

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

CORE CONCEPT

Cognitive dissonance is the psychological discomfort experienced when holding contradictory beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors. This aversive state motivates people to reduce inconsistency through changing attitudes, modifying behaviors, or adding new rationalizations. The drive for internal consistency shapes decision-making, self-justification, and attitude change.

FOUR KEY PROPOSITIONS

1. Dissonance is Aversive

- Creates psychological discomfort (tension, anxiety, guilt)
- Functions like hunger or thirst—motivates action
- Intensity varies with magnitude of inconsistency

2. Magnitude of Dissonance

- Depends on importance of cognitions (core beliefs vs. trivial)
- Ratio of dissonant to consonant cognitions matters
- Self-relevant inconsistencies create strongest dissonance

3. Dissonance Reduction

- Change behavior, change attitude, or add new cognitions
- People choose path of least resistance

4. Active Avoidance

- Avoid information that increases dissonance

STRATEGIES TO REDUCE DISSONANCE

Change Behavior

Align actions with beliefs

Example: Quit smoking to match health beliefs

Most direct but often hardest

Change Attitudes

Modify beliefs to match behavior

Example: "Smoking isn't that dangerous"

Often unconscious

Add New Cognitions

Rationalize with new thoughts

Example: "Everyone has vices," "Life is short"

Easiest strategy

Denial & Avoidance

Dismiss or avoid dissonant info

Example: Avoid health warnings, selective news exposure

Protective but limits learning

WHEN DISSONANCE IS STRONGEST

Situational Factors:

- High perceived choice/personal responsibility
- Low external justification for behavior
- Public commitment (harder to deny)
- Irrevocable decisions (can't be undone)
- High effort invested (sunk cost)

Individual Differences:

- Need for consistency varies by person and culture
- Stronger in individualistic (Western) cultures