

## HOW COGNITIVE DISSONANCE CAN BE A SIGN OF HEALTHY GROWTH

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [Flyingfreenow.com](http://Flyingfreenow.com), and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.*

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 231 of the Flying Free Podcast. In today's episode, we're going to talk about cognitive dissonance: what it is, how to identify when we are experiencing it, when is it a problem, and when is it actually a good thing that is moving us forward in our lives? Because I think that in our survivor circles, we automatically assume that to have cognitive dissonance means that there's something bad happening or that that's a negative thing. So we're going to talk about how cognitive dissonance is actually a good and necessary thing to our growth and development as human beings.

Now, according to Oxford Languages, cognitive dissonance is the state of having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes, especially as relating to behavioral decisions and attitude change. According to [everydayhealth.com](http://everydayhealth.com), cognitive dissonance is the discomfort that you feel when your beliefs are inconsistent with one another or with your actions. And [psyc.com](http://psyc.com) says that cognitive dissonance is a mental conflict that occurs when your beliefs don't line up with your actions. So I would say that cognitive dissonance is when you have two opposing or contradictory beliefs or thoughts simultaneously running at the same time.

Now, notice that when we have these two opposite or opposing beliefs at the same time, this creates conflict and discomfort, and most of us hate conflict and discomfort and we'll do anything to avoid or get rid of conflict and discomfort. We will often fight it or sometimes we just run away from it — hide from it.

Now, when we run away from discomfort and conflict, we tend to be like the proverbial ostrich with our heads in the sand. We don't want to hear any new information or learn anything new that might contradict what we already believe. And so we'll avoid anything and anyone that offers us a different perspective. And when individuals do this, they tend to stay stuck and they don't move forward because they're not really learning anything new. When society as a whole does this, then society stays stuck and doesn't move forward as well — or you could say “when a church does this” or “when a people group does this.”

Now, when we fight discomfort and conflict, that's when we're engaging in arguments

with others who disagree with us and offer us different perspectives. An example that I experienced in the churches that I went to is they would say, "Don't read books by those authors," or "Don't ever listen to those teachers." So that kind of thought or programming is basically fighting other people's perspectives. And then when I would sit back and hear those things and agree and avoid reading anything new or hearing other people's perspectives, then what I was doing is avoiding and hiding from.

So here's the problem, though. At some point, we all will come to the edges of the information or knowledge bubble that we are living in, and then we will experience the pain that occurs when our current beliefs do not have answers for that pain or that problem. We can either stay in the bubble that we've grown accustomed to or we can lean into some cognitive dissonance and change.

A psychologist by the name of Leon Festinger, he's the one who gets the credit for introducing the concept of cognitive dissonance to the world of psychology. And he says that there are three reasons why we don't want to change what we already believe or what we do — our behaviors — even when we get new information that could break us out of that bubble.

First of all, if we change our belief or our behavior, we will experience loss, and that will hurt. And who wants to hurt, right? An example of this in my own life is that when I considered changing my long-held belief that my family of origin was healthy and beautiful and I lived this charmed childhood, that would mean that I would have to be honest about some really subtle, dysfunctional things about my family of origin. Nothing that was out of the ordinary — I mean, my family of origin was like a lot of families of origin are like, maybe even what some of our current families are like. But I didn't want to acknowledge some of those things, and that was the problem. I had this very "Pollyanna" type of view about it, and that meant that I didn't want to face some of the things that happened because that would mean that I would have to go into the grief process. And grief is long, hard, painful work. Grief hurts. So that's one reason why we may choose not to change our beliefs or our behavior: because we don't want to experience that grief.

Another reason that we don't want to change what we believe or how we behave is because we're satisfied with our present behavior and beliefs. So for example, when I was married and I had this nice, big, homeschooling family, I got to be admired and respected in my church community. I felt safe because nobody was attacking me, nobody was lying about me or trying to shame me in my community. Now, if I were to change my idea of what a godly Christian really was, that might mean making some choices that would end up breaking up my big, homeschooling family, and then I would

run the risk of being attacked, lied about, and discredited. Again, I was avoiding pain, right? So it was easier to keep things status quo, and anytime I got any new information, I would shove it away and I'd be like, "I don't need to hear that. That couldn't possibly be true. I don't want to know about that because I like what I believe. I feel satisfied with it. I'm going to keep myself out of trouble."

