

# Cognitive Dissonance

## Holding Space | The Secret Sauce for Growth

Cognitive dissonance has been a common state for many of us over the past year and a half. Our worlds have turned upside down in so many ways and we have had to find new and creative ways to adapt and grow within our new environments. When we stare our beliefs, ideas, or values in the face and have the stark realization that our world is contradicting those, we find ourselves experiencing an intense form of cognitive dissonance. This is typically experienced as psychological stress, when gone unchecked can quickly transform into physical illness and distress.

Our common response to cognitive dissonance is to change ourselves or change our environment until the two are in harmony once again, because we as human beings strive for internal psychological consistency to function mentally in the world. We are generally uncomfortable with psychological or emotional discomfort and motivated to reduce this discomfort at any cost, even if this leads us to mask the core of who we are to match our external environment. The challenge here is we can find ourselves in a perpetual state of rationalization and avoidance, which over time can increase the magnitude of the cognitive dissonance and separate us further and further from our authentic selves.



Coping with the nuances of contradictory ideas or experiences can be mentally stressful. It requires energy and effort to sit with those seemingly opposite things that all seem true. The way through this is to hold space for the growth and lessons to emerge during these times.

The last year and a half has provided a treasure trove of opportunities to practice holding space – for ourselves, our friends and family, and/or clients and colleagues. Pause for a moment and reflect. Did you stuff down angst, sadness, and fear in hopes that it would disappear? Did you focus on the discomfort and allow it to overpower you? Or, did you approach these experiences as silver linings to practice holding space and growing in ways that you did not invite? What approaches did you take in both your personal and professional life?

As we face the challenges of our day, some things are easier to do than others. For most of us, it's not an either-or approach. We deal with what we have emotional bandwidth for on a given day, and some things get postponed and procrastinated until they resurface again and again. Our psyches remind us that the only way out is through.

## Attention Spans are Dwindling

The truth of the matter is that our attention spans are dwindling as we are used to having things happen now - overnight shipping, on-demand entertainment, fast food, direct deposit, and instant google searches at our fingertips. This instant gratification has subconsciously trained us to avoid being, stopping, and holding space. As we continue our quest for quick fixes, we start to experience a dopamine surge in our brains long before we actually experience any reward. The problem with this is that the craving associated with dopamine release creates subconscious addictive behavior that gets in the way of our ability to pause. Working through emotions takes time and attention, which runs contrary to much of our lives. As such, the aim of this article is to provide some resources to help you, your teammates, and those around you when holding space is the best option.

## 8 Tips for Holding Space

**Tip #1: Name It To Tame It and then Reframe It** is an adage used in professional coaching. Keeping things bottled up and hidden only gives them more power. While naming how you're feeling won't necessarily fix things, it will dispel some of the power it has over you and may well allow you to be with the discomfort and see new options. Choosing one term over another can create a very different experience as we attach meaning, feeling, and action to the language we use.

For example, calling yourself devastated after a life shattering event may be accurate, but choosing to call yourself resilient, and focusing on growth opportunities, will positively impact the recovery process.



**Tip #2: Understand that we must deal with uncomfortable stuff, or it will deal with us.** For many, there is a misunderstanding that compartmentalizing or stuffing things down will work in perpetuity. It's a lie. Negative emotions have been linked with illness, so working through tough situations and emotions is good for your health in the long run. Successful conflict resolution involves a willingness to go to the hard places, to acknowledge their intrinsic worth as part of the human experience and to resist the impulse we have to immediately try to "fix it". When we try to cheer up a colleague or friend too quickly, we often inadvertently invalidate their experience. A better and more lasting path is to sit with them in their experience, to resist the quick fix (that doesn't work anyway) and to allow them the process of feeling the grief, anger, hurt, or whatever emotions they may be experiencing.



**Tip #3: Recognize that growth comes from being out of our comfort zones,** where cognitive dissonance reigns; this occurs when we experience contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values. Reflect on the times in your life that have resulted in the greatest growth; most likely, you were out of your comfort zone and experienced cognitive dissonance. Getting back to your comfort zone entailed accommodating new ideas, beliefs and/or values, which enlarged your comfort zone. It's important to note that we can actively choose to step out of our comfort zones – socially, physically, spiritually, mentally, and intellectually. Sometimes, however, circumstances force us out of our comfort zones, such as a pandemic, losing a loved one, social injustice, a termination, and more. When experiencing cognitive dissonance, it can help to remind yourself that it is an opportunity to grow, it will take time, and it will pass – if not the situation, then at least the associated extreme emotions.

### Brooke's Story of Holding Space

I work a fair bit with the Leadership Circle Profile, a robust 360-degree leadership assessment. Highly effective leaders have pretty accurate self-assessments, the result of much experience and reflection. Most, however, overestimate and/or underestimate their abilities. For those who underestimate their effectiveness, much of the coaching work focuses on coming to terms with the incredible potential of power (power *to* and *with*, rather than power *over*) and influence. The challenge, in a coaching role, is to avoid endless praising. Holding space entails asking the right questions, so the clients can investigate possibilities along with the reasons for the underestimation. Holding space, for me, is hardest when clients overestimate their abilities and are blindsided by the results of the assessment; they tend to be disappointed, embarrassed, and even angry. It's tricky to hold space wherein clients can be with those emotions, investigate the incongruence between self-and others' assessments, and encourage them to feel the cognitive dissonance, as that's part of the secret sauce for growth. However, the only way that I can be effective in this is if I first hold space for myself. I am first a feeler and second a thinker; being witness to - and even feeling with someone - in "muck", dissonance, and a range of tough emotions would engage my flight mechanism if I didn't first hold space for myself. While Gretchen used pen and paper and the time to go to the post office (see story on next page), I tend to talk with my partner (not sharing anyone's name, of course) regarding what I am feeling, such as fear about how the person will react, what tactics I can employ to help the person avoid shutting down, why I fear such reactions, etc. (see Tip #1). I then proceed with deep empathy and lots of deep breaths when my stomach butterflies appear due to a client struggling.



