

Reality Testing is perhaps one of the most fascinating elements of emotional intelligence.

Reality Testing refers to our ability to see things as they really are, not filtered through a set of personal biases or perspectives.

Most people believe the world they see and understand is THE correct one, when in fact, we are all viewing the world through a set of distortions or biases. This is why we are sometimes surprised when we meet a friend of a friend, and think to ourselves, “How can my friend possibly like this person, and like me as well? We are so different!” You have this reaction because you are looking at this new person through your own lenses, while your friend is looking through theirs.

Reality testing is most easily understood by recognizing that, as human beings, we are subject to what we call cognitive biases. Cognitive biases are ‘filters’ that affect how we see the world. Some cognitive biases are relatively simple. For example, the Halo Effect makes us ignore negative aspects of a person's personality if we like that person. The False Consensus effect is a tendency to believe that everyone agrees with you. If you've ever dealt with someone who simply cannot understand why your opinion is different from theirs, you have experienced the False Consensus effect.

People with a high level of Reality Testing are very good at ‘stripping away’ their own biases. They know, for example, that because they don't like someone else, they'll tend to diminish the value of that person's ideas or suggestions (a process called Reactive Devaluation). From an emotional intelligence perspective, they're able to understand, and identify, when their emotions may be playing a part in their decision making. They may even avoid making a decision when they feel that their objectivity is affected by their emotions.

People with a lower level of Reality Testing may be easily affected by external influences and allow these influences to affect their moods. Their view of the world may be limited by their own beliefs, which they will resist altering even when faced with new information that contradicts those beliefs. If they're upset or frustrated, they may become completely stuck, unable to make decisions or take action, even though very little has changed, realistically, other than their mental state.

To explore your own approach to Reality Testing, consider the following reflective questions:

1. Reflect on a situation or problem you recently addressed. To what extent did your biases play a part in that process, and what did you 'miss' as you worked on it?
2. Review the list of cognitive biases provided in the workbook. Thinking again about the situation you chose in question 1, try to identify the bias that affected you.
3. Think of a current situation where someone else's perspective seems very different from yours. How might their work and life experiences have contributed to the way they see things?

To build your own Reality Testing, try the following:

1. If you feel your emotions getting triggered by a situation, ask yourself: "Will this matter a month from now?" If you decide it won't, try to move on to other things without getting bogged down in that situation.
2. Even if you are not feeling 'stuck', find someone else who is not involved in your current situation. Brief them and ask for their observations and ideas. Don't defend your perspective or evaluate theirs. Just listen and hear the things you may not have thought of.
3. When you and another person think differently about a proposed course of action, ask them why they feel the way they do. Listen for indications of good or bad reality testing.

## Working With Others

Working with people who have a very low level of Reality Testing can be tricky. They tend to catastrophize about negative outcomes or fantasize about overly positive ones. The positions they adopt may be different from everyone else's, because they are so unaware of their own personal biases. For example, the 'Not invented here' problem, where people refuse to believe that a solution developed somewhere else could have any use in their own setting. They will often default to this belief, without even looking at the solution first.

Here are three tips for working with people who have a very low level of Reality Testing:

1. Help them to see things more objectively by using data and facts in decision making processes.
2. If they seem concerned about an issue or situation, talk it through with them and help them explore possible scenarios or outcomes.
3. If certain biases are affecting their work, give them feedback regarding their biases in the most respectful way, and be as specific as possible. Keep in mind that they will want to defend their perspective, so any evidence you can provide will help this discussion.

Having a very high level of Reality Testing might seem like a good thing, but here too we can run into challenges. 'Trusting your gut' is generally seen as a good thing, but people with high levels of Reality Testing struggle to do it. They constantly seek more information to guarantee their objectivity or to find the perfect solution and can become stuck in the decision-making process. This is called 'paralysis by analysis', and again, you may have experienced this yourself, or seen others suffer from it.

Here are three tips for working with people who have a very high level of Reality Testing:

1. Watch for hesitation or resistance to decision making because of the search for more data.
2. Help them understand that no one ever has all the information they need to make a decision.
3. Ask 'what if' questions to help them see various outcomes and the possibilities of each potential decision.