

# Hope for the Politically Homeless

**FixUS**



**LESSONS FROM  
THE DEPOLARIZATION  
CHALLENGE**

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# Executive Summary

Since our 2020 launch, [FixUS](#) has grown into an extensive community of reformers, scholars, and everyday citizens who share a deep concern about the polarizing division, mounting distrust, and increasing institutional dysfunction threatening American democracy. Over our first four years, much of [our work](#) has focused on researching and crowdsourcing ideas on the ***institutional levers*** that could be pulled (i.e., reforms implemented) to alleviate those issues.

However, as we entered 2024, a presidential election year widely anticipated to instigate more national division than any in living memory, we decided to take a step back and reconsider the ***societal and individual*** consequences of our polarization, distrust, and dysfunction – with the hope of finding additional means to directly intervene in our national discord.

As a result, we identified three key problems we sought to address: (1) individuals are increasingly suffering from our country's hyperpolarization through ***frayed relationships*** with family members, friends, and colleagues; (2) some are experiencing a ***lack of community and connection*** with others who desire to make a difference in the face of similar challenges; and (3) given that these challenges feel so insurmountable, many feel a ***loss of agency*** and that little can be done to turn the tide, thus risking widespread public disengagement *and* a further ceding of the field to the most extreme voices.

In addition to providing an offramp from the exhaustion unique to 2024's daily political warfare, we aspired to create a scalable solution to each of these three issues – one that might give hope for relational reconciliation, offer a sense of camaraderie in polarized times, and imbue a resurgent feeling of agency to make the nation a better place.

To test interventions into these problems (and opportunities), we partnered with Peter Coleman at Columbia University to offer the **FixUS Depolarization Challenge**.

“I came in thinking I wasn’t individually polarized. I came out recognizing that I had areas I could strengthen in order to be my best self out in the world and be a role model for others.”

Over the first few months of 2024, about 40 individuals recruited from the FixUS community worked through a curriculum of research-based interventions – cultivated by Peter’s conflict resolution expertise – designed to increase one’s resistance to tribalism and reduce group tensions, ranging from physical exercise and diversified news intake to conversational readiness and de-escalation tactics. Participants met regularly to discuss their progress and experiences. ***Note: Along with testimonials, we have included anonymous quotes throughout this report to encapsulate participant feedback.***

## **FINDINGS**

Based on qualitative feedback and surveys of Challenge participants, our findings suggest the FixUS Depolarization Challenge could help address the problems outlined above for those involved. Challenge participants discovered:

### **Personal Growth and Skill Development for Bridging Divides**

- Participants described experiencing self-improvement and learning valuable tools and skills from the Challenge’s exercises, resulting in advancements in areas such as listening and information-seeking, among others.
- According to SCIM (Social Cohesion Impact Measurement) – a measurement tool developed to assess the impact of bridge-building interventions – participants had meaningful improvements in self-efficacy, intellectual humility, and intergroup empathy.

### **A Sense of Community and Trust Built Through Shared Experience**

- Participants expressed that the relationships formed through shared experience were as important as – if not more important than – the exercises themselves.
- Participants benefited from their peers’ insights and experiences, and they often left discussions with a palpable feeling that they were not alone as they navigated these polarizing times.

### **A Desire to Scale Up an Enhanced Program**

- Our group, aware of its relatively small size, expressed a desire for their positive experiences to be scaled up for broader impact. This can be achieved through effective administrative communication and exercises tailored to participants’ individual goals.
- Scaled-up versions of the Challenge should focus on quality over quantity in curriculum, emphasizing exercises that (a) better equip individuals to have difficult one-on-one conversations with those they disagree with; (b) break echo chambers by providing varying news and information sources; and (c) offer a superior mix of solo activities (e.g., informative videos, online games).

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# Background

## FixUS AND THE DEPOLARIZATION CHALLENGE

FixUS is housed within the [Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget](#), a nonpartisan nonprofit committed to educating the public on issues with significant fiscal policy impact. As an independent initiative of the Committee focused outside of fiscal policy, it was launched with a realization that progress on a range of policy issues may not be possible until the underlying division, dysfunction, and distrust in our politics are remedied. We felt that the political environment needed for enacting solutions – one that focuses on policy over politics, the long-term over the immediate, and a willingness to compromise and make hard choices – does not currently exist.

Since 2020, [FixUS's work](#) has focused heavily on researching and crowdsourcing ideas on institutional solutions to these problems – particularly by providing impartial [summaries of research](#) and soliciting input from [longtime public servants](#) on how our institutions can improve their functionality and (re)gain public trust.

