

“Transforming Perceptual Dissonance”

Cognitive dissonance is an uncomfortable feeling caused by holding two contradictory ideas simultaneously. For example, cognitive dissonance may be experienced when one supports animal rights and still eats meat. Many studies have been done related to how one can deal optimally with cognitive dissonance in professions like law enforcement and military service where some very difficult decisions have to be made by people who greatly value human life but may be faced with the necessity to take a human life. It is also a very common experience in everyday life. When it occurs, we feel uncomfortable and even hypocritical. I may be critical of someone driving and using his or her cell phone, but I also may use my cell phone when driving. Of course, I may resolve my cognitive dissonance by rationalizing that I only do it when necessary and never in heavy traffic (unfortunately, that would be between 11pm and 6am in Atlanta).

There is another kind of dissonance that is even more difficult to deal with because it occurs only in the context of relationship. I call this perceptual dissonance, and it is often toxic and even deadly to some relationships. “Perception” is an idea or experience as it is influenced by feelings. Perceptual dissonance occurs when differing feelings are applied to the same idea or experience. She says, “What a beautiful sunset!” He says, “It is a nice sunset.” She says, “But it is a beautiful sunset. He says, “It is just a sunset.” She says, “You never appreciate sunsets. You are not romantic at all.” He says, “That is not true. I like sunsets fine.” She says, “Well, you never like what I like.” Pretty soon the perceptual dissonance will result in a painful argument, and these two people will probably not even remember they were talking about sunsets.

So why is perceptual dissonance such a problem? I believe the problem is that, unlike cognitive dissonance, perceptual dissonance occurs outside of our cognitive awareness. One might say that perceptual dissonance occurs more in our hearts than in our minds.

To overcome the problem of perceptual dissonance, we first need to be aware and accept that we all have different perceptions because we all have different feelings about our ideas and experiences. Second, we need to be able to talk about what is in our hearts and listen openly to what is in another person’s heart. The second solution can be very challenging because many of us have a lot of difficulty when it comes to talking about our feelings. When we can accomplish these solutions, I think perceptual dissonance actually becomes perceptual synergy.

So she says, “What a beautiful sunset!” He says, “It looks like a regular sunset to me.” “Really? I think it is beautiful,” she says. He asks, “What makes it so beautiful for you?” She answers, “I’m not sure. My mother loved sunsets. Maybe it just reminds me of her.” He responds, “I loved your mother very much. She was a wonderful person. I can see why it is so beautiful to you.” “Thank you,” she replies.