

# The Role of Cognitive Dissonance in the Pandemic

The minute we make any decision—I *think COVID-19 is serious; no, I'm sure it is a hoax*—we begin to justify the wisdom of our choice and find reasons to dismiss the alternative.

**Elliot Aronson and Carol Tavis** The Atlantic JULY 12, 2020

Members of Heaven's Gate, a religious cult, believed that as the Hale-Bopp comet passed by Earth in 1997, a spaceship would be traveling in its wake—ready to take true believers aboard. Several members of the group bought an expensive, high-powered telescope so that they might get a clearer view of the comet. They quickly brought it back and asked for a refund. When the manager asked why, they complained that the telescope was defective, that it didn't show the spaceship following the comet. A short time later, believing that they would be rescued once they had shed their “earthly containers” (their bodies), all 39 members killed themselves.

Heaven's Gate followers had a tragically misguided conviction, but it is an example, albeit extreme, of cognitive dissonance, the motivational mechanism that underlies the reluctance to admit mistakes or accept scientific findings—even when those findings can save our lives. This dynamic is playing out during the pandemic among the many people who refuse to wear masks or practice social distancing. Human beings are deeply unwilling to change their minds. And when the facts clash with their preexisting convictions, some people would sooner jeopardize their health and everyone else's than accept new information or admit to being wrong.

*Cognitive dissonance*, coined by Leon Festinger in the 1950s, describes the discomfort people feel when two cognitions, or a cognition and a behavior, contradict each other. *I smoke* is dissonant with the knowledge that *Smoking can kill me*. To reduce that dissonance, the smoker must either quit—or justify smoking (“It keeps me thin, and being overweight is a health risk too, you know”). At its core, Festinger's theory is about how people strive to make sense out of contradictory ideas and lead lives that are, at least in their own minds, consistent and meaningful.

One of us (Aronson), who was a protégé of Festinger in the mid-'50s, advanced cognitive-dissonance theory by demonstrating the powerful, yet nonobvious, role it plays when the concept of self is involved. Dissonance is most painful when evidence strikes at the heart of how we see ourselves—when it threatens our belief that we are kind, ethical, competent, or smart. The minute we make any decision—I'll *buy this car; I will vote for this candidate; I think COVID-19 is serious; no, I'm sure it is a hoax*—we will begin to justify the wisdom of our choice and find reasons to dismiss the alternative. Before long, any ambivalence we might have felt at the time of the original decision will have morphed into certainty. As people justify each step taken after the original decision, they will find it harder to admit they were wrong at the outset. Especially when the end result proves self-defeating, wrongheaded, or harmful.

The theory inspired more than 3,000 experiments that have transformed psychologists' understanding of how the human mind works. One of Aronson's most famous experiments showed that people who had to go through an unpleasant, embarrassing process in order to be admitted to a discussion group (designed to consist of boring, pompous participants) later reported liking that group far better than those who were allowed to join after putting in little or no effort. Going through hell and high water to attain something that turns out to be boring, vexatious, or a waste of time creates dissonance: *I'm smart, so how did I end up in this stupid group?* To reduce that dissonance, participants unconsciously focused on whatever might be good or interesting about the group and blinded themselves to its prominent negatives. The people who did not work hard to get into the group could more easily see the truth—how boring it was. Because they had very little investment in joining, they had very little dissonance to reduce.

The term *cognitive dissonance* has since escaped the laboratory and is found everywhere—from op-eds and movie reviews to humor columns (as in *The New Yorker*’s “Cognitive Dissonances I’m Comfortable With”). But few people fully appreciate the mechanism’s enormous motivational power—and the lengths people go to in order to reduce its discomfort.

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For example, when people feel a strong connection to a political party, leader, ideology, or belief, they are more likely to let that allegiance do their thinking for them and distort or ignore the evidence that challenges those loyalties. The social psychologist Lee Ross, in laboratory experiments designed to find ways to reduce the bitter conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, took peace proposals created by Israeli negotiators, labeled them as Palestinian proposals, and asked Israeli citizens to judge them. “The Israelis liked the Palestinian proposal attributed to Israel more than they liked the Israeli proposal attributed to the Palestinians,” he told us. “If your own proposal isn’t going to be attractive to you when it comes from the other side, what chance is there that the *other* side’s proposal is going to be attractive when it actually comes from the other side?”