And then a third reason that this Festinger gave is that we don't want to change what we believe because making the change may not even be possible. Maybe we know there is something dysfunctional about our lives but we don't have the necessary resources to make any big changes at the present time. So in that case, it's just easier to keep our beliefs and our status quo.

Now, let me give you some examples of cognitive dissonance that I see in the Flying Free private forum among Christian survivors of emotional and spiritual abuse. So for example, one pretty common circumstance or experience that some women are having is that their church will teach them that God loves them and forgives them, but then that same church will also teach that if they don't follow certain rules or certain norms that they have set up within that religious environment, then they will be out of God's favor, God won't hear their prayers and they will suffer serious consequences, including excommunication.

So this creates some cognitive dissonance, right? These women are confused about what is true and what isn't true as it relates to God. And this can cause them to experience guilt if they learn new ideas that are contradicting the things that they've grown up learning from their church or that their current church is teaching, or even if they obey to the letter all of the rules and regulations and yet are still not experiencing the freedom and joy that the church people promised for their obedience.

So in the forum we'll see people who are struggling with this kind of cognitive dissonance. They'll post things about feeling like God is distant from them, maybe God will not love them if they leave their abuser, how they need to be a better Christian but they don't know how, how, no matter how hard they try, they never feel good enough — it's just a never-ending hamster wheel, okay?

Here's another example. If you were raised in a home where your parents told you that they loved you, but they would also give you the silent treatment, hit you or threaten you, call you names, or manipulate you, that's going to create some cognitive dissonance. Or maybe you were raised in a home where one or both of your parents were alcoholics, for example, or had some other kind of addiction, and they acted one way sometimes but then they would act a completely different way another time.

So naturally, then, women who grew up in homes like this are confused about what love is, first of all, but also about what their own identity is. They question what is real and what is not real about themselves, about their parents, and about the world around them, and this can cause them to feel shame about who they are and why they can't seem to get it right or do what it takes to win consistent love and safety from other people. Rather than recognize that their parents have made choices to behave poorly for whatever reasons their parents have, they believe that there is something fundamentally wrong with themselves.

And this is typical of children, right? Children have to believe — because they don't know any better — that their parents are these God-figures and have all the answers, but they really don't. And so if things go wonky, then the child will take that on themselves and think, "Well, there must be something wrong with me. There can't possibly be something wrong with my parent, so it must be me." And then that gets hardwired into their psyche and then they spend the rest of their lives trying to solve for that. And a lot of times how they try to solve for that is by looking for other people outside of themselves to validate them or give them that consistency and that safety that they need rather than looking to themselves and relying on themselves for that.

So in the forum, these people who are struggling with this will post things like, "Maybe I'm the abuser." "Why doesn't my husband love me?" "I can't live without my husband's love and approval." "Why can't I let go of my husband?" "I'm a bad mom." Those are things that they struggle with.

Another issue is maybe you were raised with a belief that husbands and wives are supposed to be... We hear the Bible says that "You are one flesh," but then we take that to this nth degree and we think that a marriage relationship is like this enmeshed relationship — that we're so intertwined with one another that projecting our own thoughts and feelings on the other one and vice versa should be a normal thing. So then when our husband doesn't act or react the way that we would, we can't make sense of that. And we feel responsible to make sure that our husband knows and understands and validates and manages all of our own thoughts and emotions, and we also think that we are supposed to understand and know and validate all of our husband's thoughts and emotions.

And so women who are struggling with this, they'll post things like, "My husband is acting so bizarre. I don't understand why he does what he does," or "I'm so confused when my in-laws don't see my side of things," or "I really need my church elders to believe me, or I'm going to fall apart," or "My husband requires sex on demand and doesn't allow me to see my family or friends, and sometimes he'll take the kids and he'll

be gone for days, but I wouldn't necessarily call him abusive," or "I'm separated from my husband, but he's being really nice now, so actually, I think I may be the bad one."

So all of these are examples of cognitive dissonance and why we may be experiencing that. Basically, we are wired with thoughts and beliefs from our family of origin, our churches, our friends, books we read, movies we see, podcasts we listen to — all of the places where we get our information and have our experiences are going to wire our thoughts and beliefs. And these thoughts create neural connections in our brain like little super highways.