However, as 2024 began, we sought to contribute more significantly to ameliorating three key detrimental effects of our political conflict – at both the personal and societal levels. Namely, we wanted to (1) mend frayed relationships between families, friends, and colleagues, (2) provide civically passionate but solitary individuals with a sense of community, and (3) empower others with the agency needed to resist the tide of public disengagement and help our nation turn the tide on our biggest challenges.

We found our inspiration for our endeavor in *“The Way Out” Challenge*, an intervention to address toxic polarization created by Peter Coleman, a professor of psychology and education at Columbia University (**see Box 1 for more information**).

From February to April of 2024, we solicited about 40 volunteers from the FixUS community to help us test this program for reducing political and cultural conflict in America. These individuals completed an array of *scientifically backed exercises* intended to catalyze the depolarization process, such as mealtime conversations with ideological disputants, consuming information from varied sources, physical activity, self-assessments, and more (**see Appendix for a listing of the exercises**).

Though we largely adopted Peter's Challenge as-is, we modified it in ways we hoped would allow for more enjoyable participation given everyone's busy schedules. For example, while "The Way Out" Challenge's default setting is to complete one of four "units" every week by executing a task every day – and complete the Challenge in a month – we experimented with completing a "unit" every other week to determine if being less demanding of participants' schedules would maintain their interest in participating without sacrificing exercise effectiveness.

And rather than having individuals complete the Challenge exercises on their own, we attempted to **build a sense of community** by convening multiple groups (of about 12-15 members) who would meet biweekly over Zoom to discuss the project (i.e., describe any positive, negative, and mixed assessments of the exercises), share their personal histories that led them to participate, and spur further tangential conversations and reflections, emphasizing our rendition of the Challenge as a **shared experience** as much as it is an exploration of depolarization.

We gathered evidence on project effectiveness using **pre- and post-surveys** of participants and **qualitative feedback** received during discussion sessions. Our findings and their feedback are collected in the following pages.

"[I] do believe [you're] on to something SORELY needed -- like Yesteryear."

"I appreciate the discussion, the virtual introduction to some very thoughtful and decent people from around the country, and the exercises."

"Thank you for taking the time to assemble this endeavor. I really believe that to depolarize, a big part of the solution is at the individual level. We can't do that just [through] newsletters or podcasts...we need to meet like this with people we respect and take some action on our own. Imagine if there were a way to scale this up to where the majority of the country just did what we did. It would truly move the needle."

# Professor Peter Coleman's “The Way Out” Challenge

Columbia professor Peter Coleman was inspired to develop “**The Way Out**” **Challenge** because he found himself polarized and hesitant to pierce the political/cultural bubble even though peacebuilding is his life’s work. Based on decades of psychological research on best practices for reducing conflict, the exercises comprising his Challenge design generally fall under one of five thematic buckets: (1) resetting negative habits (e.g., **reducing electronic media usage** due to its observed addictiveness), (2) seeking proven strategies for bridging divides over experimenting with new ones to maximize utility (e.g., **reading psychological research syntheses** on increasing self-efficacy), (3) combating the “us versus them” reactionary tendency (e.g., belonging to social groups with overlapping values has been shown to **increase tolerance for members of other groups**), (4) relieving stress through physical activity (e.g., exercising due to its **recorded enhancement of neurological processing**), and (5) repeating the aforementioned steps to respond to shortcomings.

There are many “bridging” approaches advanced by different organizations that approach our toxic polarization problem by bringing a Red person and a Blue person (or groups thereof) together around a certain activity, whether that is a direct discussion about political/cultural differences, sharing a meal, or engaging in the community in some fashion. There are also innumerable self-help efforts centered around things like improving listening, increasing patience, and fostering empathy generally.

Peter’s design is unique because it both aligns itself and distinguishes itself from these two phenomena. One, it emphasizes *individual commitment* to conflict resolution *and* breaks from the self-help standard by reorienting one’s focus to the *broader public* and calming the nation’s chaotic, caustic public discourse. And two, it attempts to introduce the *science* of conflict resolution to enough individuals that they might, in time, reach the critical mass necessary to sever our country’s feedback loop of polarization, distrust, and dysfunction.

**CHALLENGE PARTICIPANTS** who had particularly impactful conversational experiences with friends and family were asked to share their story with the broader FixUS community. This story is one of many testimonials you will find throughout this report.

