

**One explanation for Willy Loman's state of mind:**

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## Cognitive Dissonance

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### Description

This is the feeling of uncomfortable tension which comes from holding two conflicting thoughts in the mind at the same time.

Dissonance increases with:

- The importance of the subject to us.
- How strongly the dissonant thoughts conflict.
- Our inability to rationalize and explain away the conflict.

Dissonance is often strong when we believe something about ourselves and then do something against that belief. If I believe I am good but do something bad, then the discomfort I feel as a result is cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance is a very powerful motivator which will often lead us to change one or other of the conflicting belief or action. The discomfort often feels like a tension between the two opposing thoughts. To release the tension we can take one of three actions:

- Change our behavior.
- Justify our behavior by changing the conflicting cognition.
- Justify our behavior by adding new cognitions.

Dissonance is most powerful when it is about our self-image. Feelings of foolishness, immorality and so on (including internal projections during decision-making) are dissonance in action.

If an action has been completed and cannot be undone, then the after-the-fact dissonance compels us to change our beliefs. If beliefs are moved, then the dissonance appears during decision-making, forcing us to take actions we would not have taken before.

Cognitive dissonance appears in virtually all evaluations and decisions and is the central mechanism by which we experience new differences in the world. When we see other people behave differently to our images of them, when we hold any conflicting thoughts, we experience dissonance.

Dissonance increases with the importance and impact of the decision, along with the difficulty of reversing it. Discomfort about making the wrong choice of car is bigger than when choosing a lamp.

Note: [Self-Perception Theory](#) gives an alternative view.

### Research

Festinger first developed this theory in the 1950s to explain how members of a cult who were persuaded by their leader, a certain Mrs Keech, that the earth was going to be destroyed on 21st December and that they alone were going to be rescued by aliens, actually *increased* their commitment to the cult when this did not happen (Festinger

himself had infiltrated the cult, and would have been very surprised to meet little green men). The dissonance of the thought of being so stupid was so great that instead they revised their beliefs to meet with obvious facts: that the aliens had, through their concern for the cult, saved the world instead.

In a more mundane experiment, Festinger and Carlsmith got students to lie about a boring task. Those who were paid \$1 for the task felt uncomfortable lying.

### **Example**

Smokers find all kinds of reasons to explain away their unhealthy habit. The alternative is to feel a great deal of dissonance.

### **So what?**

#### **Using it**

Cognitive dissonance is central to many forms of persuasion to change beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors. The tension can be injected suddenly or allowed to build up over time. People can be moved in many small jumps or one large one.

#### **Defending**

When you start feeling uncomfortable, stop and see if you can find the inner conflict. Then notice how that came about. If it was somebody else who put that conflict there, you can decide not to play any more with them.

### **See also**

[Consistency Theory](#), [Counter-Attitudinal Advocacy](#), [External Justification](#), [Insufficient Punishment](#), [Post-Decision Dissonance](#), [Self-Perception Theory](#)

### **References**

[Festinger \(1957\)](#), [Festinger and Carlsmith \(1959\)](#)