When I asked [study] participants for examples of feeling emotionally unsafe or threatened, a clear pattern emerged. They weren’t talking about getting their feelings hurt or being forced to listen to dissenting opinion; they were talking about dehumanizing language and behavior. I recognized this immediately. I’ve studied dehumanization and seen it in my work for over a decade.

David Smith, the author of Less Than Human, explains that dehumanization is a response to conflicting motives. We want to harm a group of people, but it goes against our wiring as members of a social species to actually harm, kill, torture, or degrade other humans. Smith explains that there are very deep and natural inhibitions that prevent us from treating other people like animals, game, or dangerous predators. He writes, “Dehumanization is a way of subverting those inhibitions.”

Dehumanization is a process. I think Michelle Maiese, the chair of the philosophy department at Emmanuel College, lays it out in a way that makes sense, so I’ll use some of her work here to walk us through it. Maiese defines dehumanization as “the psychological process of demonizing the enemy, making them seem less than human and hence not worthy of humane treatment.” Dehumanizing often starts with creating an enemy image. As we take sides, lose trust, and get angrier and angrier, we not only solidify an idea of our enemy, but also start to lose our ability to listen, communicate, and practice even a modicum of empathy.

Once we see people on “the other side” of a conflict as morally inferior and even dangerous, the conflict starts being framed as good versus evil. Maiese writes, “Once the parties have framed the conflict in this way, their positions become more rigid. In some cases, zero-sum thinking develops as parties come to believe that they must either secure their own victory or face defeat. New goals to punish or destroy the opponent arise, and in some cases more militant leadership comes into power.”

Dehumanization has fueled innumerable acts of violence, human rights violations, war crimes, and genocides. It makes slavery, torture, and human trafficking possible. Dehumanizing others is the process by which we become accepting of violations against human nature, the human spirit, and, for many of us, violations against the central tenets of our faith.

How does this happen? Maiese explains that most of us believe that people’s basic human rights should not be violated—that crimes like murder, rape, and torture are wrong. Successful dehumanizing, however, creates moral exclusion. Groups targeted based on their identity—gender, ideology, skin color, ethnicity, religion, age—are depicted as “less than” or criminal or even evil. The targeted group eventually falls out of the scope of who is naturally protected by our moral code. This is moral exclusion, and dehumanization is at its core.

Dehumanizing always starts with language, often followed by images. We see this throughout history. During the Holocaust, Nazis described Jews as Untermenschen—subhuman. They called Jews rats and depicted them as disease-carrying rodents in everything from military pamphlets to children’s books. Hutus involved in the Rwanda genocide called Tutsis cockroaches. Indigenous people are often referred to as savages. Serbs called Bosnians aliens. Slave owners throughout history considered slaves subhuman animals.

I know it’s hard to believe that we ourselves could ever get to a place where we would exclude people from equal moral treatment, from our basic moral values, but we’re fighting biology here. We’re hardwired to believe what we see and to attach meaning to the words we hear. We can’t pretend that every citizen who participated in or was a bystander to human atrocities was a violent psychopath. That’s not possible, it’s not true, and it misses the point. The point is that we are all vulnerable to the slow and insidious practice of dehumanizing, therefore we are all responsible for recognizing it and stopping it.