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## PARTICIPANT TESTIMONIAL -

After being coworkers for over 30 years, I not only considered a woman I know a work friend but my personal friend, as we often socialized outside the office and continued doing so after we both retired. Then came the COVID shutdowns in 2020, when we kept in touch mostly through our Facebook feeds. In the wake of the killing of George Floyd and the large protests, our city was in major upheaval. At this difficult time, my friend posted a few things on Facebook that upset me and changed how I felt about her. Her posts weren't even extreme but revealed a difference in how we viewed current events. I wanted to reach out but didn't know what to say, so we didn't connect for about two years, when she messaged me to see how I was. I was out of town at the time and said I would get back to her but failed to follow up. I felt guilty; I felt stuck. I knew this was my issue, not hers. I knew I had unfairly projected my anxieties about our polarized politics onto her. And yet I couldn't budge. Perhaps this was partially my motivation for joining the FixUS project.

When we got our assignment to take a walk with someone with different political views, she was my obvious choice. I felt like I owed her an apology for my feelings and actions. We spent most of the walk just catching up on our lives over the last four years. It felt good to see her and talk and my anxiety was lifting. I asked her to lunch, and during our meal, I told her about how some of my political views had shifted and how I had joined the FixUS project in the hope of improving our political discourse. I told her about some of our exercises and my current assignment to connect with someone. I shared my response to her Facebook posts and how I pulled away. I apologized to her, even though she was unaware of all of this. She was surprised, touched, and really understanding. I felt like a weight had been lifted from me!

While it's true that we view certain things differently, it doesn't feel like such a big deal anymore. What matters is that we still value each other and our friendship. Today I even reached out and asked about making a date to get together and practice some of the listening/sharing skills I learned. I am really glad I participated in the FixUS project.

Estelle, Challenge Participant

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# Challenge Findings

## PERSONAL GROWTH AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT FOR BRIDGING DIVIDES

Many participants found the Challenge worthwhile because they experienced personal improvement and collected valuable tools for better connecting with their loved ones and more balanced thinking about the broader world around them. From expanded information seeking to refined listening and outreach skills to steps for defusing tensions and more, these participants appreciated learning repeatable exercises for minimizing polarization and increasing trust.

In addition to our qualitative feedback, quantitative survey data shows the Challenge had noticeable, positive impacts on those involved. With the help of [SCIM](#), a measurement tool designed by the [Listen First Project](#) and the [Civic Health Project](#) that provides bridge-building organizations a standardized way to assess their program and intervention effectiveness, we found improved participant attitudes on various dimensions of social cohesion (**see Box 2 below**).

Participants were asked to fill out a survey once before the project began and again following its conclusion. In each, they were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed with statements that assess different outcomes associated with improved social cohesion. On the next page is a list of those statements, their corresponding SCIM measurement outcomes, and the level of positive change from the pre- to post-Challenge average response:

“Learning how to [step back] and look at the challenges and issues [in front] of us, including innovative approaches to engaging those you disagree with...even seriously disagree (like taking a walk, or having a meal, etc.). The value to me was (a) having new approaches to look at the challenges in a different way (as compared to me vs. them) and (b) new techniques and ways to engage.”

“Really interesting and important. The main thing I took away was putting a face on the data – people who really don't know anyone who disagrees with them politically. It was good to listen and (mostly) resist the urge to weigh in and opine.”



Box 2

SCIM Measurement	Statement (To Agree with on a 0 to 10 Scale)	Positive Change
Self-Efficacy for Becoming a Better Bridge Builder	"I can collaborate well with the people who I hate/disagree with the most."	10.2%
	"I am confident in my ability to have fruitful conversations with the people that I hate/disagree with the most."	
Self-Efficacy for Creating a Better Bridging Community	"I have confidence in my ability to help shift social norms about how we engage with others who are different from us/who disagree with us."	9%
	"I have the ability to contribute to a community that promotes collaboration between people who disagree."	
Intellectual Humility	"When others disagree with my ideas, I feel like I'm being attacked."	7.9%
	"I accept that my beliefs may be wrong."	
Intergroup Empathy	"I find it difficult to see things from others' points of view, particularly people with different political beliefs."	4.1%
	"It's important to understand Americans with other political views by imagining how things look from their perspective."	

However, we do acknowledge that our project had a self-selection problem – participants were either contacted by their being an existing member of the FixUS network or from having a personal connection with someone who is. More plainly, those who chose to participate in our project are already more interested or engaged in the greater depolarization space than the typical American and, therefore, are more inclined to take active steps to alleviate that division. Certainly, any scaled-up future Challenge initiatives must make a greater effort to incorporate individuals who are more affectively polarized, more averse to directly engaging in our contentious politics, or both.

