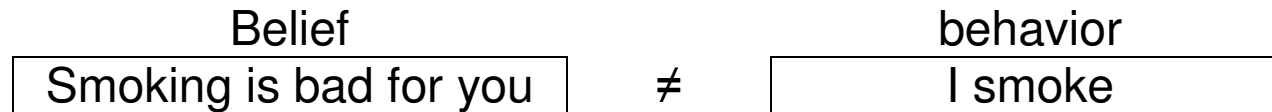


## Cognitive Dissonance

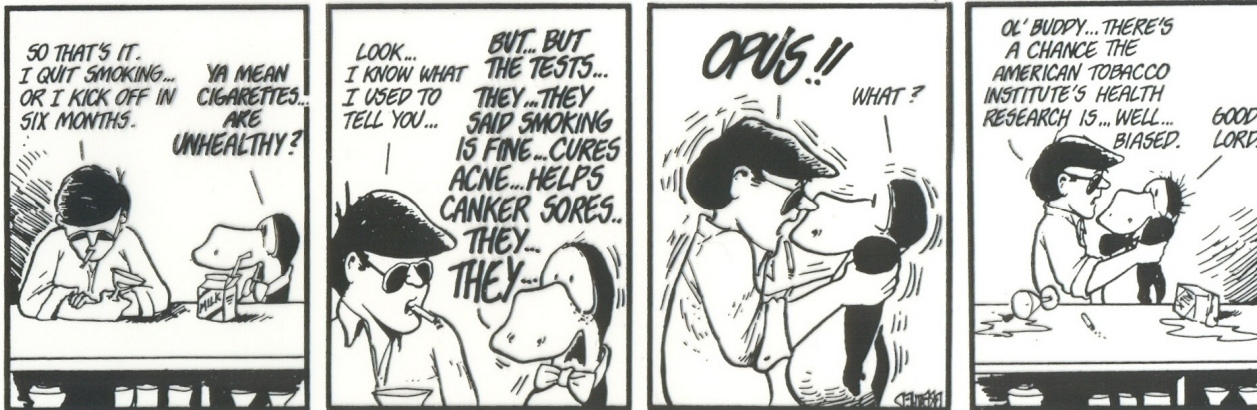
Cognitive dissonance: An unpleasant state of psychological tension or arousal that occurs when two (or more) thoughts, perceptions or behaviors are inconsistent. Typically dissonance results from the awareness that attitudes and behaviors are in conflict ([page 453](#)).



Once we are aware of these conflicts (whether conscious or not), we are motivated to reduce this tension.

## Reducing Dissonance

When behavior and attitudes are inconsistent, psychology tension arises. We are motivated to reduce this tension.



Belief

Smoking is bad for you

≠

behavior

I smoke

Generally, when we notice a discrepancy, we are motivated to reduce it by

- changing the behavior—**stop smoking**
- changing your attitude—**smoking isn't that bad**

Changing your behavior is difficult. It is easier to reducing dissonance by “distorting reality” through rationalizations or trivializing the discrepancy.

## Cognitive dissonance

Before:

### **belief**

I have liberal beliefs  
(tends to be  
inconsistent with  
many Republican  
political platforms)

≠

### **behavior**

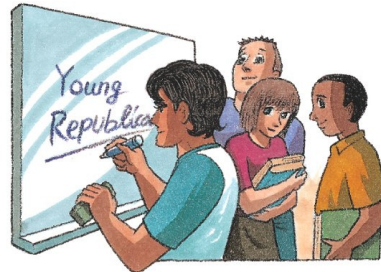
I joined the Young  
Republicans

→

The inconsistency  
produces  
psychological  
tension



J.J.'s attitude:  
"My political beliefs are  
liberal."



J.J.'s behavior:  
J.J. joins Young Republicans because his  
girlfriend is an officer.

Cognitive dissonance  
(awareness that attitude  
and behavior are  
inconsistent)



Dissonance resolved:  
"Maybe the conservatives  
have a point."

After:

### **belief**

Maybe the  
conservatives have  
a point

=

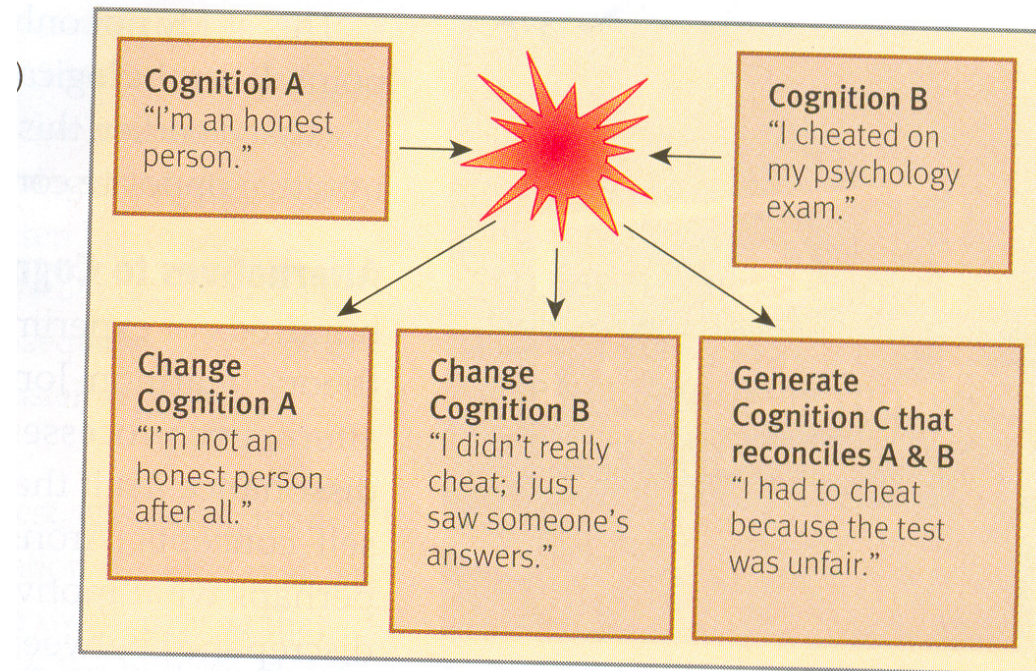
### **behavior**

I joined the Young  
Republicans

⇒

The belief and  
behaviors are  
consistent and less  
psychological  
tension

## Cognitive Dissonance

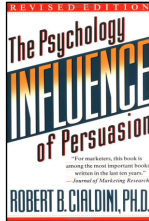


To resolve this nag-  
dy isn't really a nice  
hat the news that  
ou can instead  
etween cognitions  
nice person but

**Figure 11.10 Cognitive Dissonance Theory.** According to cognitive dissonance theory, we can reduce the conflicts between two cognitions (beliefs) in the multiple ways shown above.

## Cognitive Dissonance

In the book Influence: Science and Practice, by Robert Cialdini (1985) describes a good example of cognitive dissonance that helps students realize that cognitive dissonance influences their lives.



The story is about a young woman who is involved in an unsatisfying relationship. Her boyfriend doesn't treat her well; he drinks too much, and he is unwilling to hold a steady job. Finally, she manages to break off the relationship with this man, and shortly thereafter, she meets a new fellow and falls deeply in love. This second relationship flourishes nicely and culminates in wedding plans; the date is set, the hall reserved, the invitations sent, and everything looks like it is turning up daisies for her until she receives a phone call from a repenting first boyfriend. At first the woman is unwilling to talk with him; after all, she is engaged to another man. But gradually her resolve weakens and she listens as he pleads for a second chance and promises her that he will change. To everyone's disappointment, she finally breaks off the engagement and goes back to her first boyfriend.

At first, things go well for the woman, but as all of the students anticipate, it is not long before the boyfriend reverts back to drinking and treating her badly. What surprises students, however, is that the woman does not seem at all disappointed; indeed, she now seems happier, more committed, and more in love with him than ever before.

What are the inconsistent behavior(s) and belief(s)?

## Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance may explain the woman's odd reaction. We base our beliefs and feelings on our behavior. Hence, in this case, the woman concluded she loved the man precisely because she had given up so much for him.

1. Identify some inconsistencies that create psychological tension (cognitive dissonance)

I'm in a bad relationship	≠	Unhealthy relationships are bad for you
I went back to my bad relationship when I was in a good relation	≠	I'm a smart and sensible person (people don't choose bad relationships)

2. What are some ways to resolve these inconsistencies?
3. What beliefs about the self might make cognitive dissonance more likely?

## **Reducing Dissonance**

We have many attitudes and behaviors that are inconsistent with each other. It is difficult to notice these inconsistencies when they occur far apart in time. We may not recognize these discrepancies until someone points them out, or we reflect upon our own behavior.

However, we might not WANT to recognize these inconsistencies because it would produce psychological tension to acknowledge we have these inconsistencies. These inconsistencies can threaten our self-concept.



Examples of inconsistencies:

We want a smaller government	We want the government to provide more services
We want lower taxes	We want the government to provide more services
We believe education is important	We don't fund it
We want government out of our lives	We want the government to regulate businesses (eg. Firestone, EPA, OSHA), etc.
We want safer working conditions with a livable wage	We want cheaper food, clothes, etc and/or buy sweatshop labor products
We want presidential debates that cover issues and have substance	We don't watch them because they aren't "exciting" or "entertaining"
We know alcohol is dangerous	Many people use/abuse alcohol
We want people to tell the truth	We shun those who tell the truth (eg. Jeffrey Wygand)
We want people to tell the truth	We lie
Eating healthy is important	We eat at McDonalds
Sleep is important	We get less sleep than we should
We want a democracy with deliberation of the issues	We want things to happen fast

Talking on the cell phone when driving  
is dangerous

We talk on the cell phone while driving

## **Student examples of Cognitive Dissonance**

I know that I shouldn't eat junk food but I love chocolate cake so I just tell myself that it's okay to eat chocolate cake because it isn't really junk food; it has eggs and milk in it. It's actually good for you.

In the book *Schoolgirls*, it discusses the low rate of protected sex among young, mostly Latina girls. A theory that explains this statistic is that most girls, especially Catholic Latina girls, are taught and eventually believe that sex is wrong for women. Therefore having protected sex involves a conscious, somewhat premeditated decision to engage in sex.