

Cognitive Dissonance

What Is Cognitive Dissonance?

*The attitudes that people hold determine what they do.

-Cognitive dissonance is any incompatibility an individual might perceive between two or more attitudes or between behavior and attitudes.

*Research has generally concluded that people seek consistency among their attitudes and between their attitudes and their behavior.

Cognitive dissonance is the mental discomfort that results from holding two conflicting beliefs, values, or attitudes. People tend to seek consistency in their attitudes and perceptions, so this conflict causes unpleasant feelings of unease or discomfort

The inconsistency between what people believe and how they behave motivates them to engage in actions that will help minimize feelings of discomfort. People attempt to relieve this tension in different ways, such as by rejecting, explaining away, or avoiding new information.

Signs of Cognitive Dissonance

Everyone experiences cognitive dissonance to some degree but that doesn't mean that it is always easy to recognize. Some signs that what you are feeling might be related to dissonance include:

- Feeling uncomfortable before doing something or [making a decision](#)
- Trying to [justify or rationalize](#) a decision you've made or action you have taken
- Feeling [embarrassed or ashamed](#) about something you've done and trying to hide your actions from other people
- Experiencing [guilt or regret](#) about something you've done in the past
- Doing things because of social pressure or a [fear of missing out \(FOMO\)](#), even if it wasn't something you wanted to do

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Examples of Cognitive Dissonance

- You want to be healthy, but you don't exercise regularly or eat a [nutritious diet](#). You feel guilty as a result.
- You know that [smoking](#) (or [drinking too much](#)) is harmful to your health, but you do it anyway. You rationalize this action by pointing to your high stress levels.
- You'd like to build up your savings but tend to spend extra cash as soon as you get it. You regret this decision later, such as when facing an unexpected expense that you don't have the money to cover.
- You have a long to-do list but spend the day watching your favorite shows instead. You don't want your spouse to know, so you try to make it look like you've worked hard all day.

Causes of Cognitive Dissonance

There are a number of different situations that can create conflicts that lead to cognitive dissonance.

Forced Compliance

Sometimes you might find yourself engaging in behaviors that are opposed to your own beliefs due to external expectations at work, school, or in a social situation.² This might involve going along with something due to [peer pressure](#) or doing something at work to avoid getting fired.

New Information

Sometimes learning new information can lead to feelings of cognitive dissonance. For example, if you engage in a behavior that you later learn is harmful, it can lead to feelings of discomfort. People sometimes deal with this by finding ways to justify their behaviors or finding ways to discredit or ignore new information.

Decisions

People make decisions, both large and small, on a daily basis. When faced with two similar choices, we are often left with feelings of dissonance because both options are equally appealing.

Once a choice has been made, however, people need to find a way to reduce these feelings of discomfort. We accomplish this by justifying why our choice was the best option so we can believe that we made the [right decision](#).

What Influences Cognitive Dissonance?

The degree of dissonance experienced can depend on a few different factors. Among them are how highly a particular belief is valued and the degree to which the beliefs are inconsistent.

The overall strength of the dissonance can also be influenced by several factors, including:

- **The importance attached to each belief.** Cognitions that are more personal, such as [beliefs about the self](#), and highly valued tend to result in greater dissonance.
- **The number of dissonant beliefs.** The more dissonant (clashing) thoughts you have, the greater the strength of the dissonance.

*Cognitive dissonance can often have a powerful influence on our behaviors and actions. It doesn't just influence how you feel; it also motivates you to take action to reduce feelings of discomfort.

How Cognitive Dissonance Feels

Cognitive dissonance can make people feel uneasy and uncomfortable. This is particularly true if the disparity between their beliefs and behaviors involves something that is central to their [sense of self](#).

For example, behaving in ways that are not aligned with your personal values may result in intense feelings of discomfort. Your behavior contradicts not just the beliefs you have about the world, but also the beliefs that you have about yourself.

This discomfort can manifest itself in a variety of ways. Someone with cognitive dissonance may feel:

- Anxiety
- Embarrassment
- [Regret](#)
- Sadness
- [Shame](#)
- Stress

Cognitive dissonance can even influence how people feel about and view themselves, leading to negative feelings of [self-esteem](#) and self-worth.

Impact of Cognitive Dissonance

Because people want to [avoid discomfort](#), cognitive dissonance can have a wide range of effects. Dissonance can play a role in how we act, think, and make decisions. We may engage in behaviors or adopt attitudes to help relieve the discomfort caused by the conflict.

Some things that a person might do to cope with these feelings include:

- **Adopting beliefs or ideas to help justify or explain away the conflict** between their beliefs or behaviors. This can sometimes involve blaming other people or outside factors.
- **Hiding beliefs or behaviors from other people.** People may feel ashamed of their conflicting beliefs and behaviors, hiding the disparity from others to minimize feelings of shame and guilt.
- **Only seeking out information that confirms existing beliefs.** This phenomenon, known as [confirmation bias](#), affects the ability to think critically about a situation but helps minimize feelings of dissonance.

People like to believe that they are logical, consistent, and good at making decisions. Cognitive dissonance can interfere with the perceptions they hold about themselves and their abilities, which is why it can often feel so uncomfortable and unpleasant.

Dealing With Cognitive Dissonance

When there are conflicts between [cognitions](#) (thoughts, beliefs, and opinions), people will take steps to reduce the dissonance and feelings of discomfort. They can go about this a few different ways.

Adding More Beliefs to Outweigh Dissonant Beliefs

People who learn that greenhouse emissions result in global warming might experience feelings of dissonance if they drive a gas-guzzling vehicle. To reduce this dissonance, they may seek out new information that overrides the belief that greenhouse gasses contribute to global warming.

Reducing the Importance of the Conflicting Belief

A person who cares about their health might be disturbed to learn that [sitting for long periods](#) during the day is linked to a shortened lifespan. Since they work all day in an office and spend a great deal of time sitting, it is difficult to change their behavior.

To deal with the feelings of discomfort then, they might find some way of rationalizing the conflicting cognition. For instance, they may justify their sedentary behavior by saying that their other healthy behaviors—like eating sensibly and occasionally exercising—make up for their largely [sedentary lifestyle](#).

Changing Beliefs

Changing the conflicting cognition is one of the most effective ways of dealing with dissonance but it is also one of the most difficult—particularly in the case of deeply held values and beliefs, such as religious or [political leanings](#).