Nevertheless, we believe that this exploratory experience provides a great message with which to humbly appeal to less-engaged audiences: this Challenge is no cure, but a first step, and even those prone to wanting to bridge divides found the experience very eye-opening and rewarding for learning new skills and restoring personal connections, which portends well for its impact with broader application.

## A SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND TRUST BUILT THROUGH SHARED EXPERIENCE

For other participants, connecting with the other members of their group via the Zoom discussions made all the difference. For these individuals, learning about their peers' experiences that led them to the Challenge and their thoughts cultivated while taking part in it was inspiring, illuminating, and invaluable for building the trust necessary to bridge our political divides.

To put it differently, participants expressed an affinity for the sense of community the groups formed over the length of the project – benefits they would have felt regardless of the specific exercises they were completing. Participants expressed how much they enjoyed learning from the experiences and knowledge of their fellow participants, almost all of whom they had no prior relationship with. And we were often left with a palpable feeling from participants that, amid such polarizing times and a depressing national political mode, they simply enjoyed the project's ability to provide them with a realization that they are not alone in navigating these rough seas.

A caveat to this finding is that our sample is self-selected, as previously acknowledged, but we must also note that our pilot group's makeup was not representative of the American public on a range of demographic categories. Our participant pool skewed older, more male, whiter, and more highly educated than the general population. Through our survey, we also know we had about twice as many liberal-leaning participants as conservative-leaners. Though no conservative participant indicated they ever felt targeted or patronized on account of their ideological inclinations, the feedback we did receive – from conservatives, especially – indicates that future Challenge endeavors should focus on balancing ideological diversity as much as demographic diversity.

“Just seeing that people care enough to do it is heartening.”

“I had a great experience with the [FixUS] team and this project. It brought forward a lot of surprising feelings...and taught me how to more effectively interact with those with different backgrounds and views.”

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## PARTICIPANT TESTIMONIAL -

Participating in the recent FixUS depolarization exercise was a profoundly positive experience, allowing me to reconnect with my boyhood friend and next-door neighbor. Although we grew up close to one another, our lives took completely different paths after high school, and we spoke and saw each other infrequently. He moved to a rural area, got married, had kids, became a blue-collar worker, raised farm animals, hunted and fished, and was quite content to rarely travel from his country home. On the other hand, I went to college, moved to a large city, never got married nor had kids, got a white-collar job, developed an insatiable appetite for travel, and learned to love everything urban. Our political beliefs and ideologies, which started out similar, wound up polar opposites. After about three decades, there was little reason for us to talk. Seeing each other's posts on Facebook, it was clear we had little in common – or so we thought. Therefore, when given the opportunity to choose to have a conversation with someone with opposite beliefs, my boyhood friend was at the top of my list.

We caught up on the phone while I walked through the neighborhood streets surrounding my home. During the hour-long conversation, we shared so much about where we were in our lives. Then we moved on to the more profound. He told me about a cancer scare he experienced, which included pretty invasive surgery. I realized that during our long absence of conversation, my friend could have died. We pledged to talk more in the future and to let each other know when big things are happening in our respective lives.

In the end, it was a wonderful reconnection that needed to occur, but it took this concerted effort via a depolarization exercise to make it happen. I'm certain this November the two of us will be voting for very different candidates and parties, but I'm glad to know that at our core we still care for one another as friends. He is not a domestic enemy; he is my childhood friend whom I will always love. This experience has reinforced the importance of empathy and open-mindedness, reminding me that despite our differences, our shared history and mutual respect can bridge even the widest ideological divides.

Phil, Challenge Participant

## A DESIRE TO SCALE UP AN ENHANCED PROGRAM

Participants left positive reviews of how the project was conducted, saying the format's management fostered the learning and understanding that came from the Challenge, that it was well-paced, and that the exercise-completion-and-group-discussion framework was motivating and cathartic.

At the same time, a consistent and obvious feedback point was that we need to scale this up – just engaging a small group, including those already committed to the cause, will not move the needle. We certainly appreciated this fact before launching the project and, therefore, were intentional in gathering all critical feedback from participants on areas we need to improve if one were to scale up this experience (beyond the self-selection and diversity challenges previously acknowledged).

