

MY WAY OR THE HIGHWAY

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Sweetheart, listen to me. All you have to do is add the four and divide both sides by two to isolate the x . Does that make sense? You just have to.” The sound of my mom’s words faded out and was replaced by my rapidly growing frustration. I mindlessly scanned the paper that lay in front of me on the kitchen table. Her gentle attempt to help me understand my sixth-grade pre-algebra homework did nothing but fuel my anger.

“No. That’s not how he taught it. That’s wrong. It doesn’t matter if that’s how you do it. That’s not what I’m supposed to do,” I snapped, refusing to accept any logic other than my own. In that moment, it did not matter to me that my mom was an extremely intelligent adult who had not only completed Pre-Algebra but had also graduated from middle school, high school, college, and medical school. Regardless of her knowledge, I was absolutely convinced that she was wrong. I was determined to believe that I, a twelve-year-old, who had only recently been introduced to algebra, knew more than she did. I refused to believe that there could possibly be another way to explain the process of solving a basic algebra problem. Just because it was not my way of thinking, I completely disregarded my mom’s instructions and silenced the opposition.

Scientists Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber name behavior like mine “myside bias,” according to Elizabeth Kolbert in her essay “Why Facts Don’t Change Our Minds.” Kolbert notes examples of human behavior discussed in various psychological studies and examines the origin of these habits and mindsets. Kolbert declares that when “presented with someone else’s argument, we’re quite adept at spotting the weaknesses. Almost invariably, the positions we’re blind about are our own” (7). She tells of one specific experiment in which participants were asked to answer a series of simple reasoning problems. They were told to explain their answers and were given a chance to modify them later, if they noticed any mistakes. Kolbert clarifies that “the majority were satisfied with their original choices; fewer than fifteen percent changed their minds in step two” (7). In the third step, participants were given one of the same problems, along with their

response and that of another participant, whose opinion differed from their own. The participants were given another opportunity to make any changes to their responses. Kolbert explains, however, that “a trick had been played: the answers presented to them as someone else’s were actually their own, and vice versa” (8). According to Kolbert, about half the participants caught on to the trick. The members of the other half suddenly became “a lot more critical,” Kolbert claims, adding that “nearly sixty percent now rejected the responses that they’d earlier been satisfied with” (8). Clearly, some of the participants were overcome with “myside bias.” Kolbert’s content made me realize that I, too, was swayed by “myside bias,” when, in the heat of my frustration and disagreement, I was unable to see the logic of my mom’s explanation. Stubbornly, I shut out her reasoning, solely because it was not my own. I wanted to stick to my opinion and protect it at all costs, even if it turned out to be completely wrong. I thought that refusing to back down from my view would make me seem more intelligent and my opinion more legitimate.

Eventually, as my understanding of algebra matured, and I matured with it, I realized that the process my mom had so kindly tried to teach me was identical to the one I claimed to have been taught. The only difference was a minor shortcut, where my mom did not fully write out the steps she had completed. That was all—a simple difference in the way she was showing her work. I could have easily realized this at the time, had I not been so single-minded. Why did I refuse to listen to my mom’s explanation? Was this just an example of “myside bias” at work? Or is there something more to explain this behavior?

Becoming defensive regarding a belief is fairly common, but why do we struggle to accept others’ opinions and admit that we are, in fact, wrong? Kristin Wong provides an explanation in her *New York Times* article, “Why It’s So Hard to Admit You’re Wrong.” According to Wong, we struggle to admit that we are wrong because of a psychological stress called “cognitive dissonance” (1). We experience this type of stress “when we hold two contradictory thoughts, beliefs, opinions or attitudes” (1). In the example provided by Wong, you may experience dissonance if you believe you are a kind person but then rudely cut off a car while driving. To cope with such a contradiction, “you deny your mistake and insist the other driver should have seen you, or you had the right of way even if you didn’t” (1). You could not possibly admit that you are wrong—right?

