

## **Cognitive Dissonance;**

Listening to Bertie's accounts of how he has managed his finances in the past reminded me of a very basic phenomenon we learned in introductory psychology. This is called cognitive dissonance. It refers to the dissonance or unpleasant conflict we experience when we hold two contrary ideas or when we say one thing and do the other.

Dissonant cognitions or thoughts are related to each other and refute or disprove one another. For example, 'The Irish rugby team is one of the best in the world' and 'The Irish rugby team have been unable to convincingly beat Namibia and Georgia' are ideas that do not support each other. Since the ideas are in opposition, your mind does not want to allow these ideas to coexist and tries to get rid of one of them.

Every one of us has to deal with dissonance – when we don't do as we say or when we do something inconsistent with our principles. Dissonance in your mind is like hunger in your stomach, the stronger the dissonance the greater the desire to remove or lessen the dissonance.

There are many ways to deal with dissonance, but most of them fit into one of three groups. We can increase the value we place on the positive belief, we can decrease the value we place on the negative belief, or we can just ignore and avoid the discrepancy altogether.

For Bertie Ahern the two conflicting thoughts 'I am an honourable and honest man' and 'I am have deceived the tax-man about my financial affairs' inevitably create much dissonance. Bertie is faced with the three options:

He can increase the value of positive information that supports his idea that he is an honest man. He, and his colleagues, can do this by emphasising his track record, his success in the election, his modest life style, his likeability, etc.

He can decrease the value of the dissonant information that suggests he is a deceitful man by suggesting that what he is accused of is out of proportion, by discrediting the Tribunal as the source of the accusations, by emphasising that it happened a long time ago, or, for example, by arguing that it is an insignificance amount of money, etc

Or he can blatantly ignorance of the facts by emphasising that he has to get on with his job, that he has more important things to deal with, or not take questions on the issue.

You can make your own judgements about what he is doing but you can be sure that he has been experiencing cognitive dissonance – that is a mental conflict between what he believes about himself and what has done.

Cognitive dissonance applies to all of us and our need to appear and feel unconflicted is very strong. We want to get rid of the conflict and arrive at some consistency and certainty. The truth about Bertie is one that he cannot admit to because it would expose him in the public eye to a humanity that he doubts we can tolerate. The real truth would be to admit to the conflict without trying to do exaggerate his honesty, diminish his dishonesty, or trying to avoid the issue.

If Bertie were to speak the real truth and inhabit his dissonance he would say:

“You know, I am a conflicted person. I am by and large and very honourable and honest man but like all men I have had moments of dishonesty and deception. The difficulty I have with the tribunal is that it exposes this truth. I need you, for the sake of the party, to continue to see me as honest so we try to exaggerate this fact. I do not want you to see me as deceitful so we try to discredit the tribunal and minimise the entire significance of the issue. In order to diminish the revelation that I am 95% honest and 5% dishonest I might also try to ignore the whole issue. But, between you and me, we know the truth. It does not sit well with me – to acknowledge that I have deceived people, or that I have sinned because it makes me look like a hypocrite. However, I have to have the courage to admit to occasional hypocrisy and assume that you, being as human as I, have had your moments too. So the truth is that I am, very simply, a good man who has done some not so good things.”

In this way Bertie would inhabit his conflict and dissonance and not try to make it go away. It takes courage to do this kind of thing, in all walks of life. In relationships it is the strong adult who is able, in the cut and thrust of domestic life, to admit to his or her failings, inconsistencies, and hypocrisy. For example, the angry parent who berates his children for showing anger; the lazy husband who criticises his wife for her untidiness; the defiant teenager who criticises his parents for defying his demands. Everybody, at certain moments, is hypocritical and dissonant. It is hard to tolerate our hypocrisies so we try to make them go away. Unlike Bertie, try to tolerate yours. It is actually a relief.