Below, we outline three key areas of emphasis in any future scaled-up version of the Challenge. But beyond those three, there are a few other management improvements to be incorporated, such as more robust communication and improved explanations of what the Challenge is and is not supposed to be (e.g., a tool for self-improvement vs. learning how to communicate with others better) and how each exercise is supposed to be germane to that ultimate objective. Ideally, future versions of the Challenge should also be tailored to the needs and goals of individual participants (e.g., some might desire to learn skills to help them repair a relationship with a family member, while others may participate in order to learn about organizations they might be able to get involved with to bridge divides).

In addition, while participants generally found the Challenge's schedule very manageable, several opined that multiple exercises felt irrelevant or had negligible effects on their polarizing or bridge-building tendencies and suggested this exercise excessiveness might distract from paramount topics and inhibit deeper reflection. Multiple participants preferred focusing on quality over quantity, shedding some exercises, particularly later in the process, and focusing more time on a select few.

An enhanced, **scaled-up version** of the Challenge would incorporate these management improvements while also focusing on **three key areas**: (1) elevating the groundbreaking experiences of one-on-one "bridging" conversations, (2) emphasizing different news and information sources to break echo chambers, and (3) prioritizing solo activities for quality of experience over quantity of exercises.

## ELEVATE THE GROUNDBREAKING EXPERIENCES OF ONE-ON-ONE “BRIDGING” CONVERSATIONS

Far and away, for those who did them, the most impactful exercises were those based around conversing one-on-one with others who have differing beliefs on political issues (e.g., going on a walk-and-talk or sharing a meal with someone from “the other team”). We have included testimonials from some of those participants throughout this report.

Several Challenge participants described transformational experiences with family members and friends, and even those whose experiences were not quite as impactful saw increased civility in their discussions by moving or dining together and felt inspired by hearing the stories of those who experienced breakthroughs.

Nevertheless, these exercises are the most emotionally demanding and, due to scheduling issues, the most difficult to execute, so participants in a future scaled-up version of the Challenge would likely appreciate detailed guidance and dedicated support for starting such conversations with an individual whom a participant might have a strained relationship with and/or might not have spoken to for some time.

For example, we received suggestions from pilot participants that a psychologist or other mental health or conflict resolution professional be invited to the Challenge gatherings, particularly later ones that begin to focus on relating to others, to aid participants in learning how to manage their anger or other strong emotions and how to respond to similar reactions from others. We also received suggestions that participants might find the discussion with their loved one(s) more fruitful if they are deliberately paired with a fellow participant who disagrees with them on key issues to practice what they have learned after the first unit or two, or if they are encouraged to meet on their own in small groups to do the same.

Furthermore, some participants expressed concerns that they would be treating the individual they reached out to as a prop or tool for personal improvement rather than contacting them organically, so scaled-up versions of the Challenge should help future participants navigate speaking honestly about their inspirations and intentions without making their intended discourser feel disrespected. Another possible approach that might make these types of exercises more effective and/or easier to conduct would be if the participant and their converser completed one of the Challenge’s solo exercises and began by discussing that exercise together.

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## PARTICIPANT TESTIMONIAL -

I found the “walk-and-talk” experience very helpful for containing the emotion that typically comes up with political discussions and allowing us to bring up “politics” broadly as part of a general conversation without letting political differences derail the overall discussion.

For example, during an afternoon out with four friends, my wife and I spotted a flag that suggested strong support for a certain political candidate and movement, and this took the group’s conversation in a new direction. While the disparate views of the candidate among the six of us normally would have started something unpleasant in the absence of personal interaction, we instead took the opportunity to lead the conversation off with our shared love for the country, and this led to a constructive discussion about some of the longstanding issues that have plagued American society that we all want to be resolved.

Additionally, during a long walk with my son (and two dogs), I found that we could exchange thoughts about some of the political and fiscal issues that threaten to help break apart our fragilely shared views on what our democracy needs. I tend to be much more conservative, fiscally, than my son, which generally has, in the past, led to conversations ending tersely. But during that walk, we were able to listen to each other’s POVs more than if we had been sitting around inside discussing.

Each of these conversations was, in my view, less emotional, but also allowed both sides to speak. I don’t believe anyone has changed their point of view since then, but we also didn’t get into a shouting match. And that, for now, is enough for me.

Bob, Challenge Participant

## EMPHASIZE DIFFERENT NEWS AND INFORMATION SOURCES TO BREAK ECHO CHAMBERS

Several exercises were based on finding balanced sources of information and challenging one's existing assumptions and biases toward others, with resources ranging from More in Common's [Perception Gap Quiz](#) (measuring the different perceived realities between Democrats, Republicans, and Independents) to [conversation guides on controversial questions](#) from the National Issues Forum Institute to unbiased, holistic news reports from [AllSides](#) and [The Flip Side](#). Participants largely praised these exercises and greatly appreciated their exposure to said resources.