So for example, if we see a visual picture of a Bible or we see a Bible on a shelf or we see a Bible on our desk, our default thought that our brain might have with this immediate neural connection might be something like, "Oh, the answer to everything in life." Our brain has practiced that thought for years, so it's just a natural thought.

But let's say that our child gets cancer and requires chemotherapy and surgery, which is not taught in the Bible. Unless we are willing to allow some cognitive dissonance to come into play with a new thought, like, "Hmm, the Bible does not have the answer to this problem, so I will need to look elsewhere in God's world for some solutions" — unless we're willing to do that, we're going to hang onto our belief and then our child will not get the medical help that she needs. Now, this is an extreme example. This is the stuff of cult thinking, for example. But I wanted to use it to explain what we can do to change our thinking if we want to.

Now, there are three illustrations I like to use in my program, and I got them from different places out there. So this is not coming out of my own brain — it's just stuff I've learned and I pass it along. But one is a superhighway idea. Basically, your default programming is like a superhighway. Cars can easily drive on a highway, and so they do. Cars do not want to drive through jungles. That's hard. So finding a new thought is like giving your brain the option of driving a car on a highway, or you could drive your car through a jungle that doesn't even have a path yet. Which option will your brain automatically choose? Well, brains love the easiest option best, so if you want to grow a new neural connection or a new road, you have to manage your own brain and make a conscious, intentional choice to think the new thought over and over and over again. You need to practice driving that car through the jungle until you have made a new path.

And at first, it's going to be very uncomfortable. Your brain is going to argue with you: "But wouldn't it just be so much easier to go back to the original thought? That's what we've been thinking for years and years and years, and it's easy and it makes sense to

us." But if you can learn to tolerate that discomfort after a few thousand drives — probably a lot less — the jungle road will be well worn and the old highway will actually have overgrown with plants and rocks. And now your brain, when faced with a choice of which neural pathway to drive on, it will choose the new jungle path and it will reject the old highway, which is now overgrown. Do you see this? You've created this new neural pathway, and your brain's default thought is no longer the old thought, but it's now a brand new thought that you have chosen.

Now, another illustration that might help is thinking about two trees growing side by side. And each tree represents a thought, and they're opposite thoughts or opposing thoughts. One tree is like a big oak tree of a thought. This is a belief that's been around for decades, and it's strong and very hard to destroy. We had a couple trees removed from our yard last year, and someone had to come out with a great big, huge machine and take it down, and then the stump had to be ground. It was a whole thing, a process. It was not something that we could just go out there and take a little saw and saw these two trees down and be done with it. It was a whole thing.

So the other tree, though, imagine another tree growing next to this big oak tree, and this tree is just a little kind of a twiggy thing. It's just a young sapling. This represents a thought that is brand new and fragile, and you have the choice of which tree you're going to feed and water. The tree that you nourish and love is the one that's going to grow, and then the other one will eventually die. But you get to decide. Now, while those trees are both alive and growing side by side, you will experience some discomfort — cognitive dissonance, okay? But if you consistently choose to nourish one over the other, eventually the other one will die and go away.

And finally, a third illustration I like to use is the idea of listening to two different radio stations at the same time. I mean, talk about confusing, right? But you get to decide which station you want to tune into and listen to. You may not be able to completely turn off the other station because it's been running longer than the new station, but you can turn down the volume of that station while you turn up the volume on the station that you choose to listen to.

Cognitive dissonance is a normal part of your human development. It is not something to be scared of. I see people coming into the forum and they're like, "Oh no, this is horrible. I have cognitive dissonance," and I just want to say "Yes! That means that you are growing. This is amazing!" We want to lean into cognitive dissonance and recognize it for what it is. You can actually think, "Look at there. I have some cognitive dissonance. That means I'm getting some new thoughts that are feeling uncomfortable. Let's try those thoughts on."

Another illustration that I've heard is like trying on a clothing item that maybe is something that you've never really worn before. Maybe it's a color that you've always kind of shied away from because maybe it's too bold or maybe it's a pattern. For example, I remember the first time I tried on something that was an animal print, I thought, "Oh, that's just not me. I'm a flower girl. I wear floral blouses, but I don't wear animal prints." And I tried it on and looked at myself and I had some cognitive dissonance because that wasn't what I would normally wear. And yet the pattern and the color of the pattern looked really good on me, and so I ended up getting it.

