



English Learning for Curious Minds



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Episode #131

Cognitive Dissonance

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[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about Cognitive Dissonance, the idea that you can believe one thing, but do something that is in complete **contradiction**¹ to your beliefs.

[00:00:34] We'll talk about what cognitive dissonance actually is, and about how and when the idea was first **proposed**².

¹ when two things are the complete opposite to one another

² suggested as something to consider



Cognitive Dissonance

[00:00:42] Then we'll then move on to talk about some of the actions that people take when they have cognitive dissonance, how they try to [overcome](#)³ these [contradictions](#)⁴.

[00:00:52] And we'll end by talking about what you can actually do about this, and how psychologists suggest people can get over this [inconsistency](#)⁵ between what they believe to be right, and what they actually do.

[00:01:06] This is actually a request from a member from France, a great guy called Thierry.

[00:01:11] So, Thierry, I hope you enjoy it.

[00:01:15] OK then, let's get started.

[00:01:18] I remember being told as a kid that our brains are [infinitely](#)⁶ more powerful than the most powerful computer in the world.

[00:01:26] There's probably a little bit of debate about whether that is still true, but the idea really [stuck with me](#)⁷.

³ get over, control

⁴ when two things are the complete opposite to one another

⁵ when two things contain ideas or arguments that do not agree with each other

⁶ very much

⁷ if something sticks with you, you remember it vividly



Cognitive Dissonance

[00:01:34] Our brains contain an average of 86 billion [neurons](#)⁸, and our capacity for [reasoned](#)⁹, independent thought is why we, humans, have evolved to be the most powerful species on the planet.

[00:01:48] But our brains aren't perfect.

[00:01:51] The imperfection we are talking about today is cognitive dissonance, the idea that we can know something, and behave in a way that is in complete [contradiction](#) to our knowledge.

[00:02:04] You might think that this sounds strange.

[00:02:08] Rational thinking means processing information and using that to make a rational, sensible decision.

[00:02:16] If you need to cross a road, you look to see whether a car is coming.

[00:02:21] If there is no car coming, you take on that information and choose to cross the road. If you see a car coming, you stay where you are, because, well, it would be [irrational](#)¹⁰ to walk into the road if you might be hit by a car.

⁸ the nerve cells that carry information in the brain

⁹ carefully thought and considered

¹⁰ not using clear thinking



Cognitive Dissonance

[00:02:36] Normally our brains are pretty good at processing this sort of information. Indeed, with the example of walking into the road, it's almost [subconscious](#)¹¹.

[00:02:46] You don't have to actively think every time you cross a road, you just look and the decision is taken almost in the background.

[00:02:54] But, it doesn't always work this way.

[00:02:57] Our brains can hold a piece of information about something, but we behave in a way that is in [contradiction](#) to this information.

[00:03:06] This is called cognitive dissonance.

[00:03:09] A classic example might be someone who knows that smoking is bad for them, that there is evidence that it causes all sorts of diseases, but they do it anyway.

[00:03:21] Or someone who knows that flying on aeroplanes is damaging to the environment and yet [jets off](#)¹² for weekends away twice a month.

[00:03:29] Or someone who is on a diet, and they decide to [treat themselves](#)¹³ to a large burger and chips just as a [treat](#)¹⁴, just this once.

¹¹ the part of your mind that remembers and processes information without you thinking

¹² travels on an aeroplane

¹³ rewards themselves (with something)

¹⁴ reward, something you give yourself because you have done something else



Cognitive Dissonance

[00:03:40] In all of these cases, the person acts in a way that is **contradictory**¹⁵ to knowledge that they believe to be true.

[00:03:48] Of course, people knowing one thing but behaving in a **contradictory** way is nothing new, but the **label**¹⁶ of cognitive dissonance, and the study of this particular behaviour was first **proposed** in 1957 by the American social psychologist Leon Festinger.

[00:04:08] Festinger observed this behaviour all around him, perhaps even in himself, and argued that human beings try to be as **consistent**¹⁷ as possible in their lives, but often find that there is **inconsistency**.

[00:04:25] This **inconsistency**, Festinger argued, often causes physical **discomfort**¹⁸, it often makes you feel physically ill when you do it.

[00:04:35] Until relatively recently I needed to fly very often for work.

[00:04:39] I would fly from Malta to London twice a month, so that's an average of about 12 hours flying every month.

[00:04:47] But I am also very aware of the environmental impact of flying.

¹⁵ if two things are contradictory, they cannot both be true

¹⁶ word, term

¹⁷ always behaving in a similar way

¹⁸ feeling of not being comfortable



Cognitive Dissonance

[00:04:52] I know that flying **spews**¹⁹ carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and that flying less is an efficient way of lowering your carbon footprint.

[00:05:01] Yet I still did it.

[00:05:03] Every time I got on a flight I felt a little bit physically ill. I wasn't afraid of flying, but it was this conflict between what I believed and what I did that was causing me physical **discomfort**.

