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# Self-Serving Bias as a Defense Mechanism

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Self-serving bias is how [social psychologists](#) describe humans' tendency to blame external forces when bad things happen and to give ourselves credit when good things happen. Although it can mean evading personal responsibility for your actions, self-serving bias is a defense mechanism that protects your [self-esteem](#).

## Examples of Self-Serving Bias

Let's say you ace an exam. Self-serving bias would lead you to believe that it's because you studied hard. If you failed, on the other hand, you might believe it was because the teacher didn't explain the subject correctly, the classroom was too warm, or your roommate kept you up all night before the exam.

All of these things may be true, but they're not painting a complete picture of all the circumstances that led to your performance on the test.

Here are some other examples of self-serving bias:

- Following a car accident, both parties involved blame the other driver for causing the crash.

- After a disastrous meeting with a potential client, a businessman blames losing the account on a competitor's dirty business practices.
- A high school basketball player makes a throw during the final seconds of a game and manages to make a basket. He attributes this to his skill at the game.

## Why Self-Serving Bias Occurs

In many cases, this [cognitive bias](#) allows you to protect your self-esteem. By attributing positive events to personal characteristics, you get a boost in confidence. By blaming outside forces for failures, you protect your self-esteem and absolve yourself from personal responsibility.

A number of factors have been shown to influence the self-serving bias, including age and gender. Older adults tend to make more internal attributions, that is, credit themselves for their successes. Men are more likely to make external attributions, meaning they tend to blame outside forces for their failures.

Often when a person is [depressed](#) or has [low self-esteem](#), this kind of bias may be reversed: they'll attribute positive outcomes to outside help or even luck, and blame themselves when bad things happen.

## Common Situations

Experts suggest that while this bias is quite widespread in Western cultures including the United States and Canada, it tends to be much less frequent in Eastern cultures like China and Japan.

Why? [Individualist cultures](#) such as the U.S. place a greater

emphasis on personal achievement and self-esteem, so protecting the self from feelings of failure is more important. On the other hand, [collectivist cultures](#), such as tend to be found in Eastern cultures, are more likely to attribute personal success to luck and failures to lack of talent.

However, there are some scenarios where self-serving bias is less likely. Some research has found that people in close relationships, whether romantic or friendship, tend to be more modest. Your friends or your partner, in other words, keep you in check with honest criticism about when a bad situation might be part of your own doing.

### **Positive Side of Self-Serving Bias**

One advantage of this bias is that it leads people to persevere even in the face of adversity. An unemployed worker may feel more motivated to keep looking for work if he attributes his joblessness on a weak economy, for instance, rather than some personal failing. An athlete might feel more motivated to perform well if she believes that her failure during a previous event was the result of bad weather rather than a lack of skill.