Admitting your mistake, accepting someone else's opinion, or apologizing also means accepting the dissonance between thought and behavior, "and that is unpleasant" (2). Therefore, we often stay true to our argument because it makes us feel powerful, which can be "an attractive short-term benefit" (3). However, according to Tyler Okimoto, the author of a psychology study that Wong discusses in her article, "if it is undeniably clear that you are in the wrong, refusing to apologize reveals low self-confidence" (4). Okimoto also claims that "if it is clear to everybody that you made a mistake, digging your heels in actually shows people your weakness... rather than strength" (4). If you consider this idea, admitting you are wrong may not seem so bad after all. Sticking to your opinion, no matter how wrong it is, may make you feel powerful in the moment, but in reality, you are making yourself appear as just the opposite.

Rebecca Solnit, in her essay "The Habits of Highly Cynical People" for *Harper's Magazine*, explains the refusal to admit mistakes as a form of cynicism, a doubtful attitude and unhelpful outlook on life. In simplest terms, cynics believe that they know the truth, and anyone who disagrees is naive. According to Solnit, cynicism "takes pride more than anything in not being fooled and not being foolish. But . . . cynicism is frequently both these things" (2). Like Okimoto, Solnit suggests that a stubborn point of view works against the person who possesses it, in the sense that they appear naive when they intend to be sophisticated and weak when they intend to be strong.

To demonstrate her suggestion, Solnit shares a story about the reaction of a commenter on a Facebook post she made regarding climate change. The post involved a passage from the February issue of *Nature Climate Change*, and in the passage, a group of scientists discussed the impact of climate change over the next 10,000 years.

The scientists revealed a shocking reality: "The next few decades offer a brief window of opportunity to minimize large-scale and potentially catastrophic climate change that will extend longer than the entire history of human civilization thus far" (4). Solnit shares that the first comment left on the post was, "there's nothing that's going to stop the consequences of what we have already done/not done" (4). As Solnit puts it, the commenter was essentially saying, "I'm pitting my own casual assessment over peer-reviewed science; I'm not reading carefully; I'm making a thwacking sound with my false omniscience" (4). When trying to project an image of strength and certainty, the commenter unknowingly did the

exact opposite. The overpowering and pre-existing feelings that this person had towards the topic, in combination with their cynical personality, resulted in not only an embarrassing reflection of themselves, but also a pathetic attempt to crush the opposing view. Had the commenter approached the contradicting opinion with even the slightest bit of an open mind, a great deal of negativity could have been avoided on both sides.

After I had realized that my mom was correct in solving the algebra problem, it was so difficult to admit that I finally understood her explanation, and that she was right. Relinquishing that power and accepting that I was wrong in refusing to listen took a surprising amount of effort, which can be explained by Wong's idea of "cognitive dissonance." But what was even more surprising was the volume of knowledge that I mindlessly shut out to protect my flawed reasoning and personal opinion, just as the cynic did in Solnit's article. A connection can also be made between my experience and that of the participants in the study explored by Kolbert, who shot down an opposing opinion simply because they thought it was someone else's. I do not believe, therefore, that any one explanation can independently be used to explain this behavior. Perhaps the cause is several psychological habits in combination with each other. Regardless, if we approach views contradictory to our own with an open mind, we can avoid those uncomfortable situations in which we have to admit that we are wrong. By making ourselves open to the possibility of other viewpoints, we can also protect ourselves from an embarrassing display of a stubborn, weak, and naive character.

Just because you may disagree with someone does not mean they are wrong. It also does not mean you are wrong. If you take a moment to have a conversation, listen to each other, consider the opposing position, and try to reach common ground, you can most likely avoid a lot of frustration. And if by the end of the discussion, you do realize how wrong you are, consider this: sometimes owning the ability to admit that you are wrong can make you seem far more powerful than being right in the first place, because you have the courage to say "You're right, I'm wrong, and I respect that."

WORKS CITED

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