

What Happens In Our Brain When Our Views Are Challenged?

Everyone has had a conversation with someone who shares distinctly different views and has left it feeling frustrated, as if there has been breakdown in communication and there is nothing we can do to make the other person understand our perspective. This conflict is more likely to appear when the discussions centre on topics that we really care about, and that we view as connected to our identity.

To help temper future conflict around the communication of strongly held opinions and beliefs, it is important to understand what is going on in our brain:

- **Until adolescence, our brain works like a flexible sponge, absorbing information in our external environment to better understand the world and our position in it.**
 - At some point in adolescence, the brain changes tack, its role shifts from sponge to defender, and it now gives dominance to the internal environment: what we think and believe.
- **From this point onwards, if we encounter information that challenges our worldview or a central tenet of our identity, we become defensive and our brains go into flight or flight mode, in the same way they would if we were physically under attack.**
 - This is due to the fact that we have set ideas about who we are, what we are like and what we believe – in effect, our identity has become ‘fixed’. Information that challenges our identity and understanding of the world, therefore, feels like a threat to who we are and to the reality that our brains have spent so long constructing.
- **When encountering opposing views on topics that we regard as central to who we are, we subsequently retreat inwards or expend energy on staunchly defending why our views and beliefs are the ‘right’ ones.**
 - Indeed, research has shown that when our deepest beliefs are challenged, even if they are challenged with reputable scientific research, our response is to protect and defend these beliefs with such fervour that we end up believing them more than before they were challenged. This response has been termed “The Backfire Effect”.
- Now, this isn’t to say that our identity remains completely fixed over time – we can absorb new ideas, and new features might become central to who we are and form part of our

new reality. But the same remains true – that whenever beliefs, values or opinions central to our identity are challenged we tend to feel like we are under attack.

It is really important to keep this knowledge of how our brains work in mind when we are connecting people and trying to build a sense of community because:

- **We need to avoid putting people into a state of stress that makes them feel as if they are in danger, particularly if we cannot support them through the state of stress.**
 - If we want to help someone understand a view that runs contrary to a deeply held belief or a view they possess that is central to their identity, using facts or persuasive arguments is not going to cut it, we need to connect, listen and share. Once we make a bond with people and build trust, it is easier for them to empathise with and understand our perspective.
- **We ourselves are fallible - our perspectives and beliefs that are linked to our identity might be preventing us from fully engaging with and understanding what others are saying.**
 - We might be wrong, but our brain might be duping us into believing that we are right!

Understanding a bit about our own identity and behavioural psychology can help us become better communicators, who are able to engage with potentially frustrating opinions more effectively, and who are open to learning and questioning our own beliefs. Such understanding also encourages humility – we may not be as ‘right’ as we think or feel we are.

If desired, use these questions to reflect on the content contained above:

- Did you find any of the information you read surprising, interesting or troubling? If so, what was it and why?
- Have you ever had beliefs central to who you are challenged? What happened? Did you become more set in your views?
- Have you ever challenged beliefs central to someone else’s identity? What happened? Did you notice this “backfire”?
- Will the information contained above impact how you communicate with others? If so, how? If not, why not?

Want to learn more about the brain and the way our mind operates? Have a look here:

- [MIT Press Brain and Culture Blurb](#)
 - [‘The Backfire Effect’ Article: You Are Not So Smart](#)
 - [‘The Backfire Effect’ Podcast: You Are Not So Smart](#)
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