[00:05:17] If I didn't know, or didn't believe, that flying had a negative impact on the environment, no doubt I wouldn't have felt this way.

[00:05:27] 50 years ago I'm sure people didn't, and if you don't believe in the environmental impact of flying I'm sure you don't feel this way either.

[00:05:37] Festinger, the psychologist who originally **proposed** the theory of cognitive dissonance noticed that humans feel different levels of discomfort, depending on two **factors**²⁰.

[00:05:49] Firstly, how important you feel your belief to be.

[00:05:53] With my flight example, someone who was an environmental activist would evidently feel different about flying to someone who had watched a few documentaries and knew in the back of their mind that flying was bad for the environment.

¹⁹ if something spews out X, X comes out in large quantities

²⁰ the things that influence a result/outcome



Cognitive Dissonance

[00:06:08] And the second [factor²¹](#) is the number of inconsistent thoughts you have.

[00:06:15] Let's take the example of someone who is offered alcohol, but drinking alcohol is against their religion and in addition to that, they know that alcohol has negative health consequences, and they know that they need to drive a car later on that evening and that driving while drinking alcohol is dangerous.

[00:06:33] That's a lot of reasons to not drink alcohol, a lot more than someone who, for example, was aware of the long term health consequences of drinking alcohol but it wasn't against their religion and they didn't need to drive.

[00:06:46] Festinger noticed that the level of cognitive dissonance, based on the two [factors](#) I've mentioned, led to differing levels of physical [discomfort](#).

[00:06:58] So, the person in our first example would feel a lot more [discomfort](#) than the person in our second example.

[00:07:05] This might sound obvious, but the point is that cognitive dissonance isn't black and white, it exists in [varying²²](#) degrees.

[00:07:14] Where it starts to get even more interesting is what Festinger noticed people do to try to avoid these feelings of [discomfort](#).

²¹ one of several things that influence a result

²² different



Cognitive Dissonance

[00:07:23] Nobody likes feeling uncomfortable, and when you do feel uncomfortable you take actions to avoid these feelings.

[00:07:32] Festinger [proposed](#) that humans have four ways of dealing with this [discomfort](#).

[00:07:38] Firstly, you can change your behaviour.

[00:07:41] You can say, right, I know this is bad, and I'm going to stop doing it. With the classic example of smoking, you would stop smoking.

[00:07:51] Secondly, you can [justify](#)²³ your behaviour to make it fit the knowledge that you have. With our example of someone who smokes, that person might say “yes, I know smoking is bad for me, but I'm a vegetarian and I exercise 3 times a week - smoking is my only [vice](#)²⁴, I'm otherwise really healthy”.

[00:08:13] Thirdly, you can [justify](#) the behaviour by adding new behaviours, you can do something that you tell yourself [compensates](#)²⁵ for the behaviour. Going back to our smoker, you can say “I'm going to quit drinking, or I'll start going to the gym”.

[00:08:31] This doesn't change the fact that you know that smoking is bad, but you justify it by doing other things that you tell yourself reduce its impact.

²³ say that something is acceptable

²⁴ a bad habit

²⁵ balance the negative impact of



Cognitive Dissonance

[00:08:42] And finally, you can either ignore or [deny](#)²⁶ any information that is [contradictory](#) to your actions. Our smoker might say “well, there isn’t [conclusive](#)²⁷ evidence that smoking causes lung cancer, there are lots of other [factors](#) and I just don’t believe it’s as bad as people say it is”.

[00:09:00] This fourth action is worth spending some more time discussing, because it [leads](#)²⁸ to something called confirmation bias.

[00:09:09] This is the idea that we tend to only believe information that confirms something that we already believe to be true.

[00:09:17] Instead of [approaching](#)²⁹ life from the perspective of, here’s the evidence, now what does this mean is true, it’s often [tempting](#)³⁰ to [approach](#)³¹ things from the other way around, thinking ‘this is what I believe to be true’, now I’m going to surround myself with evidence that supports my belief.

²⁶ say is not true

²⁷ proving that something is true

²⁸ causes something to happen

²⁹ thinking about

³⁰ if something is tempting, you want to do it

³¹ think about something in a particular way



Cognitive Dissonance

[00:09:36] In the era of social media, where you can surround yourself with people who think in exactly the same way as you, believe similar things, and consume the same kind of content, this is easier than ever to do.

[00:09:50] And the worst thing is that we normally don't even know that we're doing it - it's just done 'for us' because platforms such as Facebook and Instagram show us content that we are more likely to believe is true, so we engage with it and stay on these platforms for longer, further [reinforcing](#)³² the beliefs that we already had.

[00:10:12] So, those are the four ways that Festinger [proposed](#) people deal with their cognitive dissonance - they either change their behaviour, they [justify](#) it, they add new behaviours, or they ignore it altogether.

[00:10:28] Cognitive dissonance, Festinger said, doesn't just occur for actions you take now, it also happens when you consider an action you took in the past.

[00:10:39] It can be uncomfortable to feel like a decision you took in the past was incorrect, and people often [justify](#) their past decisions despite the fact that they are [inconsistent](#)³³ with their current beliefs.

