CUADERNO DE IDEAS

Cognitive Dissonance: Why We Sometimes Justify

Psicología y comportamiento · 05/11/2026 · Por Camilo Calderón

Have you ever defended a decision even though you knew it was not the best one? Cognitive dissonance explains how we try to reduce conflict among our beliefs, thoughts, and actions. Discover how this phenomenon works in everyday life.

Cognitive Dissonance: Why We Sometimes Justify Choices We Know Are Not Good for Us

Imagine buying a fairly expensive product. Before purchasing it, you knew it was not necessary and that your budget was tight. Yet after buying it, you start looking for reasons to convince yourself it was a good decision.

â€œI deserved it,â€? â€œit was on sale,â€? â€œI will probably need it,â€? or â€œit was not that much money.â€?

Does that sound familiar?

Situations like this reveal something interesting about our behavior: it is not always easy to accept that our decisions can conflict with what we think, believe, or consider right.

Psychology has a concept that helps explain this phenomenon: cognitive dissonance.

It is a theory about the discomfort we may experience when we hold contradictory ideas, beliefs, or attitudes, or when our actions do not match what we think.

Most interestingly, to reduce that discomfort, we sometimes change how we interpret what happened instead of changing our behavior.

1. What Is Cognitive Dissonance?

Cognitive dissonance is a concept developed by psychologist Leon Festinger and formally presented in his 1957 book A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance.

The theory proposes that people seek some consistency among their cognitions: thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge about ourselves and the world.

When two of these elements contradict one another, we may experience psychological tension.

For example:

You know smoking has health risks, but you continue to smoke.

You believe saving money matters, but you make impulse purchases.

You believe honesty is essential, but you hide information to avoid a consequence.

You want to take care of your diet, but keep habits that conflict with that goal.

In these situations, what you think and what you do are not aligned.

This contradiction does not create the same level of discomfort for everyone. It depends on factors such as the importance of each belief, the circumstances, and whether the behavior can be changed.

Cognitive dissonance occurs when we perceive an incompatibility among important parts of how we think or act.

2. Why Do We Try to Justify Our Decisions?

One central idea in this theory is that people may try to reduce dissonance by changing their thoughts or their behavior.

Consider someone who has just bought a very expensive phone.

Before buying it, they knew their previous device still worked perfectly and they had other financial commitments.

After the purchase, they start thinking:

â€œThe camera is much better.â€?

â€œThis phone will last me for many years.â€?

â€œIt was an opportunity I could not pass up.â€?

â€œI have worked hard, and I deserve a treat too.â€?

Some of these reasons may be completely valid. The issue is not recognizing the benefits of a purchase, but using arguments to avoid acknowledging a contradiction that feels uncomfortable.

Instead of accepting that the decision may have been impulsive, the person may focus only on its positive aspects.

This process can help restore a sense of internal consistency.

It does not mean that all our justifications are conscious or that we are always trying to deceive ourselves. Often, we reinterpret situations without realizing it.

3. The Festinger and Carlsmith Experiment: Why Do We Justify What We Do?

One classic experiment related to this theory was published in 1959 by Leon Festinger and James M. Carlsmith.

In the study, some participants had to perform repetitive and uninteresting tasks.

Afterward, they were asked to describe the activity to another person as if it had been enjoyable.

Some participants were offered one dollar to make that statement, while others were offered twenty dollars.

The researchers later assessed how participants described their experience.

The best-known result was that participants who received one dollar tended to rate the activity as more interesting than those who received twenty dollars.

How is this result interpreted?

The researchers proposed that, for those who received a small reward, it could be harder to justify saying the activity was enjoyable through the financial incentive. Under certain conditions, changing their evaluation of the task could help reduce the contradiction.

By contrast, those who received twenty dollars had a more obvious external reason for making that statement.

This experiment became one of the classic studies of cognitive dissonance.

It also reminds us of something important: the explanations we give for our own actions are not always as simple as they seem.

4. How Does Cognitive Dissonance Appear in Everyday Life?

This phenomenon can be observed in different areas of our lives.

In Personal Relationships

Imagine someone who considers respect and trust essential in a relationship but repeatedly tolerates behavior that conflicts with those values.

To reduce the conflict, they might think:

â€œThey do not really mean any harm.â€?

â€œEvery couple has problems.â€?

â€œThings will probably change.â€?

These explanations do not prove by themselves that cognitive dissonance is present, but they illustrate how we may reinterpret situations to maintain some consistency between our beliefs and decisions.

In Consumer Choices

We buy a product, subscription, or service and later discover that it is not as useful as we expected.

Instead of admitting we made a mistake, we may look for arguments to defend the purchase.

This may happen especially when we spent a significant amount of money or a lot of time choosing.

