

Preparation for Beliefs and Self-Deception

Do you have family or friends whose social or political views are very different from yours? If you've tried to hold a calm discussion with them about an issue, it may have been a frustrating experience. Even if you presented clearly reasoned arguments and strong evidence, the other person probably didn't come around to your side. They might even have gotten angry with you.

Why is it so difficult to change someone's mind? Humans typically tend to cling strongly to the beliefs that we already hold. We seek out evidence that will confirm those beliefs, and we actively avoid considering evidence that might challenge them. Psychologists call this tendency "confirmation bias" or "myside bias."

The effect of confirmation bias is so strong that we may be tempted to consider the "other side" as irrational, almost delusional in their resistance to what we see as true. After all, delusions are defined as "fixed beliefs that do not change, even when a person is presented with conflicting evidence." But beliefs that we share with others in our culture or subculture – politics, religion, strong convictions about the best music – are not delusions, even if they seem unusual to others. Instead, such beliefs are important to us because they are part of our cultural identity, an identity that we want to protect.

When our beliefs are challenged, the anger that follows may actually represent fear. Fear, a powerful motivator, has evolved to save us from mortal danger. In our physical environment, fear short-circuits rational thinking to move us swiftly away from death or injury. Similarly, our minds will lead us away from an idea if that idea imperils us. Consider people's beliefs about climate change. The threat may seem overwhelming, and suggestions about changing our consumption behavior may be threatening as well. Any idea that causes us to feel helpless is an idea we probably avoid. Hence the phrase "My mind is made up; don't confuse me with facts."

But our self-deception is not free of cost. The greatest danger of self-deception is it leaves one more easily manipulated. If powerful interests use fear to influence people's beliefs, those people may be persuaded to act against their own self-interest. Thus if we can be convinced to fear immigrants, we are unlikely to ally with them for higher wages for all workers. Who benefits? Perhaps powerful business owners. Similarly, if we can be convinced that our way of life is threatened by people who are different from us, we may be more inclined to accept authoritarian rule to "keep us safe."

Should we reject all conventional beliefs because they are culturally determined? Most of us would not want to live in a world where nothing was considered true. We need our beliefs.

We need beliefs, but we also need to be able to change them. Our experience can adapt to new beliefs if they become less threatening. Many people have found their beliefs changed at college (or another immersive experience) when they left their familiar culture for a new one. Even societies can change beliefs. For example, support for same-sex marriage in America changed dramatically from 35% in 2001 to 62% in 2017. The first step in changing beliefs is feeling less threatened. The next step is to allow a new belief to "reframe" experience, as same-sex marriage was reframed not as a threat to conventional marriage but as an issue of equality. Belief doesn't have to be maintained by fear.

To be alive ... means not being completely consistent. *David Lagercrantz*

We are not thinking machines, we are feeling machines who think. *Richard Restack, neurologist*

We have two alternatives: either we question our beliefs – or we don't. Either we accept our fixed versions of reality – or we begin to challenge them. In Buddha's opinion, to train in staying open and curious – to train in dissolving our assumptions and beliefs – is the best use of our human lives.
Pema Chodron

If your Personal Beliefs deny what's objectively true about the world, then they're more accurately called Personal Delusions. *Neil deGrasse Tyson*

Children are not born with memories of those who insulted their mother or slew their grandfather or stole their land. Those hates are bequeathed to them, taught them, breathed into them. If adults didn't tell their children of their hereditary hates, perhaps we would do better. *Robin Hobb, Assassin's Fate.*

Confirmation bias is the tendency to interpret and search for evidence to confirm your own beliefs even in the face of contradictory information. It involves a systemic error of inductive reasoning whose effect is strengthened in emotionally charged situations. People will interpret information in a biased manner to support their own conclusions. *Debbie McGauran*

Love is the spirit of this church
The quest for truth is its sacrament
Christine Robinson

The beginning of wisdom is found in doubting; by doubting we come to the question, and by seeking we may come upon the truth. *Pierre Abelard*

Questions to Ponder

1. What are your absolute certainties, your personal truths? For one or two, can you describe how you believe they are true?
2. What are some of your beliefs that may have been partly shaped by culture, family, or your experience? Consider the background of one or two of your beliefs.
3. Do you have friends or family whose beliefs are very different from yours? How do you handle discussions about those beliefs?
4. What could cause you to question your own truth?
5. Recall a time when your beliefs about something changed. How did that happen?
6. Are you considering changing your mind about anything right now? How are you approaching changing your mind?
7. When would you be willing to force your truth on others?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the gathering, think about some beliefs that you might have changed. The prompt for the Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence: "I changed my beliefs about ..."