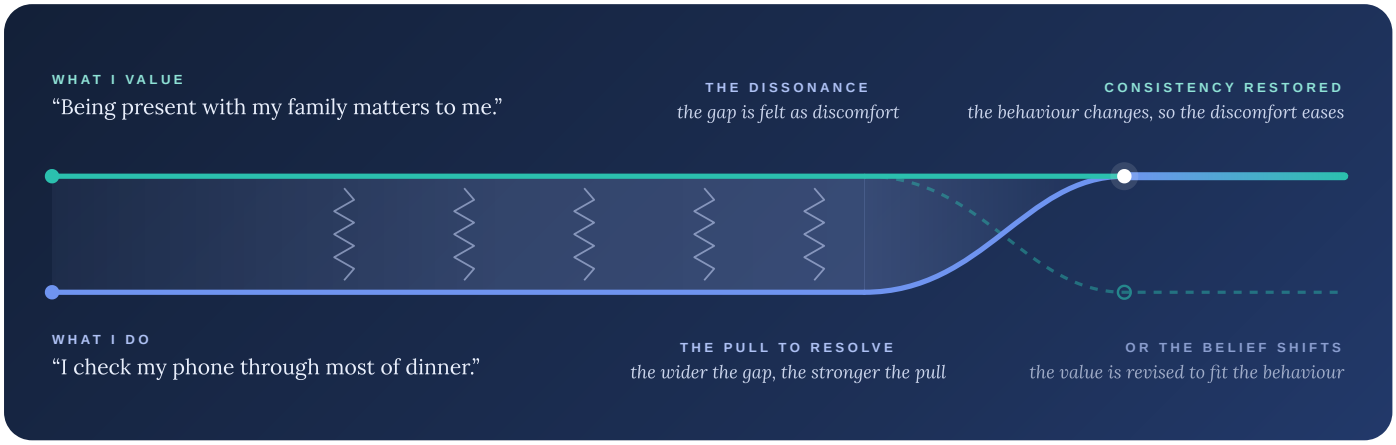
Cognitive Dissonance

BELIEFS & BEHAVIOUR

When what we value and what we do are out of step

Cognitive dissonance is the discomfort that can arise when two of our thoughts are inconsistent, often a value we hold and something we have done (Festinger, 1957). It is a common, normal experience. The discomfort tends to motivate us to reduce the inconsistency, and how we do that can either bring our behaviour closer to our values or shift our thinking away from them.



01 How dissonance works

three parts, often within seconds

1 Two inconsistent thoughts

A value and a behaviour, or two beliefs, that do not fit together. The more important both are to us, the stronger the dissonance tends to be (Festinger, 1957).

2 Psychological discomfort

Research describes it as feeling uneasy and bothered, distinct from general low mood. It tends to ease once the inconsistency is resolved (Elliot & Devine, 1994).

3 A drive to reduce it

People are motivated to restore consistency, often quickly and without noticing which strategy they have used.

02 Four ways people reduce dissonance

using the same example

STRATEGY A

Change the behaviour



“Phone in another room during dinner, for the next month.”

reduces discomfort ●●●
consistent with values ●●●

STRATEGY B

Change the belief



“Being present at dinner isn’t really that important.”

reduces discomfort ●●●
consistent with values ●○○

STRATEGY C

Add a justification



“Everyone checks their phone these days.”

reduces discomfort ●●○
consistent with values ●○○

STRATEGY D

Reduce its importance



“It’s only a few minutes here and there.”

reduces discomfort ●●○
consistent with values ●○○

Not every change in belief is avoidance. If a belief is inaccurate or overly rigid (for example, “I should never look at my phone when I’m with my family”), revising it can be reasonable. Playing down the importance of an inconsistency is a well-documented strategy (Simon et al., 1995). The useful question is whether the new belief is more accurate, or only more comfortable.

03 The one-dollar study

Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959

A CLASSIC EXPERIMENT

Less external justification, more attitude change

Students completed an hour of dull, repetitive tasks, then were paid either $1 or $20 to tell the next participant the tasks were enjoyable. Those paid $1 later rated the tasks as more enjoyable than those paid $20. One explanation is that, with little external reason for what they had said, their attitude shifted towards their behaviour.

It was a small study (20 people per group), and alternative explanations have been debated since, but it shaped decades of research.



Average rating of how enjoyable the tasks were, from −5 to +5

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Dissonance is a common, motivating state, not a sign that something is wrong with us. The strategies that reduce discomfort fastest, such as justifying or minimising, do not always lead to behaviour that fits our values. In one study, making people aware of the gap between what they advocated and what they did increased the likelihood of behaviour change (Stone et al., 1994). The next page works through one situation of your own.

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04 The value and the behaviour

one situation that feels inconsistent

WHAT I VALUE OR BELIEVE

The value

what matters to me in this situation

the inconsistency

WHAT I DID, OR KEEP DOING

The behaviour

describe it factually: what, when, how often

How strong is the discomfort? *none* 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 *extreme*

05 How I have been reducing it

tick any that apply

- ○ "Everyone does it"
- ○ "Just this once"
- ○ "I had no choice"
- ○ "It doesn't really matter"
- ○ "I'll deal with it later"
- ○ Avoiding thinking about it
- ○ Deciding it was never that important
- ○ Changing the behaviour
- ○

06 What the discomfort indicates

dissonance often points to something important

What does this discomfort tell me about what matters to me?
the value underneath it

If I acted consistently with this value, what would I be doing differently?
specific and observable

07 Choosing a strategy

based on my values, not only on quick relief

STRATEGY	WHAT IT WOULD LOOK LIKE FOR ME	FITS MY VALUES
Change the behaviour *bring the behaviour in line with the value*		○○○○○
Revise an inaccurate belief *only if the evidence supports the change*		○○○○○
Add accurate context *explains the behaviour without excusing it*		○○○○○
Tolerate the discomfort *while I plan a change, rather than rushing to justify*		○○○○○

08 A balanced statement and a plan

both parts, stated accurately

THE VALUE AND THE BEHAVIOUR

An accurate summary

For example: "Being present with my family matters to me, and I have been checking my phone through most dinners. Both are true. Work pressure is real, but it does not change what I value. My plan: phone in another room during weeknight dinners for four weeks, then a review at the end of the month."

Specific change

How I will track it

Likely obstacle, and my plan for it

Start date

Review date

Discomfort now, 0–10

If the behaviour is difficult to change on your own, or the discomfort persists, consider talking with your GP or a psychologist.

SOURCES

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