[00:10:53] An obvious example here is voting, and political elections.

³² making something stronger

³³ if two things are inconsistent, they cannot both be true



Cognitive Dissonance

[00:10:59] It's very common for people to defend the actions of a politician that they voted for even if those actions are **inconsistent**³⁴ with their current beliefs.

[00:11:10] Being wrong is an uncomfortable feeling for most people, and one way of reducing this **discomfort**, and minimising the impact of your decision is by defending the actions that you feel you had an impact in causing.

[00:11:26] I should stress that Festinger's theory of Cognitive Dissonance doesn't suggest that people are any less or more intelligent if they have instances in their life of cognitive dissonance.

[00:11:38] Indeed, he **proposed** it as an **inherently**³⁵ human **flaw**, something that we all are guilty of doing.

[00:11:46] The most common example used for cognitive dissonance is smoking, because over a billion people do it, and the vast majority of those people know that smoking isn't good for them.

[00:11:57] But smokers aren't of any higher or lower intelligence than anyone else, and if you smoke this is by no means a criticism.

[00:12:06] It is just that it is the world's most evident example of cognitive dissonance, and one that is easy to recognise.

³⁴ naturally and deep down

³⁵ mistake or weakness



Cognitive Dissonance

[00:12:14] So, what can we do about this?

[00:12:16] Is cognitive dissonance [by default](#)³⁶ bad?

[00:12:20] Well, it might be uncomfortable, especially if the [inconsistency](#) is either very strong or there are several [inconsistencies](#)³⁷.

[00:12:29] And while the simple answer might be to just stop engaging in the behaviour, for most people this isn't always realistic.

[00:12:38] We are only human, after all.

[00:12:42] Most psychologists suggest that [key](#)³⁸ to [overcoming](#)³⁹ this dissonance, and making better, more rational decisions is to become more aware of these inconsistencies, to not try to fight them, and certainly not to [seek](#)⁴⁰ confirmation bias.

[00:13:00] Instead, understand that your decision making process is often imperfect, that we all have these perfectly human [flaws](#)⁴¹, these [inbuilt](#)⁴² [biases](#)⁴³, and that we

³⁶ in itself

³⁷ if two things are inconsistent, they cannot both be true

³⁸ very important

³⁹ get over, control

⁴⁰ look for

⁴¹ mistakes or weaknesses

⁴² if something is inbuilt, it's the original part of it

⁴³ allowing personal opinions to affect rational judgment



Cognitive Dissonance

should [evaluate](#)⁴⁴ every decision based on the evidence in front of us, rather than what we want to believe, and it is by doing this that you will have the best chance of making more rational, better decisions.

[00:13:27] And that is certainly something that we can all aspire to.

[00:13:33] OK then, that is it for today's episode on Cognitive Dissonance, the [inconsistency](#) between what we believe and what we do.

[00:13:41] I hope it's been an interesting one, and that you've learnt something new.

[00:13:45] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:13:49] I'm not asking for examples of [inconsistencies](#) from your life, but I would love to know what you think about this idea.

[00:13:56] You can head right in to our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:14:06] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:14:12] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

⁴⁴ consider, judge the importance of something



Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Contradiction	when two things are the complete opposite to one another
Proposed	suggested as something to consider
Overcome	get over, control
Contradictions	when two things are the complete opposite to one another
Inconsistency	when two things contain ideas or arguments that do not agree with each other
Infinitely	very much
Stuck with me	if something sticks with you, you remember it vividly
Neurons	the nerve cells that carry information in the brain
Reasoned	carefully thought and considered
Irrational	not using clear thinking
Subconscious	the part of your mind that remembers and processes information without you thinking
Jets off	travels on an aeroplane



Cognitive Dissonance

Treat themselves	rewards themselves (with something)
Treat	reward, something you give yourself because you have done something else
Contradictory	if two things are contradictory, they cannot both be true
Label	word, term
Consistent	always behaving in a similar way
Discomfort	feeling of not being comfortable
Spews	if something spews out X, X comes out in large quantities
Factors	the things that influence a result/outcome
Factor	one of several things that influence a result
Varying	different
Justify	say that something is acceptable
Vice	a bad habit
Compensates	balance the negative impact of
Deny	say is not true
Conclusive	proving that something is true



Cognitive Dissonance

Leads	causes something to happen
Approaching	thinking about
Tempting	if something is tempting, you want to do it
Approach	think about something in a particular way
Reinforcing	making something stronger
Inconsistent	if two things are inconsistent, they cannot both be true
Inherently	naturally and deep down
Flaw	mistake or weakness
By default	in itself
Inconsistencies	if two things are inconsistent, they cannot both be true
Key	very important
Overcoming	get over, control
Seek	look for
Flaws	mistakes or weaknesses
Inbuilt	if something is inbuilt, it's the original part of it



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Cognitive Dissonance

Biases allowing personal opinions to affect rational judgment

Evaluate consider, judge the importance of something

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

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