

How Cognitive Dissonance Controls Your Life (Unless You Do THIS)

Red Pill Theory | 13 July, 2018 | by Avery

Sarah, a catholic nun, is thinking pious thoughts while she walks down the street. That is, until Sarah passes by a tall, dark, handsome man bending over to fold some clothes. Suddenly, Sara's thoughts turn sinful.



Sarah's normally black and white world is tempted by 50 shades of grey. Sarah rushes back to her quarters and tries to distract herself with scripture, but she finds herself unable to focus. She can only think of one way to get rid of her dirty thoughts. But as a nun, she's not supposed to do *that*.

Sarah is experiencing cognitive dissonance. As a nun, she took a vow of celibacy. But as a human being, she can't help but have certain needs. This tension between Sarah's commitment to abstain from any sexual activity and her physiological desire for, um "relief" creates a discomfort that she must resolve.

When we experience cognitive dissonance, we have two options to eliminate our discomfort:

1. We can change our beliefs. In Sarah's case, she might tell herself, "I'm only human. I'm sure god will forgive me if I sin just this once."
2. We can distract ourselves from the discomfort. In Sarah's case, she might take a nap in the hopes that her desires fade away (although it could take her quite a while to actually fall asleep).

Unfortunately, scratching the itch that's causing cognitive dissonance is much easier than trying to distract ourselves from it:

- It's much easier to grab that 2,000 calorie Chipotle burrito you're craving, than it is to try to distract yourself with a boring salad.
- It's much easier to smoke the cigarette you desire than to distract yourself with a TV show.
- In Sarah's case, it would be much easier to take 5 minutes to scratch her itch than to distract herself with a nap

Cognitive dissonance is a powerful force in our lives. It's because of cognitive dissonance that we often make decisions which are bad for our long-term health and well-being.



So, how do we resolve our cognitive dissonance without constantly giving in to our immediate temptations for things like unhealthy food?

Self-awareness is the key. Normally, we get a stimulus and we respond automatically:

- Stimulus -> Craving for a 2,000-calorie burrito.
- Response -> Go to Chipotle
- Stimulus -> Desire to skip the gym and watch Netflix
- Response -> Go home and watch Netflix.

However, through developing self-awareness, you can create a space between stimulus and response.:

- Stimulus -> Craving for a 2,000-calorie burrito.
- Space: Remember that your commitment to lose weight doesn't allow for the eating of 2,000

calorie burritos.

- Response -> Eat a salad, instead.

Creating a space between stimulus and response isn't easy. The stimuli cognitive dissonance creates are like psychological itches, we can't help but want to scratch them.

Of course, scratching an itch doesn't solve the underlying problem, it makes it worse:

- Watching Netflix doesn't make the essay you've been procrastinating write itself.
- Watching the characters in 90210 make new friends isn't going to make your feelings of loneliness go away.

That's why it's so important to cultivate self-awareness so that cognitive dissonance doesn't control your life.

But how do we actually do that?

The first step to outsmarting cognitive dissonance is simply knowing what it is and how it affects you. You've already taken that first step by reading this article.

The second step is to implement the most powerful weapon we have at our disposal against cognitive dissonance: systems.

How to Create Systems



So, cognitive dissonance leads us to do things that feel good in the moment instead of things that are good for us in the long-term. Fortunately, if you create a system, you can override this tendency and make better decisions.

Wait, aren't systems just goals? Not exactly. A goal is something you want: to lose 20 pounds, to make \$100,000, or to get married. A system is a specific set of rules that you commit to follow. And by following those rules, you will automatically accomplish your goals.

Let's say you want to lose weight. Losing weight is a goal, but it's not a system. Goals leave room for excuses and procrastination.

Today, I might tell myself that I want to lose 20 pounds in the next 6 months. But in two weeks when I'm craving a McFlurry, I'm going to tell myself, "One snack won't kill me". Unfortunately, I'm probably going to convince myself that "one snack won't kill me" about 3 times a day (thanks to cognitive dissonance). As a result, I'm not going to lose those 20 pounds.

A system is different from a goal because it involves very specific rules that, by following, will get you the result you want. Here's an example of a system-based approach to weight loss:

- Count your calories every day with Myfitnesspal.
- Eat 200 calories less than your body uses per day ([which you can calculate online](#)).

With this system in place, you'll still get a craving for that McFlurry, but before that stimulus leads to a response, you'll think, "Well, if I eat that I'll go over my daily caloric limit, I guess I'll just get a freakin' lemonade instead."

The above system wouldn't prevent you from eating unhealthy deserts, but you wouldn't eat such foods in a way that would lead to weight-gain, because you can't gain weight if you're eating fewer calories than your body uses in a day.

Your system won't be perfect when you first create it, but it will point you in the right direction. Then, as you notice areas where there's still room for improvement, you'll be able to tighten up your system. If, for example, while using the above weight loss system you found that you were still eating more unhealthy foods than you should, you could create additional rules for that system (I.E. Limit sugars to 50 grams per day).

Many of the systems I've used in my own life have been flawed. For example, I have a rule for myself to go to a coffee shop to work 4 times per week. Initially,

With good systems in place, you will make progress towards your long-term goals even when cognitive dissonance would otherwise lead you to procrastinate. Our emotions are unpredictable and impossible to completely control, a system is the answer to the chaotic nature of emotions. To make this more practical, here's a few examples of systems I use in my own life:

- I have a rule to publish 3 articles on my website per week.
- I have a rule to go to a coffee shop and write at least 1,500 words 4 times per week.
- I have a rule to go to the gym twice per week for at least 30 minutes to lift weights (which, surprisingly, has helped me lose over 15 pounds in the last two months).

With those examples in mind, think of systems you can create that will allow you to outmaneuver cognitive dissonance. In my experience, the most important aspect of creating a good system is that it leaves room for decision-making.

Leave some room for choice in your systems. If you have a rule to go to the gym 3 times a week, you can still choose which days to go, whereas if you have a rule to go 7 days a week, that system might feel too oppressive.

If you create a system and you find that you're still procrastinating due to cognitive dissonance, then adjust the system accordingly. If your rule is to write 10,000 words per week, but you find that you can't keep up with it, reduce it to 5,000 words a week. Then, once you get comfortable with writing 5,000 words per week, incrementally increase your goal until you can write 10,000 words per week comfortably.

Wrapping Up How Cognitive Dissonance Controls Your Life (Unless you do this)

Cognitive dissonance is the little-known cause of many of our personal struggles: it's the reason 70% of Americans are overweight. It's also the reason the average American spends 4 hours per day on their cell phone (instead of doing something productive). As powerful as cognitive dissonance is, you can take away its hold over you by creating systems.

Once you're aware of what cognitive dissonance is, you can overcome it. But, if you're not aware of the affect cognitive dissonance has on you, it can control your life. People often think the key to success and happiness is willpower, discipline, or skill. And yes, those qualities are all important, but self-awareness is the key to cultivating those qualities in the first place.

Self-awareness allows you to break your patterns. If you want to really want to dive in and learn how to transform your life by developing self-awareness, you can get my new book, *The Power of Self-Awareness*, [on Amazon](#).