

Naturally discordant

Living in accordance with your values is an important way of finding psychological meaning – and part of this is recognising when your behaviour diverges from your beliefs, then working out what you want to happen next

Have you ever firmly believed one thing but then done another and ended up feeling uncomfortable as you contemplated the discrepancy between your beliefs and your actions? Perhaps you are firmly committed to exercise and fitness, but have found it difficult to act on these beliefs because of tiredness and started to feel upset with yourself. Maybe you are an environmentalist and invested in acting on climate change, but also like to travel and are uncomfortable with reconciling your beliefs about a greener world with the reality of emissions caused by air travel. Or you might see yourself as a kind and tolerant person, but have moments where you become irritable and annoyed at people and then feel guilty.

Perfectly normal

These are all common experiences. Most people have had times when they've acted in ways that feel opposed to their core beliefs and values. It's normal to feel uncomfortable, and even distressed, if you realise you're behaving in ways that do not reflect your thoughts and beliefs. This discomfort has a name – it's called cognitive dissonance.

Internal inconsistencies

Derived from social-psychology literature, the term is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as: 'The state of having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs or attitudes, especially as relating to behavioural decisions and attitude change.' It was first noted in the 1950s, by American social psychologist Leon Festinger, who saw it as a powerful cognitive force within people that supports their drive toward internal consistency.

Human beings like behavioural and attitudinal consistency (that is, consistency in what they believe and how they act), so holding beliefs and attitudes that are contradictory – such as believing climate change is important, but also having personal beliefs around the relevance of travel as a goal – can

cause psychological discomfort. Equally, believing one thing and acting in a way opposed to this belief can elicit the same discomfort, such as holding a strong interest in health and fitness but neglecting to exercise. Experiencing strong cognitive dissonance can lead to feelings of anxiety, shame, guilt, regret, sadness or stress – as the brain tries to bridge the gap.

Managing the tension

When cognitive dissonance is experienced, the brain tends to attempt to narrow the gap between attitudes and behaviours to reduce or eliminate the tension felt. Most people dislike experiencing difficult emotions, and the distress caused by cognitive dissonance is no different. A person might try to remove this distress in a range of ways. These include rejecting certain information outright (for example, stating that air travel doesn't contribute to climate change, as a way of avoiding guilt), engaging in denial, or explaining away or rationalising actions that are discrepant with beliefs. Someone might, for example, blame a friend or family member for provoking them to respond with anger, to explain why they acted with aggression or irritability when they usually try to treat people with kindness and empathy. It's a common and mostly unconscious process to attempt to push away discomfort or to explain it in a way that makes it more palatable and the actions socially acceptable.

Recognising the signal

It's helpful to consider using cognitive dissonance as a source of information about the values you hold instead of attempting to reduce it to feel comfortable again. Sometimes, discomfort can act as a signal to think about and reflect on the things that truly matter. It's common for beliefs and attitudes to change with time, experience and personal growth and development, so it can be helpful to learn to use cognitive dissonance as an





opportunity to stop and reflect on attitudes and values. This is more likely to allow change to emerge.

When you notice any dissonance between your thoughts and behaviours it can be helpful to ask yourself several questions:

- *What am I feeling right now?*
- *Do I hold a strong belief or value about this situation? Am I acting in a way that aligns with these beliefs?*
- *Do I hold beliefs that are opposed to each other? Which belief do I hold more strongly?*
- *Which of my behaviours diverges from the beliefs/values I hold?*
- *Do I think I need to change my beliefs, or my behaviours?*

The first step to utilising cognitive dissonance to help better understand personal values and attitudes is to draw your awareness to it and build insight into your own psychological functioning. Once you recognise you are experiencing cognitive dissonance, consider the ways in which you might be acting quickly to try to rationalise it or reduce it. Simply asking yourself if you are trying to deny essential parts of your experience – or if you are attempting to rationalise or minimise your actions in some way – can be helpful.

It's important to ask these questions with self-compassion, without blame and to recognise that attempting to reduce psychological discomfort and acting in ways that are opposed to your values is common. By drawing compassionate attention to the ways in which you might be attempting to reduce dissonance, it's possible to start to build better awareness of your own psychological processes and to make more careful, considered and conscious choices.

Learning to understand and pay attention to the discomfort of cognitive dissonance can be a useful psychological skill. In addition, using this process as a marker to determine and become more conscious about whether you're living in ways aligned with your beliefs could lead to a broader and more meaningful understanding of life.

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BEYOND THE TENSION

If you're experiencing difficulties with cognitive dissonance, it might be helpful to reflect on your beliefs and values. This process is easier if you have a good sense of your values and can tolerate the discomfort associated with noticing when you're living in a non-values aligned way. Instead of allowing yourself to minimise your actions or deny the dissonance, try to use it as a tool to bring your actions more in line with those deeper beliefs. This might involve some or all of the following

- **A change of behaviour.** You might reflect on your actions and decide they are too far removed from your values for comfort and opt to amend some of your behaviours. It's important to be gentle with yourself and to recognise that it's common for everyone to find themselves in this position. It might be helpful to consider one to two realistic and small changes that can be made to get your actions and values more closely aligned. You could, for example, replace 30 minutes of social-media time with a short walk or run if you think your behaviour has moved too far away from your values around health and fitness.
- **A change of values.** Personal reflection might reveal that your values and beliefs have evolved and that your actions are acceptable. Instead, it's those values that need to be tweaked. This is common as people move through the various stages of life. In childhood and teenage years, for example, friendship and being a good pal are often dominant, but these might become secondary to career and family-oriented values later on.
- **A change of behaviour and values.** Sometimes, you might decide there's a need for more flexibility in both areas and that both require amending to bring them into better alignment. You might realise, for example, that your values were too rigid, which made it difficult to act in a values-aligned manner.

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