At first, it was uncomfortable when I would put that shirt on, but over time I grew accustomed to it and it became a normal shirt that I would wear and feel perfectly comfortable wearing. And now I actually will look at animal prints on purpose and consider them, whereas before I would have just overlooked them and completely denied their existence as far as how they might relate to my wardrobe.

So anyway, what we want to do is find out what the two thoughts are that are going on at the same time that are opposites or contradicting each other, and then we can decide which one we want to nurture and which one we are interested in discarding over time. Another word for this is just increasing our self-awareness.

Cognitive dissonance only becomes a problem when we avoid looking at those two thoughts. We either run away from them and deny that we're having opposite thoughts, or when we find new information and we pathologize it... So, I see this a lot in Christian circles. I regularly get hate emails from people who, they call themselves Christians and they say things like, "You are lying and you are believing lies from the devil," or "You are teaching lies." Now, these are people who are fighting the learning and growing process.

And this is just a good example of my own cognitive dissonance and how I've had to rewire my brain, because I used to have the belief that if someone called themselves a Christian, if they said, "I'm a Christian," I automatically assumed, "Well, they must be a kind and loving person like Jesus." I also automatically gave all their words credibility. Now, this is extremely naïve and childlike for me to approach things like this, and yet this is how I approached things. I was very naïve. I had a very "Pollyanna" outlook on people, and I just believed them — I gave them credibility.

But when I stopped denying what I was experiencing... So I believed that, and yet what I was experiencing was a lot of bullying, gaslighting, manipulation, a lot of critical maligning of other people and of myself, all of that kind of stuff. When I stopped denying that and I acknowledged it, I realized, "Wow, I have a lot of cognitive

dissonance. I need to rewire my brain with something new.”

And the new belief that I now have is that some people say they are Christians — and they may or may not be. That is not for me to be able to decide — but that doesn't automatically mean that they are going to show up for their lives and in the world around them the way Jesus did. It doesn't mean that they are actually walking in His footsteps just because they say, “I am a Christian.” It does mean that they definitely want others to think that the way they believe and feel and behave is the Christian way or the way that Jesus Himself would have believed, felt, and behaved. But just because they want other people to think that, that doesn't mean that other people have to. It doesn't mean we have to believe that or think that.

So when someone sends a hate mail from an email address like “jesussaves@something.com,” I no longer give emails like that credibility. I delete them. And if it's a long email, I just delete it. As soon as I read something hateful, I just delete it. I don't even read the rest of it. So if you want to send me a lengthy letter-email telling me how horrible of a person I am, go right ahead, but you're wasting your time because I won't even read it.

This is how I protect my mind, and this is what I help women do in the Flying Free program. I coach women on their thoughts and their cognitive dissonance every single week for an hour and a half to two hours, and members get to listen to all of it on our private podcast. This is in addition to courses and a private forum and also access to hundreds of hours of past workshops, butterfly stories, coaching, and lessons. It's a veritable treasure trove of help, and you can learn more about it by going to [joinflyingfree.com](http://joinflyingfree.com).

Here are some examples of cognitive dissonance that I've coached on this year in 2023. It's not everything, but here are just a few little samples: “I believe my husband loves me and wants to change.” “I don't think my husband loves me or wants to change.” “I believe God calls me to forgive, and that means continuing to build relationships with those who chronically mistreat me.” “I believe God calls me to freedom, and that means continuing to build safe relationships with those who offer mutual love and respect.” “I want to be unstuck, but my husband is keeping me stuck.” “I'm an adult, but I need someone else to take care of me.” “I want to tell the truth, but if I tell the truth, I'm a bad person.” “I don't know what to do with my life, so someone else has to tell me.” “My husband told a bunch of lies about me, but maybe they are true. After all, I visit my sick dad whenever I can, but I'm a bad daughter for not visiting him more.” “My husband isn't controlling, but he hides money.”



Now, if you would like help with your own cognitive dissonance, I would love to see you join Flying Free. It's only \$29 a month or \$290 for an entire year. That's the cost of a couple of therapy sessions, so it's very affordable, but in terms of how it's going to change your life and your future — priceless. [joinflyingfree.com](http://joinflyingfree.com) for more information and to complete an application, and let's get started on working with all of the cognitive dissonance in your own life.

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