Braver Angels

Depolarizing Within Participant Guide

Part 1: Recognizing My Inner Polarizer

You can use the following questions to think about your inner polarizer. Don't worry: most of us think and feel some of these things.

1. How often do I find myself thinking about "those people" on the other political side without much regard for the variation among them? (Usually we're aware of great variation within our one group.)

   ▢ **Often** ▢ **Sometimes** ▢ **Never**

2. How often do I find myself assigning mainly self-serving or negative motives to the other group—and mainly positive motives to my group?

   ▢ **Often** ▢ **Sometimes** ▢ **Never**

3. How often do I find myself focusing on the most extreme or outrageous ideas and people on the other side, thereby making it hard to see how a reasonable person could remain in that group?

   ▢ **Often** ▢ **Sometimes** ▢ **Never**

4. How often do I find myself comparing the worst people on the other side with the best people on my side?

   ▢ **Often** ▢ **Sometimes** ▢ **Never**

5. How often do I feel a "rush" of pleasure with friends when we ridicule those crazies on the other political side?

   ▢ **Often** ▢ **Sometimes** ▢ **Never**

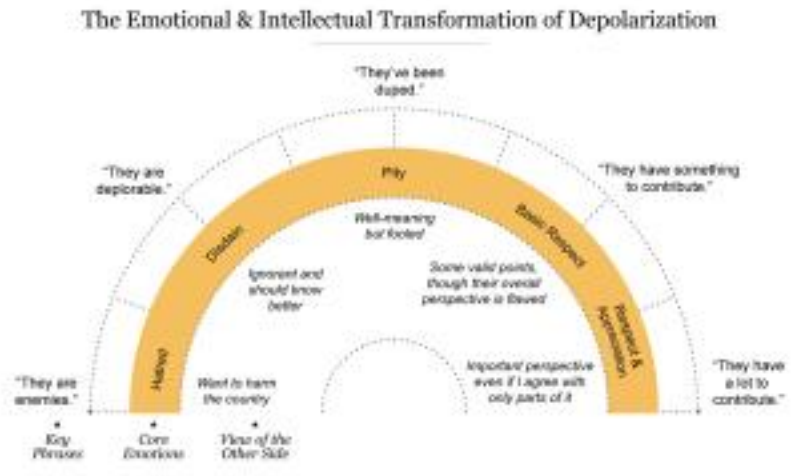
6. Which of the following is closest to my overall emotional attitude towards the majority of people who support the other side?

   Hate. They are enemies out to destroy the country

   Disdain. They are ignorant and should know better.

   Pity. They are well-meaning but duped.

   Basic respect. They make contributions even if they are mostly off base.



Respect and appreciation. They make unique and necessary contributions.

Part 2: Strategies to Counteract My Inner Polarizer

We become agents of polarization when we use any of the Four Horsemen of Polarization: Stereotyping, Dismissing, Ridiculing, and Contempt. The following are ways to offset polarizing thoughts and feelings when you notice them arising in you. These are ways to "edit the story" you tell yourself about people on the other political side. You may also have other strategies that work for you.

Challenge Your Stereotypes

Stereotypes are how outsiders over-simplify, dismiss, lump together, and disparage the "Other." Based on Braver Angels red/blue workshops where we ask each side to identify the most common stereotypes they run into about their own side, these are the most common stereotypes:

Reds think that **Blues** tendto believe:	Reds are racist, anti-immigrant, uncaring about those in need, homophobic, anti-woman, anti-science, bible thumpers.
Blues think that **Reds** tendto believe:	Blues are arrogant/elitist, favor big government for its own sake, and are fiscally irresponsible, unpatriotic, anti-religious, against free speech if it's not politically correct, and hypersensitive "snowflakes.

Ways to counter stereotypes in your own thinking:

- Tell yourself that the other side is more varied than the stereotype.
- Acknowledge that their political views and motivations are no doubt more complicated than the rhetoric you've been hearing.
- Read and listen to thought leaders on the other side who present complex arguments. ● Recognize that the life experiences informing their views are likely different from your own. ● Develop relationships with a variety of people who differ with you politically. Relationships tend to undermine stereotypes.
- If you want to go all out, you can work to develop an understanding of the history and current strands of thought on the other side.

