

# Cognitive Dissonance Theory

**Rationale:** This lesson builds on previous lessons about attitudes by examining the human drive for consistency between attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

By the end of this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Define cognitive dissonance
- Describe features that increase/decrease the amount of cognitive dissonance that is experienced
- Describe responses that individuals use to reduce cognitive dissonance
- Identify ways that cognitive dissonance theory informs persuasion attempts

{video}

You may download a copy of the visual aid used in this video: [L04-cognitive-dissonance-visual-aid.pdf](#)

## Outline of the Lesson

- I. Review of previous session's content
- II. Lesson opening:
  - A. Cognitive Dissonance Theory is the best supported, most researched theory in the social sciences.
  - B. Psychology-based theory with clear applications to persuasion
- III. Overview
  - A. Defining Cognitive Dissonance Theory
  - B. Factors that influence the strength of dissonance
  - C. How we control dissonance
  - D. Post-decision regret
  - E. How to use Cognitive Dissonance Theory

## Body

- I. Defining Cognitive Dissonance Theory
  - A. In brief: humans have a drive to avoid cognitive inconsistency, and will change their attitudes, alter their beliefs, and behave differently in order to prevent or reduce dissonance
  - B. Attitude objects can have three different relationships:
    - A. Consonant (in harmony)
    - B. Dissonant (in conflict)
    - C. No relationship
  - C. Dissonance is a "Drive State"
    - A. The motivation to achieve consistency is a DRIVE STATE, like hunger or thirst.
    - B. As the magnitude of dissonance increases, so does the pressure to reduce it.
- II. Factors which influence the strength of dissonance
  - A. The relative proportion of consonant & dissonant elements.

- B. The importance of elements or issues.
- C. If the decision can be “undone.”
- D. If you did something of your own free will.
- E. If there are negative consequences.
- F. If you had to choose between two options that were similar in attractiveness.

### III. How we control dissonance

- A. Change the relative proportions of consonant and dissonant elements
  - 1. Think of reasons why what you’re doing is good or persuade yourself that the bad isn’t so bad
- B. Alter the importance of the issue or the elements involved
- C. Selective exposure prevents dissonance
- D. Four stages of resolving cognitive dissonance [VA]

### IV. Post-decision regret: a special case

- A. Greater dissonance results if a choice is made between two alternatives that are of similar attractiveness
- B. Dissonance increases as the importance of the decision increases
- C. Dissonance increases as the difficulty of reversing the decision increases

### V. How to use it:

- A. Flakiness and inconsistency are seen as socially undesirable in American and Western European cultures
- B. Compliance with a position someone has previously committed to is easy and straightforward in these cultures: just point out the inconsistency between the position and current attitudes/behaviors
- C. Gaining commitment can be an effective tool for influence
  - A. Start with something modest.
  - B. Seek harmless concessions.
  - C. Get them to write it down.
  - D. Make the commitment public.
  - E. Don’t give large inducements – make it an inner choice.

## Conclusion

### I. Review

- A. Defining Cognitive Dissonance Theory
- B. Factors that influence the strength of dissonance
- C. How we control dissonance
- D. Post-decision regret
- E. How to use Cognitive Dissonance Theory

### II. Learning activity

### III. Lesson closing

## References

Gass, R. H., & Seiter, J. S. (2014). *Persuasion: Social influence and compliance gaining* (5th ed.) Pearson.

## Learning Activity

Complete one of these two class activity options.

### **In the Classroom**

1. Divide into small groups
2. Discuss how Cognitive Dissonance Theory explains the strategies that colleges and universities use to gain commitment when recruiting students:
  - Start with something modest.
  - Seek harmless concessions.
  - Get them to write it down.
  - Make the commitment public.
  - Don't give large inducements - make it an inner choice.
3. Share the results of your discussion with the class

### **Remote**

1. Download this document:  
[L04-cognitive-dissonance-theory-activity.docx](#)
2. Answer the questions in the document
3. Upload the completed activity document here

### **Variations and Accommodations**

Follow guidance from local accommodation authorities. Please contact your instructor if any accommodations are necessary