9.8: Cognitive Dissonance

As a "normal" human being, we want to maintain our stasis and be comfortable. There are times, however, when we become aware of cognitions that disagree with our held beliefs, causing a feeling of uncertainty, or discomfort. How do we return to our feeling of comfort when we experience cognitions that are contradictory to our beliefs and disrupting our stasis?

A cognition has been understood to be both the process of understanding our environment and the end product of that process, a unit of awareness. Our environment bombards us with more stimuli than we can interpret. The few that we become aware of are known as cognitions. Leon Festinger developed his Theory of Cognitive Dissonance in “A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance” to explain how a person attempts to resolve the discomfort felt when they experience contradictory cognitions.

Leon Festinger argues that there are a total of three different, possible relationships between cognitions, which he refers to as being thoughts or ideas. Instead of calling the comfort state, stasis, he refers to it as being a state on “consonance.” Dissonance is an “unpleasant motivating state (a feeling) that encourages attitude change to achieve or restore consonance.”

- Change a cognition
- Add a new cognition
- Change the importance of the cognition

For example, you may like an occasional drink, or two or three. You are comfortable with your drinking. But then you become aware of how alcohol can harm your body from your liver to your heart. Your stasis is now disrupted and you need to resolve this discomfort. According to Festinger, you can do one of three things to return to your comfortable stasis:
**Change a cognition** This can be accomplished by either altering the new cognition or your old, comfortable cognition. The person could rationalize by saying the source of the disrupting information on alcohol was biased, or unreliable. Or as a last resort, the original cognition that drinking was fine should now be changed.

**Add a new cognition** This can occur where you read from another source that a glass of red wine a night is actually good for your health

**Change the importance of the cognition** This can occur when you realize you only drink on weekends so the health effects are really not that big a deal.

Although Dissonance Theory can suggest that a person will engage in one of these three actions, the theory does not predict which one.

If you are attempting to persuade another person, you need to first disrupt their stasis by providing cognitions that create dissonance. A person cannot be persuaded to change to a new stasis until they are made uncomfortable with their current stasis. A couple has been living together for a couple of years and now she wants to get married. He is very comfortable with his stasis of just living together. If she wants to persuade him to get married, she must first make him uncomfortable with their current relationship. Then he will be open to a change in the relationship.

But even when we experience discomfort in our current situation, we will still fight to not change. Researcher Robert Abelson suggests that we resist a challenge to our stasis, by following one of four methods of reducing an inconsistency with our comfortable stasis.

“Inconsistency is not always resolved by bringing the maverick beliefs, attitudes, or values into line. At least four other strategies for reducing inconsistency have been distinguished: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence.”

- **Deny** one of the dissonant cognitions. Here a person makes the determination the cognition is wrong. “She is the spokesperson for that company, so you can’t believe anything she says.”
- **Bolster** an attitude they want to believe by looking for sources that support beliefs they want to maintain. After becoming aware of a new cognition, a person can now easily find an internet source that agrees with his original belief.
- **Differentiate** one of the cognitions by separating it into different paths, where one of the paths may contain the dissonant idea, but the other path has a more consonant idea. “Sure, she may be telling lies, but she is also trying to save her children’s feelings.”
- **Transcendence** is the opposite of differentiate and occurs when the dissonant parts are put together and lead to an important whole. “Sure, he is lying on the school form and pretending to live in the proper district, but he really wants to get his daughter into a better school.”

Convincing ourselves that we should maintain our stasis in the face of new information can also be referred to as rationalization. Based on the work theory of belief-dilemma resolution by Robert Abelson, Ware and Linkugel (1973) used the same four key methods to explain how we excuse ourselves and rationalize that we are not to blame for some action we have taken.

**Denial:** “I didn't do it.” Denial is the simplest of methods of excusing oneself and avoiding punishment. This is a method...
of coping with cognitive dissonance felt when our actions are in contradiction with our values. It does, however, require plausibility. You cannot deny something where there were multiple witnesses, although some do try.

**Bolstering**: “I'm a nice person.” I can't have done it. The word ‘bolstering’ means propping something up. When defending an attack, particularly when it appears to be personal, then many feel the need to bolster their character and reputation.

**Differentiation**: Distancing oneself. Show that you are not really connected with what went on. Distance yourself from the event. Indicate that it had nothing to do with you and that you had no knowledge of it.

**Transcendence**: A higher purpose when faced with an accusation, transcendence is a method of connecting the accused action with a greater meaning, thereby excusing the act as legitimate on a more important stage…. Transcendence is a method of reframing, not so much changing the facts, but changing their meaning by looking at things in new ways.⁷

As you can see from these previous theories, we are not naturally, open minded critical thinkers. Our natural state is to create a comfortable stasis and do our best to maintain that comfortable position. Instead of taking in new information and testing it to see if there is enough validity to it to change our minds, our natural tendency is to fight this new information, using a variety of strategies so we can maintain our comfort zone. This has led me to observe that “People would rather be comfortably wrong than uncomfortably right.”

**Persuasive Strategies**

There are, as you might guess, a variety of approaches that describes how we can change the stasis of others and be more aware of how others will try to change us. The first step is to analyze your audience.

---

**Reference**