Make Depolarizing Distinctions

Distinguish between positions and people	You can believe that a viewpoint is completely wrong without believing that everyone who holds it is stupid or ill-motivated.
Distinguish between policies and core values	Policies are means to ends, ways to support or enact values, not the values themselves. People can differ sharply on policies and have similar ultimate goals for the country and its people.

Distinguish between inconsistency and hypocrisy	Resist the pull towards assuming that inconsistencies on the other side always reveal hypocrisy. Inconsistencies between stated values and actual behavior can also come from blind spots and from the inevitable tensions between competing values. Be reluctant to assign the label of hypocrite to large numbers of fellow citizens who disagree with you, even when their positions seem contradictory to you. (You seem inconsistent to them.)

Part 3: How to Talk about the Other Side in a Non-polarizing Way

Avoid:

- Using pejorative labels: ("wingnuts," "bible thumpers," "libtards," "snowflakes")
- Using the phrase "they all" or its equivalent "The Democrats/Republicans." These are the classic stereotyping phrases.
- Painting all supporters of a politician with the same brush you use for the politician. If you go on a rant about a particular politician, make it clear that you are not putting all supporters into the same box. ("I'm talking about (so and so) right, and not everyone who voted for him/her.")

Criticize the idea or the policy, not the motives of everyone who holds it.

	Say This	Not This
Blue Example	"Climate change denial is the riskiest idea I've seen in my lifetime because we're running out of time to prevent lasting damage to the planet."	"Climate change deniers care more about the fossil fuel industry than about the planet."
Red Example	"Climate science is uncertain enough that I don't think we should start overhauling our way of life"	"Climate change supporters have a liberal agenda to over-regulate the economy and tax us to death."

Criticize your own side, too.

- "We are losing that group because we haven't listened to them very well."
- "Sometimes our leaders talk as if they have the final answer to (a complex problem), and I don't think they do."

Say something positive about the other side.

- "I read a liberal/conservative commentator who said something interesting about this....."
- "I think their criticism has some validity even if I don't agree with their solution."

Try this “eavesdropper” thought experiment.

Ask yourself, “How would a rational and well-intentioned member of the other group feel when listening to you describe their side?”

- Respected (even if strongly disagreed with) or disrespected
- Understood (at least partly) or grossly misrepresented

Part 4: LAPP Skills for Depolarizing Conversations with Like-Minded People

*LAPP stands for **L**isten, **A**cknowledge, **P**ivot, and **P**erspective.*

Listen

Listen for the other person’s values and emotions that are influencing the stereotyping, ridicule or contempt. Often it’s from frustration, fear, worry for the country or groups in the country, or personal experiences of being put down by people on the other side. When there are strong emotions, there’s a deeper story there.

Acknowledge

Acknowledge what you are hearing.

- “I’m sorry you’ve had to deal with those put downs in your family.”
- “I hear you and I’m with you on your concerns about....”

Pivot

A pivot is used to signal a shift in the conversation. Offer a context for why you are introducing another perspective into the conversation. Be personal here, and use “I-statements”

- “I’ve become so worried about our country’s polarization that I’ve started to try to understand the other side better. I’d like to share some of my thoughts with you.”
- “I’m with you on being very concerned about what’s going on. Can I throw in another perspective?”
- “Since taking a Braver Angel workshop, I’ve been learning more about how (reds/blues) are thinking about these issues.” [Wait to see if there is any curiosity from the other person, either verbally or nonverbally. If confronted with silence, then advance to, “Want hear about this?”]

Perspective

Offer a depolarizing viewpoint. Here are five kinds of perspective comments:

More Varied - They don’t all think the same way. “I’ve been learning that not everyone on the other side thinks that....”

More Complicated - It's more complicated. "I see more complexity in why some people support/oppose that idea. It's not just because they are uninformed."

Different Backgrounds - They are coming at this from different backgrounds and experiences. "It's easy for me to judge them for supporting _____ but I'm aware that I've not been in their shoes."

