Fingret about someone we know when she stopped and said: "That's not true. Sam isn't like that any more. He used to be like that but he hasn't been like that for three years." She then proceeded to give me evidence contrary to what I believed.

"You are suffering from primacy error," she said, and then went on to explain a concept she teaches her clients based on the writings of English psychology professor Stuart Sutherland, author of *Irrationality: The Enemy Within*.

There are several types of distortions to truth that the irrational mind uses to bend reality. These can lead to all sorts of problems.

Primacy error is where the first impression we have of someone or something continues despite contrary evidence. For instance, we may have formed the initial belief that Jenny is not very bright. Even when Jenny wins the Pulitzer Prize we can't quite process it, claiming instead that she has a "bookish" intelligence, not real street smarts. Anyone can write a book. Look how she mucked up that last relationship. Jenny just isn't that smart.

Fingret says there is recency error, where we obsess about the last thing that happened and use it to colour the entire relationship. For instance, if a friend is horrible to us on Friday, we tend to think they have always been horrible to us, when in fact it might have been one horrible act amid several benevolent ones. Recency error is a distortion of reality and shows a dangerously selective memory.

There are other irrational judgments we all make regularly. There is halo error, which maintains that attractive people are also intelligent, warm and funny despite there being no actual correlation, which accounts for so many relationship disappointments. There is obedience error – "She (authority figure) must be right" – and availability error, whereby one shark attack will create more fear than the 200 car crashes that occur on the way to the beach each year; yet people will be scared to swim, not to drive.

People constantly ignore evidence that contradicts their view and they distort facts to stay within their comfort zone. Meanwhile, memory is an unreliable witness.

Fingret urges: Stay open and alert! History is littered with friendships, wars and money lost over such errors of judgment and bias. Let reality and rationality reign.

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