However, many participants requested the Challenge focus even more intently on these tasks and resources. To these individuals, the effectiveness of these informational exercises and their potential for long-term impact and behavioral change demand more dedicated explanations from Challenge administrators and a greater emphasis in the organized discussions with their fellow participants.

"I pause more, listen better, even watch [Fox News]...in addition to CNN."

"Worth my time, but not in the way I expected. I live in the DC bubble, have spent a career in Democratic and center-left politics...and spend a lot of time talking to people with whom I disagree (on both the left and right)...They were good conversations to listen to so I got out of an elite political bubble, rather than out of a partisan bubble."



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## PARTICIPANT TESTIMONIAL -

I am grateful beyond words to FixUS for showing me ways to navigate tough conversations with those who hold very different opinions than myself. I thought I had good interpersonal skills in the career I had for almost 40 years, but what I discovered was that, while I could engage with strangers fairly well, I was having a very tough time with my own inner circle. It took a difficult conversation with my own sister and her husband to realize I had indeed made a breakthrough in the way I could sit in conversation.

I had sent a text to my sister about a current event that I knew might raise her curiosity, but I hadn't counted on the antagonism it stirred up in her and my brother-in-law. When I received a call from them a few days later, my sister's tone was cold and sharp – completely out of character for her – and my brother-in-law proceeded to speak in a very aggressive manner, in so many words accusing me of not telling the truth about the issue I had texted about. I calmly asked if he had seen the news a few days earlier because it had been reported on all the networks, right and left, but he refused to engage, curtly dismissing me and stepping away from the phone. I have known this man for 55 years. It stung.

Gratefully, my sister stayed on the phone, and we spoke for about 30 minutes more. During our time, I used listening and empathy skills that we had been discussing in our FixUS calls, acknowledging our differences but also noting that these days, when there is disagreement, we run to our respective corners and put on our boxing gloves, when what we need to do is actually embrace in love and find common ground, of which there is much – particularly with family. She and I both had a bit of a cry, and my brother-in-law perhaps had been listening, because he came back on, to the surprise of us both, and apologized, saying he wouldn't let it happen again. I expressed my love for them both, hung up, and cried some more.

Each one of us has the power to make small changes. Thank you, FixUS, for reminding me of that truth.

Ann, Challenge Participant



## PRIORITIZE SOLO ACTIVITIES FOR QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE OVER QUANTITY OF EXERCISES

Participants were assigned virtual activities (e.g., virtual games to play, content to consume, or self-assessments to complete) and physical exercises to execute and, in general, praised both assignment formats, noting that the former tended to be rich in reflective material and that the latter was an unsung boon for mental health.

For some participants, one of the assigned reading or viewing materials resonated with them more than any other exercise, be it an article, a TED Talk, or something else, with the content feeling ripe for further exploration. However, for scaled-up versions, promoted readings and videos should be carefully chosen, as some readings and videos did not resonate with our pilot participants.

While many participants received valuable insight from them, ranging from understanding their tolerance for change and ambiguity in life to observing how they derail in conflict, others found the self-assessments produced results either too generic for personal application or highly personalized but lacking information that would have made them actionable. Therefore, future scaled-up efforts should provide fuller explanations of what these assessments were and what would make their results applicable to participants' daily lives, as well as why self-improvement and collective depolarization should be considered related.

“In today's hectic society with so many personal and professional demands, I needed the [regularly] scheduled meetings to keep me on task (and I wanted to stay on task). I found the discussions somewhat [cathartic].”

“First...I greatly appreciate the opportunity to participate and learn. Second, I applaud this effort to gather people to see how we can approach our divisions differently and hopefully improve our communications/engagements.”



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## PARTICIPANT TESTIMONIAL -

I am an independent voter – socially liberal and fiscally conservative – and I was encouraged to reach out to my brother and sister, who have been alienated from the family due to rather extreme political beliefs, conspiracy theories, and the like, and try to find common ground.

We haven't really spoken much in the last few years, but I reached out to my brother and said I was participating in a national study on depolarization and wanted to prove that the three of us could calmly speak on the phone and find common ground politically if we talked rationally and not emotionally. He thought that was a good idea.

However, the next morning, before I even woke up, he received from my sister an op-ed inordinately demonizing a politician they both loathe and decided to forward it to me, wanting it to be the starting point of our discussion. He knows without a doubt that those kinds of written pieces make my skin crawl, so I was left feeling completely disappointed and saddened after less than a day of hoping to find common ground or common-sense solutions amongst my family amid the extreme polarization of politics in the US.

