

The Pros and Cons of Cognitive Consistency

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Thinking about thinking rarely occupies our thought processes. For most of life's events, cognitive consistency is normal and even advisable to maintain equilibrium. Our daily activities would be tedious if we were to mentally analyze and process everything that occurs. Therefore, it is useful to spend much of our life complying with the rules, regulations, procedures, codes of conduct, role expectations, good manners, membership rites, dress codes, and other routines imposed by social groups and personal values.

Groups function harmoniously when members share common objectives and beliefs. Etiquette and sundry proprieties guide us at social and other organizational events. Work proceeds efficiently when coworkers have the same goals, purpose, and communicate similarly. Most common undertakings are sufficiently harmonious, so there is little value in contradictory views.

For these reasons, habitual thoughts contribute to making communal and personal living consistent, comfortable, and reliable. Individually, our morning habits enable us to efficiently awaken and prepare the same way for each day's work. Being contrarian without a good cause does not serve a useful purpose.

The Downside of Cognitive Consistency

While in normal times cognitive consistency makes sense and contributes to efficient interaction, it can fail us when we are faced with adversity. Habitual beliefs and behavior – without considering limits on their appropriateness to the current situation – can cause problems. Unfortunately, we become complacent and complacency becomes habitual which may lead to unhealthy emotional reactions when *things change*.

Difficulties arise when fixed cognitive processes are applied inappropriately. We tend to universalize our interpretation of events and our thoughts become automatic. Our perceptions become rigid. As a result, while patterns are frequently advantageous there are times when cognitive change is beneficial.

When our mental viewpoints are detrimental, therapists call them cognitive distortions. These cognitive distortions are treated by methods referred to variously as cognitive restructuring, cognitive reappraisal, cognitive relabeling, cognitive reframing, cognitive therapy, and attitude adjustment. By any name, the goal is to correctively *rethink thinking*.

Much of this corrective action can be undertaken by individuals becoming aware of their thought processes. While the various names and methods were developed by cognitive psychologists, psychiatrists, and other therapists,

their teachings can often be adopted and individually applied successfully by motivated persons.

The Change Process

A useful first step in developing our self-awareness process is in identifying distortions that pervade our thinking. Several typical errors of thought have been identified. Some common mental attributions are: **Over or under** emphasizing the importance or significance of an event; **assigning** all good or all bad motives or consequences to an action; **believing** that a single event represents a pattern that applies to everything; **using** our feelings as a factual basis for attributing motive to someone; **defining** a person by a single act; **driven** by obligations represented by “should” or “must” statements and not by reason; **holding** another person responsible for all misfortunes or good luck; **being** a prophet of doom and gloom; **attributing** thoughts to a person's behavior; and **mentally filtering** out what does not conform to our expectations. These and other cognitive distortions need to be *identified to be changed* for your well-being.

If we cannot identify our own distortions, there are some friends, acquaintances, or enemies that might point out our faulty cognitions. Often an attentive spouse is a provider of constructive criticism.

A useful caveat is to hear critical input, write it down as a succinct statement, such as elaborated in the last paragraph, and then deliberately consider if and how it applies to you. It is another distortion, and possibly the most insidious, to consider every critical input as gospel. Consider that many best-selling authors tell how they have enough early rejection letters to wallpaper their mansions.

The Work of Change

Believe in yourself but temper it with reality. “Feel-good” input may provide temporary gratification but substance must underlay success. Be truthful and realistically assess your strengths and weaknesses.

In the final analysis, you will make the decision whether or not to *work* on changing yourself. It is no easier to change if the constructive input comes from a therapist or an interested bystander.

Work is the operative word in the last sentence. Nothing happens without effort. There are many commercial programs that provide quick discovery of human shortcomings and are often entertaining, but lack substance. Stand-up comedians gather much material for their shticks that draw upon people's erroneous thinking. While laughter is a great relief, it must be followed-up with serious effort to produce lasting positive change.

It is up to each of us to decide if we are satisfied just laughing at *Seinfeld* and our self or whether we want to be successful.