First Impression

We are all familiar with optical illusions but we are much less familiar with the idea that our brain may be creating illusions in front of our eyes in the real world!

Purpose: To highlight the influence emotions can have on perception, decision-making, and attention

Time: 15 – 20 minutes

Materials:
- Two different handouts, one with positive headlines (1a), the other with negative headlines (1b)
- Photo of an emotionally neutral face on a separate handout (2) or projected for all to see

Preparation:
In a New York Times article, researchers Lisa Feldman Barrett and Jolie Wormwood describe an experiment in which participants were shown a picture of an emotionally neutral face. What the participants didn't know was that they also saw the flash of either a happy or an angry face that registered below their conscious level. When asked to describe the neutral face, they ascribed emotions to it that corresponded to the subconscious image they had seen. To be precise, they identified physical features in the neutral face – the eyes are smiling or the brow is furrowed – to back up the emotion they had assigned to it.

Procedure:
- Using your own words, explain that you would like to explore the factors we consider when making decisions – especially the way our initial impressions might impact how we perceive a situation. Tell people that you will ask them to rate a list of news headlines and later discuss how they made their decisions.

- Distribute a list of positive headlines to half the individuals of the group and give copies of a list of negative headlines to the remaining half. Do not point out that there are two different lists of

TRAINER'S NOTES

headlines or that the headlines are either positive or negative.

- Ask people to read the instructions on their handout and rank the headlines. Allow about 3 minutes.

- Next, ask people to look at the photo of a person's face (on the third handout) and think to themselves about their reaction to it. Ask them to mark the appropriate responses on the handout.

- Alternatively, if you are projecting an image of the face, ask people to silently write notes about their impressions of the face: What emotions does it show? What visual clues help you know these emotions are present? On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being very trustworthy and 5 being not at all trustworthy, give this person a trust level score.

- Lead a discussion using the following questions as a guide.

Discussion:
- Describe your reaction to the face that you were shown.
- How likely would you be willing to meet this person?
- What emotions do you see in the person's face and how do you recognize them?
- How can you explain the fact that people might see the face as showing very different emotions?
- What trust level score did you give for the person?
- Why do you think people assigned different trust scores for this person?
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Introduce the concept of affective realism:
- Share with participants that in experiments people have been shown an emotionally neutral face but it was pared with either an angry or a happy face. That paring was flashed to the people in the experiment below their level of consciousness. Yet the subconscious images

Learn more about affective realism in the May 2015 issue of the Firefly News Flash.

actually changed what the subjects saw in the neutral face. They saw furrowed brows and other symbols of anger when the image was paired with an angry face.

- Point out that some of the people read positive headlines and some read negative headlines before seeing the image of the face. This was intended to establish an emotional state that might influence the interpretation of the neutral face.

Discussion:
- To what extent do you think your interpretation of the neutral face was influenced by the headlines you read?
- How do you think your impression of the neutral face might have changed if you had looked at images instead of words?
- What other examples can you give of how a person's experiences might actually change what they are able to see?
- How is affective realism relevant in your organization or work team?
- Is affective realism more relevant when encountering new situations or in familiar circumstances?
- How might affective realism influence first impressions of people or situations?
- How might you use affective realism to your advantage in the future?

Conclusion:
- Acknowledge that the activity was not about people's ranking of headlines but about the unexpected impact emotions can have on our perceptions.

- Invite people to share the ranking of their headlines, if they wish.

- Challenge everyone to become more aware of their emotional state, especially in stressful situations.

Read through the following headlines. Rank them from 1 to 5 with 1 being the most positive and up-beat and five being the most negative.

     _____Award-Winning Retriever Births Litter of Twelve

     _____Middle East Negotiators Make Headway on Peace Talks

     _____NYSE Surges Up for Seventh Week Running

     _____Octogenarian Scientist Shares Secret to Long Life

     _____Youth Volunteers Renovate Homeless Shelter

Read through the following headlines. Rank them from 1 to 5 with 1 being the most negative and depressing and five being the most positive.

_____Local Tax Increase of 5.7% Approved by Legislature

_____Epidemiologist: Heroin Habit is State-Wide "Epidemic"

_____Family of Three Trapped in Apartment Blaze

_____City Center Caught in Deadly Tornado's Crosshairs

_____Factory Closes, 13,000 Jobs Shipped Overseas

Look at this face.

What emotions does it show?

What visual clues help you know these emotions are present?

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being very trustworthy and 5 being not at all trustworthy, give this person a trust level score.

TRUST LEVEL SCORE: _____