Because of the intense polarization in our country, a great many Americans now see the life-and-death decisions of the coronavirus as political choices rather than medical ones. In the absence of a unifying narrative and competent national leadership, Americans have to choose whom to believe as they make decisions about how to live: the scientists and the public-health experts, whose advice will necessarily change as they learn more about the virus, treatment, and risks? Or President Donald Trump and his acolytes, who suggest that masks and social distancing are unnecessary or “optional”?

The cognition *I want to go back to work* or *I want to go to my favorite bar to hang out with my friends* is dissonant with any information that suggests these actions might be dangerous—if not to individuals themselves, then to others with whom they interact.

How to resolve this dissonance? People could avoid the crowds, parties, and bars and wear a mask. Or they could jump back into their former ways. But to preserve their belief that they are smart and competent and would never do anything foolish to risk their lives, they will need some self-justifications: Claim that masks impair their breathing, deny that the pandemic is serious, or protest that their “freedom” to do what they want is paramount. “You’re removing our freedoms and stomping on our constitutional rights by these Communist-dictatorship orders,” a woman at a Palm Beach County commissioners’ hearing said. “Masks are literally killing people,” said another. South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem, referring to masks and any other government interventions, said, “More freedom, not more government, is the answer.” Vice President Mike Pence added his own justification for encouraging people to gather in unsafe crowds for a Trump rally: “The right to peacefully assemble is enshrined in the First Amendment of the Constitution.”

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Today, as we confront the many unknowns of the coronavirus pandemic, all of us are facing desperately difficult decisions. *When is it safe to get back to work? When can I reopen my business? When can I see friends and co-workers, start a new love affair, travel? What level of risk am I prepared to tolerate?* The way we answer these questions has momentous implications for our health as individuals and for the health of our communities. Even more important, and far less obvious, is that because of the unconscious motivation to reduce dissonance, the way we answer these questions has repercussions for how we behave *after* making our initial decision. Will we be flexible, or will we keep reducing dissonance by insisting that our earliest decisions were right?

Although it’s difficult, changing our minds is not impossible. The challenge is to find a way to live with uncertainty, make the most informed decisions we can, and modify them when the scientific evidence dictates—as our leading researchers are already doing. Admitting we were wrong requires some

self-reflection—which involves living with the dissonance for a while rather than jumping immediately to a self-justification.

Understanding how dissonance operates reveals a few practical lessons for overcoming it, starting by examining the two dissonant cognitions and keeping them separate. We call this the “Shimon Peres solution.” Peres, Israel’s former prime minister, was angered by his friend Ronald Reagan’s disastrous official visit to a cemetery in Bitburg, Germany, where members of the Waffen SS were buried. When asked how he felt about Reagan’s decision to go there, Peres could have reduced dissonance in one of the two most common ways: thrown out the friendship or minimized the seriousness of the friend’s action. He did neither. “When a friend makes a mistake,” he said, “the friend remains a friend, and the mistake remains a mistake.” Peres’s message conveys the importance of staying with the dissonance, avoiding easy knee-jerk responses, and asking ourselves, *Why am I believing this? Why am I behaving this way? Have I thought it through or am I simply taking a short cut, following the party line, or justifying the effort I put in to join the group?*

Dissonance theory also teaches us why changing your brother-in-law’s political opinions is so hard, if not impossible—especially if he has thrown time, money, effort, and his vote at them. (He can’t change yours either, can he?) But if you want to try, don’t say the equivalent of “What are you *thinking* by not wearing a mask?” That message implies “How could you be so *stupid*?” and will immediately create dissonance (*I’m smart* versus *You say I’m doing something stupid*), making him almost certainly respond with defensiveness and a hardening of the belief (*I was thinking how smart I am, that’s what, and masks are useless anyway*). However, your brother-in-law may be more amenable to messages from others who share his party loyalty but who have changed their mind, such as the growing number of prominent Republicans now wearing masks. Senator Lamar Alexander from Tennessee said, “Unfortunately, this simple, lifesaving practice has become part of a political debate that says: If you’re for Trump, you don’t wear a mask; if you’re against Trump, you do... The stakes are much too high for that.”

This nasty, mysterious virus will require us all to change our minds as scientists learn more, and we may have to give up some practices and beliefs about it that we now feel sure of. The alternative will be to double down, ignore the error, and wait, as Trump is waiting, for the “miracle” of the virus disappearing.

**ELLIOT ARONSON AND CAROL TAVRIS** *are social psychologists. Their book, Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts, has just been released by Mariner in an updated edition.*