I told my brother and sister as such, and that I felt little motivation to move forward with any such phone call. We haven't spoken about the idea or the issues that inspired it since.

Marty, Challenge Participant

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# Where Do We Go From Here?

In all, this exploratory Depolarization Challenge has been a transformative experience for us here at FixUS and we are heartened that many of our pilot program’s participants feel the same way. In the months ahead, we plan to work with Peter Coleman and those who aided his development of “The Way Out” Challenge – as well as our pilot participants – to improve our modified offering and are considering ways to expand its use within existing institutions that may benefit from it (e.g., Congress, media).

We know this Challenge alone will not cause the better angels of our nature to manifest, especially not through the actions of FixUS itself. Detoxifying our demonizing and self-destructing political culture and discourse will require considerable time and unrelenting effort. But the dangers are too great to ignore our present ills and continue to allow families, friends, neighbors, peers, and even strangers to shout down and shun one another when we can offer them a helping hand.

For now, we consider the FixUS Depolarization Challenge experiment a success and appreciate the opportunity to learn from its achievements and drawbacks alike. And we wish to extend our sincere thanks to Peter Coleman and to all our participants who volunteered their time and energy to make this project possible this winter and spring. We are excited about what the future holds for this project and look forward to receiving feedback on how to extend its benefits from those within the FixUS community to any American who desires to see our house less divided, less dysfunctional, and less distrusting than we see today.

“I really appreciate the entire experience...It was [provocative], engaging and at times challenging.”

“I would like to thank the organizers for facilitating the conversation and drawing out all of the participants. Since we no longer live in communities that...offer a diversity of thought, I appreciate being able to hear diverse points of view. I always learn a lot from people with different experiences and world views.”

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# Appendix:

## The Units & Their Exercises

### PART ONE: YOU

- **Step 1 (Stop to Reset):** Take the [Implicit Change Theory Inventory](#)
- **Step 2 (Spot Positive Deviance):** Read "[How to Be More Optimistic](#)" or "[4 Ways To Improve And Increase Self-Efficacy](#)"
- **Step 3 (Complicate to Simplify):** Use [The Flip Side](#) and/or [AllSides](#) to find three fair sources that politically differ from you to consume information from for a day
- **Step 4 (Move to Synchronize):** Complete "[The Joy Workout](#)" or one of [these activities](#)
- **Step 5 (Adapt to Setbacks):** Take this [learning orientation quiz and watch the accompanying videos](#) or take the [Tolerance for Ambiguity Assessment](#)

