ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



Episode #131
Cognitive Dissonance
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Transcript

[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].

[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.

[1] opposition; a state where one thing goes against another

[2] put forward or suggested

[3] successfully deal with or get past

[4] conflicts between two things that cannot both be true or right

[5] a lack of agreement or match

[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].

[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.

[6] very, very much; to an extremely large degree

[7] stayed in my memory; I never forgot it

[8] nerve cells that carry messages in the brain

[9] based on careful, logical thinking

[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.

[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.

[10] not sensible or logical

[11] happening without you being aware of it

[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.

[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.

[12] travels by plane, often for pleasure
[13] allow themselves something special that they enjoy
[14] a special thing you enjoy that you do not usually have
[15] opposed or in conflict with something else
[16] a name or description given to something
[17] in agreement with their own beliefs
[18] an unpleasant or uneasy feeling

[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.

[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] sends out large amounts of something with force

[20] things that affect or influence a result

[00:06:08] And the second **factor**[21] 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 **varying**[22] 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] a thing that affects or influences a result

[22] different from one case to another

[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] give reasons to show that something is right or acceptable

[24] a bad habit

[25] makes up for something bad by balancing it with something good

[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 to**[28] 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.

[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.

[26] say that something is not true

[27] proving something without any doubt

[28] causes; results in

[29] dealing with or thinking about

[30] attractive or appealing, even if it may not be wise

[31] deal with or think about

[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.

[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** with their current beliefs.

[32] making stronger

[33] not in agreement; not matching

[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**[34] human **flaw**[35], 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.

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

[00:12:16] Is cognitive dissonance **by default**[36] bad?

[34] by its basic nature; naturally

[35] a fault or weakness

[36] automatically; in every case

[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 to 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 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.

[37] conflicts between beliefs and actions

[38] the most important part; the thing that matters most

[39] successfully dealing with or getting past

[40] try to find or get

[41] faults or weaknesses

[42] existing naturally as part of something from the start

[43] unfair tendencies to favour one idea or view over others

[44] judge or consider carefully

[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]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Contradiction	opposition; a state where one thing goes against another
Proposed	put forward or suggested
Overcome	successfully deal with or get past
Contradictions	conflicts between two things that cannot both be true or right
Inconsistency	a lack of agreement or match
Infinitely	very, very much; to an extremely large degree
Stuck with me	stayed in my memory; I never forgot it
Neurons	nerve cells that carry messages in the brain
Reasoned	based on careful, logical thinking
Irrational	not sensible or logical

Subconscious	happening without you being aware of it
Jets off	travels by plane, often for pleasure
Treat themselves	allow themselves something special that they enjoy
Treat	a special thing you enjoy that you do not usually have
Contradictory	opposed or in conflict with something else
Label	a name or description given to something
Consistent	in agreement with their own beliefs
Discomfort	an unpleasant or uneasy feeling
Spews	sends out large amounts of something with force
Factors	things that affect or influence a result
Factor	a thing that affects or influences a result
Varying	different from one case to another

Justify	give reasons to show that something is right or acceptable
Vice	a bad habit
Compensates	makes up for something bad by balancing it with something good
Deny	say that something is not true
Conclusive	proving something without any doubt
Leads to	causes; results in
Approaching	dealing with or thinking about
Tempting	attractive or appealing, even if it may not be wise
Approach	deal with or think about
Reinforcing	making stronger
Inconsistent	not in agreement; not matching
Inherently	by its basic nature; naturally

Flaw	a fault or weakness
By default	automatically; in every case
Inconsistencies	conflicts between beliefs and actions
Key	the most important part; the thing that matters most
Overcoming	successfully dealing with or getting past
Seek	try to find or get
Flaws	faults or weaknesses
Inbuilt	existing naturally as part of something from the start
Biases	unfair tendencies to favour one idea or view over others
Evaluate	judge or consider carefully

Language spotlight

1. Stick with you

- **Meaning**: If something sticks with you, you remember it for a long time.
- **Synonyms**: stay with you, stay in your mind, remain in your memory
- **Antonyms**: slip your mind, be forgotten, go in one ear and out the other
- **Examples**:
    - The advice my grandmother gave me has really **stuck with me** over the years.
    - It was only a short film, but the ending **stuck with her** for weeks.

2. Jet off

- **Meaning**: To travel somewhere by plane, usually for a holiday or a short trip.
- **Synonyms**: fly off, take off, head off abroad
- **Antonyms**: stay at home, stay put, stay behind
- **Examples**:
    - As soon as the exams were over, they **jetted off** to Spain.
    - My boss is always **jetting off** to somewhere exotic for meetings.

