

Why It's So Hard to Be Wrong

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Just about everybody hates to be wrong. It makes us feel stupid, or worthless, or ashamed. We get angry and defensive, feeling attacked, insisting our position is right and justified. Our reactions to being wrong are usually boulders in the road to authentic communication and reaching a mutually acceptable understanding.

But why? What's so bad about being wrong?

Humans are unique creatures. Most animals live according to fairly simple rules based on what their physical senses pick up from the external world. We, on the other hand, have the ability to perceive and process information about things that don't come from the external world through our five senses.

We call these things "ideas and concepts." They are "things," but they aren't based on our usual senses. For instance, you can't take a photo of the idea of "reasonable." You can't taste the concept of "happiness." (Although certain tastes can definitely make us happy. Hello chocolate!) We can take a picture of a smiling person and say they're happy, but we can't capture a happiness. Happiness is a concept that comes from the human brain which we then apply to the picture of the smiling person. Nevertheless, we live in the conceptual world every bit as much as in the ordinary physical world. We can "stand on principle," or "live with" an idea.

Concepts are highly useful because they convey whole categories of information in very efficient ways. Imagine trying to tell someone all about a party by trying to describe every physical sensation that affected your eyes, ears, nose, and taste buds. It's so much easier to say, "The party was fun. I had a good time." We get it when people say that, and "fun" is a concept.

We get into trouble because our concepts take on a life of their own. The lifeblood of concepts is "being right." Just like all parts of our bodies have to have blood flow to stay alive, all parts of our conceptual bodies (aka "belief system") must have their supply of being right to stay alive. When someone threatens our supply of being right about something, we disagree, sometimes very passionately, even violently. We develop elaborate psychological defenses to avoid being wrong. Being wrong equals death in the conceptual world.

Therefore, human beings often defend their beliefs almost as vigorously as they defend their bodies. Remember the "Being Imperfect Together" column from September 24, about why people act like jerks sometimes? The answer was because of defensive reactions. They are most often defending their concept(s) from the "death" of possibly being wrong. Maybe it's more difficult to understand defensiveness when it comes to concepts as compared, say, to someone being attacked by a bear, but it's a very real phenomenon that drives human behavior.

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