

Preparation for Beliefs and Change

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 tend to cling to the beliefs that we already hold. We seek out evidence to 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 in its resistance to what we see as true. But beliefs that people share with others in their culture or subculture – politics, religion, strong convictions about the best music – are not irrational, 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 we feel 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 reluctance to consider changing a belief is not free of cost. It may leave us open to manipulation. If powerful interests use fear to influence people's beliefs, those people may be persuaded to act against their own self-interest. For example, if we can be convinced to fear immigrants, we are unlikely to ally with them for higher wages for all workers. 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 beliefs because they are culturally influenced? Beliefs are a necessary and valuable part of our cultural navigation system – we cannot function without them. Yet our experiences can nudge us toward changing beliefs. 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 the U.S. changed dramatically from 35% in 2001 to 62% in 2017. Beliefs can change when we feel less threatened by a different view, perhaps by "reframing" that view, much as same-sex marriage was reframed not as a threat to traditional marriage but as an issue of equality.

What about beliefs that are at the core of our being, beliefs upon which we have built our lives? Humans seem to be made with a desire for meaning. We may joke that Unitarians would "rather seek than find" in their search for meaning, but we can acknowledge that sources of meaning are powerful for ourselves and for others.

Love is the spirit of this church, and the quest for truth is its sacrament. *Christine Robinson*

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 Chödrön

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*

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 personal truths? For one or two, can you describe why these beliefs are important and meaningful for you?
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. Recall a time when your beliefs about something changed. How did that happen?
5. Are you considering changing your mind about anything right now? How are you approaching changing your mind?

Words of the Day

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