3. Treat yourself

- **Meaning**: To give yourself something special that you enjoy, often something you would not normally have.
- **Synonyms**: spoil yourself, indulge yourself, reward yourself
- **Antonyms**: deny yourself, go without, hold back
- **Examples**:
    - After finishing the marathon, I **treated myself** to a big slice of cake.
    - You've worked hard all week, so why not **treat yourself** to a night out?

4. Lead to

- **Meaning**: To cause something to happen as a result.
- **Synonyms**: result in, cause, bring about
- **Antonyms**: prevent, stop, block
- **Examples**:
    - Eating too much sugar can **lead to** serious health problems.
    - A small mistake in the code **led to** the whole system crashing.

5. By default

- **Meaning**: Automatically or necessarily, without any particular choice or reason being needed.
- **Synonyms**: automatically, necessarily, as a matter of course
- **Antonyms**: by choice, deliberately, on purpose
- **Examples**:
    - An expensive restaurant is not a good restaurant **by default**.
    - Just because an idea is new, it doesn't mean it is better **by default**.

Quiz

Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions

1. According to the episode, what is cognitive dissonance?

a) Being unable to make any decision without help

b) Believing one thing but acting against that belief

c) Changing your beliefs whenever you learn something

d) Forgetting information you learnt a long time ago

2. Who first proposed the idea of cognitive dissonance, and when?

a) A British psychologist called Alastair Budge in 2021

b) An American doctor called Leon Festinger in 1975

c) A French philosopher called Thierry in 1957

d) An American psychologist called Leon Festinger in 1957

3. According to Festinger, which two factors affect how much discomfort people feel?

a) How important the belief is and how many conflicting thoughts there are

b) How old the person is and how much money they earn every month

c) How intelligent the person is and how religious their family is

d) How often the person acts and how many other people can see them

4. What does the smoker say in Festinger's third way of dealing with discomfort?

a) They will stop smoking completely from tomorrow

b) There is no conclusive proof that smoking is harmful

c) They will quit drinking or start going to the gym

d) Smoking is their only vice; otherwise they are healthy

5. Why, according to the episode, is confirmation bias easier than ever today?

a) Newspapers now print only stories that are definitely true

b) Social media shows us content we are likely to believe

c) Schools no longer teach people to question the evidence

d) People spend much less time talking to their friends

True or False

6. Alastair says that our brains contain an average of 86 billion neurons. (True/False)

7. Alastair used to fly from Malta to London twice a month for work. (True/False)

8. Alastair felt ill on flights because he was afraid of flying. (True/False)

9. Festinger's theory suggests that people with cognitive dissonance are less intelligent. (True/False)

10. The most common example used for cognitive dissonance is smoking. (True/False)

Fill in the Blanks

11. There’s probably a little bit of debate about whether that is still true, but the idea really _____ with me.

12. Or someone who knows that flying on aeroplanes is damaging to the environment and yet jets ___ for weekends away twice a month.

13. Or someone who is on a diet, and they decide to _____ themselves to a large burger and chips just as a treat, just this once.

14. I'm a vegetarian and I exercise 3 times a week - smoking is my only ____, I'm otherwise really healthy

15. Is cognitive dissonance by _____ bad?

Vocabulary Practice

16. In the example of crossing the road, what does "**irrational**" mean?

a) Very common or normal

b) Against the law

c) Polite and respectful

d) Not sensible or logical

17. What does "**spews**" mean when Alastair talks about flying and carbon dioxide?

a) Sends out large amounts of something

b) Takes in small amounts of something

c) Hides or stores something away safely

d) Measures how much of something there is

18. What does "**compensates**" mean in the third way of dealing with discomfort?

a) Pays someone money for the work they did

b) Makes something much worse than it was before

c) Makes up for something bad with something good

d) Hides something from the people around you

19. What does "**conclusive**" mean in the smoker's comment about lung cancer?

a) Coming at the end of a long report

b) Proving something without any doubt

c) Recently published by a scientist

d) Expensive and difficult to collect

20. What does "**inherently**" mean when Festinger describes cognitive dissonance as a human flaw?

a) Only now and then; by accident

b) In a way that is easy to fix

c) Deliberately; with a clear purpose

d) By its basic nature; naturally

Answers

1. b) Believing one thing but acting against that belief
2. d) An American psychologist called Leon Festinger in 1957
3. a) How important the belief is and how many conflicting thoughts there are
4. c) They will quit drinking or start going to the gym
5. b) Social media shows us content we are likely to believe
6. True
7. True
8. False
9. False
10. True
11. stuck
12. off
13. treat
14. vice
15. default
16. d) Not sensible or logical
17. a) Sends out large amounts of something
18. c) Makes up for something bad with something good

19. b) Proving something without any doubt

20. d) By its basic nature; naturally