

Traumatic Cognitive Dissonance

WHEN CARE AND HARM COME FROM THE SAME PERSON

Drawing on Leon Festinger (1957), Donald Dutton & Susan Painter (1981, 1993) and Jennifer Freyd (1996)

The painful confusion of holding two conflicting realities about someone important — "they care for me" and "they hurt me". A descriptive term, not a formal diagnosis, drawing on psychological research on cognitive dissonance, attachment and betrayal.

WHEN THE HEART HOLDS TWO TRUTHS

"They care about me."
WARMTH · HOPE · GOOD TIMES

The mind longs to hold onto this...



"They hurt me."
HARM · FEAR · HURT

...so it may soften this

ONE RELATIONSHIP · TWO REALITIES · A PAINFUL DIVIDE

To ease the dissonance, the mind may reach for...

Minimising

"It wasn't that bad."

Self-blame

"I must have caused it."

Justifying

"They're just stressed."

Holding the good

"But remember how kind they can be."

Self-doubt

"Maybe I'm remembering it wrong."

Three Ideas That Explain It

The research behind the experience

LEON FESTINGER · 1957

Cognitive Dissonance

Conflicting beliefs create discomfort we are driven to reduce — often by reinterpreting events rather than changing the situation.



DUTTON & PAINTER · 1981, 1993

Traumatic Bonding

Strong emotional attachment can sometimes persist in relationships characterised by repeated harm and periods of warmth or reconciliation.



JENNIFER FREYD · 1996

Betrayal Blindness

Freyd proposed that when a person depends on someone who betrays them, awareness of the betrayal may be affected by the need to preserve an important relationship.



How It Can Feel

Common experiences — none of them mean you are to blame

● **Confusion** and a sense of mental "fog"

● **Questioning** your own memory or perception

● **Defending** the person to others

● **Feeling responsible** for their behaviour

● **Longing** for them even after being hurt

● **Anger** quickly followed by guilt

● **Leaving and returning** more than once

● **Shame** about staying or still caring

Understanding and Finding Clarity

Making sense of it with compassion

WHY IT MAKES SENSE

A Protective Response

We are wired for attachment. When someone we love is also a source of harm, the mind works hard to preserve the bond — through doubt, hope and self-blame. These responses can be understandable attempts to make sense of, or cope with, a difficult relational bind.

Both can be true: they may have cared — and what happened still hurt.

WAYS TO FIND CLARITY

Gentle Steps Toward Your Own Reality

- 1 **Name both truths** — without one cancelling the other.
- 2 **If helpful, keep a private record** of specific events and conversations.
- 3 **Reality-check** with trusted others.
- 4 **Notice the pattern** of harm and warmth, not just moments.
- 5 **Be compassionate** and seek trauma-informed support.

Reflection

For personal reflection or to explore in therapy

01

WHAT TWO REALITIES AM I TRYING TO HOLD AT ONCE?

02

WHAT DO I TELL MYSELF TO MAKE THE HARM FEEL SMALLER?

03

WHAT WOULD I SAY TO A FRIEND IN MY SITUATION?



If you are being harmed or feel unsafe, please reach out to local emergency services or a domestic abuse support service. You deserve safety and support.

SOURCES

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