Humility - Our side hasn't been perfect on this matter. "I don't agree with them on this, but our side has ignored the problem for too long."

Not Useful - It's not useful to dismiss them. "They put us down and we put them down. And nothing's working in this country. I've come to the conclusion that we're going to have to understand and respect each more if we're going to solve our country's problems."

NOTE: Expect a pushback ("Yes, but" or "Wait a minute. Are you defending...?"). Use the LAPP Skills to respond.

Part 5: Practice Depolarizing Skills

Now we're going to try and use these LAPP skills when someone pushes back in a conversation. Let's say you've tried to Listen, Acknowledge, Pivot, and share your Perspective. They're pushing back with "Yes, but. . . " or "Wait a minute are you defending. .?" We are going to use the following Polarizing Statements for the Listen/Acknowledge Practice.

BLUE Polarizer

Conservatives say they are for limited government but what they really want is for the rich to get richer, and the best way to do that is to take from the poor and working class people. They believe in a society of winners and losers, with the winners deserving most of the pie and the losers being blamed for their own misfortune—even though the winners usually start out with lots of advantages. Reds are basically heartless about the poor and would strip away the social safety net if they could get away with it. What amazes me is how many Americans get duped by this conservative approach to government.

RED Polarizer

Liberals say they want the federal government to provide opportunities for people on the margins, but they are hypocrites. They know that these welfare programs trap millions of people into dependency on the government. What that means is more votes for their party, and the government gets bigger and bigger. Blues want to create a society where everyone gets the same outcomes in life no matter how much effort they put into their own success. When they talk about equality, that's what they mean. Put the blues in charge and they will crush personal initiative and ruin the economy. What amazes me is how many Americans get duped by this liberal approach to government.

For Pivot & Perspective practice: "I'm glad you agree with me about this. I'm really worried about the future of the country if these people ever get to control all of the federal government. Most of them would follow their terrible leaders off a cliff!"

The basic steps to think about in this situation are to connect, share, and reassure.

1. Connect with what they're saying by listening and acknowledging, (the L & A in our LAPP skills).
   Ex: "I hear how important immigration reform is to you and how personally it affects your family."

2. Share an additional perspective (the final P in LAPP).
   Ex: "I don't agree on some of what their side has done but our side hasn't solved the problem yet either."

3. This person is worried that your non-polarizing words mean you no longer share their values. So, reassure them before you go further in the conversation. Reassure them you're still with them in your core political values and beliefs. When a like-minded person senses you're continuing to come back with this "new" perspective you've developed, the conversation can turn into the other person thinking you are being a traitor. ("Hey are you actually defending what those people are doing?")

   Ex: "I'm still a conservative/liberal but I've come to realize we don't always come up with solutions for all these problems either." Then you can try to return to a perspective statement like this one: "It's just that I don't think that demonizing the other side is helping anyone."

Exit

If you've repeated your LAPP skills a couple of times and the other person keeps pushing back with no softening, it's usually best to exit the conversation gracefully, or change the topic.

- "I'm just giving you some idea of where I'm coming from. We don't have to agree. Maybe we should just move on."
- "These are tough issues. I'm going to take a break and get a cup of coffee."

Part 6: Final Thoughts: A Long-Term Perspective on Being a Depolarizer

1. Being a depolarizer is not just being high-minded. It's also being pragmatic about the future. Many of our differences today have been around in some form since the founding of the country—and they are not going to disappear. Our current whipsaw approach to polarized policy-making leads to undoing each side's policies every 4 years. The result is paralysis, and cynicism about government.

   Quoting a Braver Angels workshop participant, "Neither side is going to vanquish the other, so we better figure out how to get along and run the country together."

2. Your depolarizing influence in your social circles is apt to occur over time. It will not necessarily come in any individual conversation or with every individual. If you come across as genuine and use your skills, people will remember what you said and think about it.

3. A long-term goal could be to be capable of explaining the other side's views in such a way that they would say, "You got it." This requires reading, listening, and suspending disbelief long enough to understand the worldviews and policy views of people you differ with. That's why it's a long-term goal for those who decide to embrace it.

