

Procrastination, Guilt, Excuses and the Road Less Traveled



People seldom do what they believe in. They do what is convenient, then repent

. (Bob Dylan). I certainly agree with the first part of this Dylan quote, but I'm quite sure that there's more to it than repentance, including: distraction, forgetting, trivialization, self-affirmation and denial of responsibility to name a few.

Since the 1950's with Leon Festinger's (and his students') initial work on [cognitive dissonance](#), psychologists have spent countless hours studying how acting counter-attitudinally leads to a negative emotional state. Why? Well, most people try to maintain a consistent and positive sense of self. Most people want to [act](#) competently, morally, and to be able to predict their behavior. When our actions and beliefs or even two beliefs are in conflict, they are dissonant. Dissonance is uncomfortable. We want to relieve ourselves from this negative state.

Traditionally, researchers have studied this relief in the form of attitude change. If my behavior conflicts with my attitude, change my attitude. That's easy, and it's common. It's the road most traveled, as they say. I could also change my behavior. But, even Festinger has argued that this isn't simple or easy (and it's seldom the preferred route; it's the road less traveled). As Dylan has noted above, it's easier to do what's convenient, not necessarily what we believe in, then repent.

I just finished reading a doctoral student's proposal for her research on [cognitive dissonance](#). It was a very good read, and she has proposed some interesting studies. Of course, I read her work through my "filter" of [procrastination](#) research, and this took me to different places.

That's what I want to blog about today - cognitive dissonance and procrastination.

Not only do "people seldom do what they believe in" but all too often people don't do what they intend to do. They do what is convenient (what they feel like). Then what?

When we intend to act, when we have a goal to which we've made an intention to act, and we don't act (voluntarily and quite irrationally choosing to delay action despite knowing this may affect us negatively), **we experience dissonance. This is one of the costs of procrastination.**

Dylan says we "repent" afterwards. We could. I've even conducted some research on this repentance in the form of [self-forgiveness](#). It happens, and it seems to help.

More often, I think we engage in alternative strategies to reduce the dissonance created by procrastination. This dissonance is commonly experienced emotionally as guilt, and we do whatever we can to get rid of this negative emotion.

Here are a few typical reactions that researchers have catalogued as responses to dissonance (and ways that we reduce this dissonance).

1. **Distraction** - allows individuals to divert their attention away from their dissonant cognitions and avoid the negative affective state caused by dissonance;
2. **Forgetting** - can be in two forms, passive and active. Passive is often the case with unimportant thoughts, while we may have to actively suppress important cognitions that are causing dissonance;
3. **Trivialization** - involves changing beliefs to reduce the importance of the dissonance creating thoughts or beliefs;
4. **Self-affirmation** - creates a focus on our core values and other qualities that reasserts our sense of self and integrity despite the dissonance;
5. **Denial of responsibility** - allows us to distance ourselves as a causal agent in the dissonance;
6. **Adding consonant cognitions** - often by seeking out new information that supports our position; and
7. **Changing behavior** - to better align with our beliefs and values, although changing one's behaviour requires effort and is often not the most convenient way to reduce dissonance.

This is quite a list, and quite frankly I - as do many researchers - think this is just the tip of the iceberg. We have many strategies available to make ourselves feel good as we minimize feelings of dissonance. And, we're quite expert at employing them to keep buoyant day-to-day. It's part of our coping mechanisms.

That said, **not all coping mechanisms are adaptive.** Quite consistently, research has demonstrated that techniques like distraction, forgetting, trivialization and denial of responsibility are emotion-focused strategies that are not nearly as effective in the

long term as planful-problem-solving strategies. Yes, we have to take care of our emotions, but this can't be where the coping stops. If it is, that's just a case of "[giving in to feel good](#)," and we'll pay in the long run if this is our dominant short-term strategy.

What we're doing is making excuses for ourselves to bolster a threatened sense of self. Why is self threatened? In the case of procrastination, it's because we failed to [self-regulate](#) and do an intended task in a timely manner. Interestingly, we're the only one to blame as we become our own worst enemy. The sad answer seems to be to entrench a little deeper into self-protection.

I think it's time to live with the tension that cognitive dissonance creates and let it fuel more honesty; perhaps an honest look at strategy number 7 - behavior change.

Want to reduce dissonance about not working on an intended task?

[Just get started](#). Simple strategy. Simple truth.

Ah, I know, some of you will read this and it will create dissonance for you as it conflicts with your beliefs. I know because I get emails from people who say, "if it was that simple wouldn't we all just change?" No, because the easier route is to employ one of the other strategies - distraction, forgetting, denial . . . These are the much more traveled routes. We know this from lived experience. We know it from research.

two roads diverged in a wood, and I --I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

(Robert Frost, 1915)

It's time for the road less traveled - Just get started.

[Progress](#), even a little, will reduce your dissonance, fuel your [motivation](#) and enhance your well-being. As Frost knew, the road less traveled by can make all the difference.