

Cognitive dissonance

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What is Cognitive Dissonance? Describe a time in your life when you experienced Cognitive Dissonance. What were the conflicting factors and how did you resolve the conflict?

First coined by social psychologist Leon Festinger in his 1956 book *When Prophecy Fails*, Cognitive Dissonance describes the state of conflict arising in the human mind as it tries to accommodate two opposing realities. This concept is best illustrated through Aesop's fable of the hungry wolf. As the wolf's attempts to get hold of the bunch of grapes fails repeatedly, it eventually gives up. But instead of smarting from the failure, it perks itself by thinking that the grapes were not needed after all. For all it knows they could turn out to be bitter and sour. The theory of Cognitive Dissonance is quite fundamental to the study of social psychology, as it is applicable to a vast array of everyday situations faced by people.

In my life so far, there have been many instances of Cognitive Dissonance. But I would regard a few of them to be particularly instructive and formative. One such is the high school prom event that happened last year. I am usually a reserved personality type, not comfortable with large public gatherings. But the prom was one occasion when I was forced out of my comfort zone. The days before the prom were anxiety ridden. I couldn't eat, sleep or concentrate properly, as my mind was preoccupied with what might unfold during the upcoming event. It was a reflection of the state of my mind that I took a long time in deciding what to wear to the Prom.

On the morning of the Prom my nerves really started playing up. I was on the verge of a panic attack and only averted it through long, slow breathing for a few minutes. I managed to distract myself with household chores till the evening arrived. I was able to spot my close friends right at the edge of the

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gathering and immediately joined them. That soothed the nerves a little as I was able to forget other peering eyes. I managed to get through the formal photograph session without much ado as I clung on to my group. And then during the dance event my social inhibitions were exposed a little. This phase was a tough to negotiate and I couldn't wait for it to end. Later in the evening, the Prom Queen, Prom King, Prom Prince, Prom Princess was announced. As the members selected for the Prom Court was read out, I was surprised to find my name included. From relative obscurity for most part of the event, I was suddenly thrust into the spotlight, as my friends and classmates congratulated me.

I'd never thought of myself as a very popular student. So the announcement took me aback and also increased my anxiety. When I was called upon the stage to say a few words, I was struck by trepidation. But since there's no escape from the situation, I went through the motions and uttered a few words in the mike. As I began to speak, the audience began to pay attention. Their attention, strangely enough, calmed me too. My words began to make sense too, as I thanked all those who voted me into the Court. I also acknowledged my responsibilities as a member of the Court and promised to give it all. Upon conclusion of my speech, the gathering at the Prom gave a warm round of applause, which I appreciated and enjoyed too.

These few minutes of my school life would prove to be very consequential, for it brought out another facet to my personality. It made me realize that my prior introversion was purely a matter of conditioning and that I had the capacity to manifest another side. The conflict and agony that I was carrying throughout the evening resolved into a state of relaxed confidence. The Prom dinner was a totally different experience, as the dissonant state of

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mind gave way to one of self-confidence, pride and enjoyment. To this day, I look back at the Prom as a crucial formative event to the evolvment of my personality.