In Personal Habits

We know that sleeping well, being physically active, or eating a balanced diet can benefit our well-being.

However, we do not always act in line with that knowledge.

Sometimes we look for explanations that help us live with the contradiction:

â€œI will start next week.â€?

â€œToday has been far too complicated.â€?

â€œIt is fine just this once.â€?

It is important to clarify that not every difference between what we know and what we do involves cognitive dissonance. Fatigue, financial limits, our environment, and other factors may also play a part.

In Professional Decisions

Someone may invest a great deal of time and effort in a project that is not getting good results.

Even when signs suggest the strategy should change, the person may keep defending the original decision because admitting it needs to change feels uncomfortable.

The greater the emotional, financial, or personal investment, the harder it can be to review some decisions.

5. How Is Cognitive Dissonance Related to Thinking Biases?

Cognitive dissonance and cognitive biases are related concepts, but they do not mean the same thing.

Dissonance describes a conflict among cognitions and the possible motivation to reduce it.

Cognitive biases are systematic patterns that can influence how we process information, interpret situations, and make decisions.

For example, confirmation bias can lead us to pay more attention to information that supports our existing beliefs.

Imagine you are convinced that an investment was an excellent decision. Even when data appears that challenges this idea, you mainly seek opinions and arguments that confirm your position.

This behavior can help maintain a belief and make it harder to reconsider a decision.

However, the concepts should not be confused: confirmation bias is not the same as cognitive dissonance, although both can play a part in the same situation.

6. How Can We Recognize Cognitive Dissonance?

Recognizing it does not mean analyzing every thought or constantly questioning all our decisions.

It means developing a greater ability to observe our own justifications.

You can start with a few questions:

Does what I am doing match what I consider important?

If there is a difference, try to identify it without immediately judging yourself.

Am I looking for arguments to understand the situation or only to defend my decision?

This question can help distinguish a balanced evaluation from selective justification.

What information am I avoiding?

Sometimes we pay more attention to facts that support our decisions and set aside those that could challenge them.

What would have to happen for me to change my mind?

If no evidence seems sufficient to change your position, it may be worth asking yourself why.

These questions are not a psychological test and cannot diagnose a phenomenon by themselves. They are reflection exercises that may help you notice how you form explanations.

7. How Can We Handle These Contradictions Better?

It is not always possible to avoid conflicts between our beliefs and actions. We are people with needs, limits, emotions, and changing circumstances.

However, we can develop strategies to face these situations more thoughtfully.

Recognize the Contradiction

The first step is to notice the gap between what you think and what you are doing.

You do not need to punish yourself for it. Recognizing an inconsistency is an opportunity to better understand your decisions.

Evaluate the Situation Honestly

Try to consider both the information that supports your decision and the information that challenges it.

This does not mean automatically assuming you were wrong; it means allowing yourself to review the facts.

Identify What You Can Change

In some situations, you can change your behavior. In others, you may need to reconsider an expectation, accept a limitation, or set a more realistic goal.

The right response depends on the circumstances.

Learn to Recognize Mistakes

Making a mistake does not mean all your previous decisions were bad.

Accepting that a choice was not the best one can help prevent a past decision from unnecessarily controlling future ones.

Align Your Actions With Your Values

If saving money, caring for your health, or maintaining respectful relationships matters to you, try to turn those values into concrete and achievable actions.

Consistency does not mean perfection. It means trying to make your decisions reflect what matters to you more closely over time.

8. One Last Thought: We Do Not Always Need to Be Right

Cognitive dissonance helps us understand something fundamental about human behavior: our decisions are not guided by logic alone.

Our emotions, experiences, expectations, and need to maintain a consistent self-image also influence us.

That is why it can sometimes feel easier to find an explanation that justifies a decision than to stop and recognize that we need to change direction.

The next time you find yourself defending a decision too insistently, ask yourself a simple question:

Am I defending this decision because it truly makes sense, or because it is hard to accept that I might have been wrong?

You do not always need to be right. Sometimes the best decision is to recognize that something did not go as expected and use that experience to act differently.

Conclusion

Cognitive dissonance helps us understand how people try to maintain some consistency among their beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors.

This phenomenon may appear in consumer choices, personal relationships, habits, and professional situations.

Learning to recognize it does not mean eliminating every contradiction from our lives. It means developing a greater ability to observe our decisions, question our justifications, and accept information that may not match what we expected.

Understanding how we think also means learning to recognize when our own explanations may be influencing what we see.

Sometimes, growth does not mean finding better arguments to defend our decisions; it means having the ability to reconsider them.

Psychology and education content for general audiences. Examples are illustrative and are not diagnoses or a substitute for professional evaluation.