4. If you really want to take a road less traveled, practice identifying your inner conservative side if you are a liberal, or your inner liberal side if you are a conservative. Make sure you see these as positive aspects of you, for example, the committed traditionalist in some areas for a liberal or the openness-to-rapid-change for a conservative. The lesson: The “Other” resides in me as part of what I value about myself.

Appendix

The Braver Angels Way

➢ We state our views freely and fully, without fear.
➢ We treat people who disagree with us with honesty, dignity and respect.
➢ We welcome opportunities to engage those with whom we disagree.
➢ We believe all of us have blind spots and none of us are not worth talking to. ➢ We seek to disagree accurately, avoiding exaggeration and stereotypes. ➢ We look for common ground where it exists and, if possible, find ways to work together. ➢ We believe that, in disagreements, both sides share and learn.
➢ In Braver Angels, neither side is teaching the other or giving feedback on how to think or say things differently.

GENERAL RESOURCES

Books:

- Jonathan Haidt, The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion. New York: Vintage, 2008. Psychologist looking at the moral intuitions of liberals and conservatives.
- Thomas Sowell. Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles. Basic Books, 2007.
- David Blankenhorn. In Search of Braver Angels. Braver Angels, 2022. A collection of essays by the founder of BA.
- Mónica Guzmán, I Never Thought of It That Way: How to Have Fearless Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times. BenBella Books, Inc, 2022.
- Updated list on Braver Angels Library: Bridging Divides

News Sources

- **Allsides** assesses the political bias of prominent media outlets, and presents different versions of similar news stories from sources of the political spectrum in a mission to show readers news outside their filter bubble.
- **Ground News** Top stories from around you and around the world. Compare headlines across the political spectrum using media bias ratings driven by data.
- **1440** a comprehensive daily newsletter, edited to be as unbiased as humanly possible. ● **The Flip Side** Sends a daily email of curated news articles from left, center, and right that have been vetted for newsworthiness to "burst your media bubble."
- **Tangle** an independent, non-partisan politics newsletter that summarizes the best arguments from across the political spectrum on the news of the day.

UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER SIDE

LIBERALISM

Books:

- Helena Rosenblatt, The Lost History of Liberalism. Princeton University Press, 2018.

Magazines:

- The New Republic
- Nation
- The Atlantic

Voices:

- Heather Cox Richardson
- New York Times:
  - Ezra Klein
  - Nicholas Kristof
  - Thomas Friedman
  - Jane Coaston: The Argument
- Washington Post:
  - Richard Cohen
  - Eugene Robinson

Party Platform:

- Democratic Party
- Democratic Socialist Party
- Green Party

CONSERVATISM

Books:

- Arthur C. Brooks, The Conservative Heart: How to Build a Fairer, Happier, and More Prosperous America. Broadside Books, 2017.

Magazines:

- The National Review
- The Federalist
- Reason
- Glenn Loury
- New York Times:
  - David Brooks
  - Bret Stephens
  - Ross Douthat
- Washington Post:
  - Ramesh Ponnuru
  - Megan McArdle
  - George Will

Voices:

Party Platform:

- Republican Party
- Conservative Party
- Libertarian Party

Debates. Please consider attending a national or local debate. Braver Angels debates use a special parliamentary format that encourages everyone to participate by speaking or asking questions. We tackle challenging topics that matter. Debate participants gain a deeper understanding of other points of view, a better sense of common ground, and a renewed confidence that we actually can talk about controversial topics respectfully. For a list of upcoming debates, visit: https://braverangels.org/what-we-do/debates

Workshops. There are also many other workshops in the Braver Angels catalog. Each workshop extends your skills in depolarization. We encourage you to experience the full set. Take another workshop - https://braverangels.org/what-we-do/#workshops

Podcasts. Finally, there is an extensive amount of Braver Angels material in video and audio/podcast form - including a YouTube channel and podcasts on Apple, Spotify and other major streaming platforms. Check them out - we are sure that you will find many interesting topics for exploration.

Braver Angels videos and podcasts - https://braverangels.org/media/

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