### PART TWO: POLITICAL "IN-GROUP"

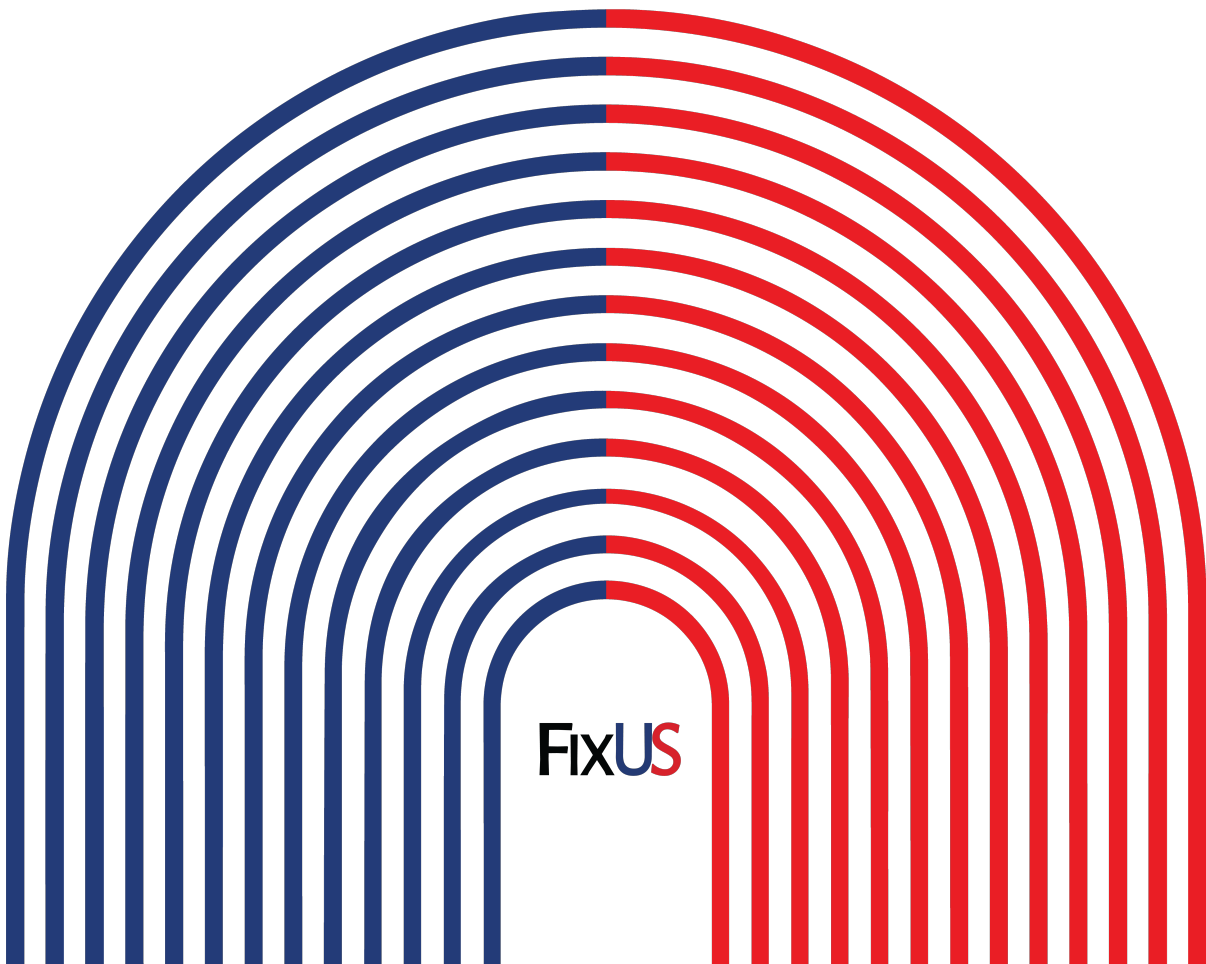
- **Step 1 (Stop to Reset):** Weigh yourself on the [Workplace Social Courage Scale](#) or [Need to Belong Scale](#)
- **Step 2 (Spot Positive Deviance):** Begin a conversation with your in-group on reducing tensions
- **Step 3 (Complicate to Simplify):** Watch this video on "[tight vs. loose group norms](#)" and reflect on the possible consequences of these norms for your in-group(s)
- **Step 4 (Move to Synchronize):** Take More in Common's [Perception Gap Quiz](#) and review [the findings](#)
- **Step 5 (Adapt to Setbacks):** Watch this [video](#) on discarding the terms "success" and "failure" or this [TED talk](#) on learning from failure, then reflect on the video's implications for your in-group's approach to solving issues you care about

### PART THREE: POLITICALLY CHALLENGED RELATIONSHIPS

- **Step 1 (Stop to Reset):** Take the [Blame Intensity Inventory](#) or the [Conflict Anxiety Response Scale \(CARS\)](#) and review how you derail in conflict
- **Step 2 (Spot Positive Deviance):** Reach out to someone you and a person you're in conflict with both trust to help you have an improved conversation (i.e., how to approach the relationship differently, what to keep in mind, if they'd be willing to offer both of you guidance in working things out, etc.)
- **Step 3 (Complicate to Simplify):** Watch and reflect on this [video on keeping an open mind before decision-making](#)
- **Step 4 (Move to Synchronize):** Invite someone from "the other team" or whom you have political/cultural tension with to take a walk or hike with you
- **Step 5 (Adapt to Setbacks):** List what is pulling you and someone from "the other team" or whom you have political/cultural tension with apart and think about what you can do together to lessen those repellent forces

## PART FOUR: COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

- **Step 1 (Stop to Reset):** Take this [social media persona quiz](#) or the [Political Engagement Survey](#)
- **Step 2 (Spot Positive Deviance):** Check out the [Bridge Alliance](#) and see which groups are reducing divisions over issues you care about
- **Step 3 (Complicate to Simplify):** Review the [National Issues Forum Institute guide\(s\)](#) on the issue(s) you care most about to understand the various perspectives on them
- **Step 4 (Move to Synchronize):** Invite someone from “the other team” to [make and/or share a meal](#) with you
- **Step 5 (Adapt to Setbacks):** Play around with this [game](#) that explains why complex social conflicts get stuck in long-term patterns resistant to change and [reflect on its broader implications for society](#)



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