## Gretchen's Story of Holding Space

My 18 year old son left for Marine Bootcamp June 14th, 2020, right in the heart of COVID-19. The overwhelm of my son joining the Marines was enough for me to grapple with, let alone the added stress and fear of COVID-19. It was nearly unbearable. No phone calls, no texting, no email....just wonder and worry. Writing this now, I feel the angst bubbling up all over again. I was paralyzed. I could not seem to focus on work. While I was concerned about the state of my business and how it was being impacted by COVID-19, I can now look back and be grateful for the space that it provided me to 'BE' with my son so many miles away in a foreign environment, with drill sergeants screaming in his ears, literally spitting in his face (with COVID-19 lurking), lack of sleep, and physical and mental challenges like he's never known before.

There were days I felt I could not breathe. In a strange way I was even afraid of the pride that I would feel when I saw him next. So much emotion running through my body. Writing got me through. Remember the days of writing a letter? The embodiment and feel of the pen on paper, inserting a picture in the envelope, and taking the letter to the mailbox? While the normal mail might take 3-4 days to go across the country, let's add 10 days to that wait, having to go through the military system. Between my letter to him and his letter back to me, we're talking at least 2 weeks. Space? Oh yes. I was holding space! And this space was healing in such a unique way that we can't experience in the world of email and texts. Thankfully I had friends and parent's groups to lean on who could also hold the space for me and my son. I relied heavily on the tips shared in this article. And today I am much better for this time that I gave to myself. The space I held for ME to grow! In fact, as a bonus, the space offered me a new perspective on my business, with time to refocus and rebrand in a way that truly aligns with my deepest purpose.



## INTEGRATED GROWTH

**Tip #4: Accept or ask for a listening ear** from someone you trust; aim to identify someone who is an active, compassionate listener, rather than a fixer. Consider hiring a mental health professional or coach.

**Tip #5: Rather than forcing your way through, embrace resilience**, which goes beyond surviving something to thriving out of hardship. Many people who have been through traumatic life events found that a path to healing was recognizing that their pain could be used for the greater good. Many survivors who are on the other side of the life event choose to share their stories, both as part of the healing process for themselves but also to use their experience to help others.

**Tip #6: Be patient.** Unfortunately, no particular time frame exists for working through tough emotions and situations. Coping with multiple stressors at one time, will make this process both longer and harder. Remember that things don't always work in your timeframe.

**Tip #7: Take time to be in a green or blue space.** Walk in a city park, work in the dirt, grow something green or colorful inside, sit by a beautiful body of water, open your window and listen to passing birds. Bathe in nature daily if possible; nature has numerous health benefits.

**Tip #8: Be kind to yourself.** Give yourself a break for not being able to work through things as effectively or efficiently as you may like. Don't "should" on yourself, rather remind yourself that perfect doesn't exist and there's no right way to do this. This is your journey to do YOUR way.

Holding space may be the most powerful tool we have in today's environment; for ourselves, others, and our communities. We hope these 8 tips are useful to you and your team, as they have proven helpful to ourselves and our clients. They are in no sequential order, so see what works for you. We are here to help through coaching, team workshops, and organizational culture.

---

Zen for Business believes in a sustainable business model, meaning that companies should not only be used as a means to profit their owner(s)/shareholders, but they should also be making a positive impact on employees, the communities in which they operate, and on the environment. Zen for Business practices what we preach, we are proud to be a Certified B Corp.

We help individuals, teams, and organizations find their "Zen" state - one of full engagement, optimal performance, and joy - in work and in life. This is done through client-centered, custom-designed engagements that help people step into their authentic selves and work toward their potential.

Integrated Growth is a leadership and organizational development consultancy dedicated to advancing health and wellbeing through innovative leadership, organizational culture, and change management. Founded in 1998, Integrated Growth offers organizational effectiveness and leadership consulting across the health care, wellness, and outdoor industries. With a team of highly skilled consultants and coaches we build award winning leadership development programs, facilitate strategic planning and team development initiatives, and provide coaching for leaders and their teams.

The name Integrated Growth is based on the premise that all growth, whether personal or organizational, is integrated to provide a harmonious, interrelated whole. At Integrated Growth we work with the whole person, the whole team, and the whole organization.



**AUTHOR - Gretchen Reid** is the Founder and Chief Change and Leadership Architect for Integrated Growth. She has spent over 25 years coaching leaders and creating award-winning Leadership and Talent Development Programs, directly contributing to multiple awards for her clients, including Fast Company's 50 Most Innovative Companies, Forbes America's Best Employers List, Forbes Best Employer for Diversity, and ASTD BEST. She is an Adjunct Professor of Change Management and Innovation in the Strategic HR Masters Program, Denver University, University College. (MS, Career and Human Resource Development, Rochester Institute of Technology, BA, Psychology & Business Management, University of Rochester)



**AUTHOR - Brooke Moran** is Co-CEO and Human Potential Catalyzer, has been helping people strengthen their leadership skills, including identifying their purposes and passions, for over 20 years; on six continents in a range of environments, from conference calls to remote mountain glaciers, and from five-star resorts to Ivy League executive education classrooms. Brooke's emotional intelligence allows her to earn the trust of diverse people; from minimum-security prisoners in Australia to C-suite executives across the Globe. She is the author of *Organizational Heartbeats: Engaging Employees in Sustainability by Leveraging Purpose and Curating Culture* (Routledge, 2020). Look for her forthcoming *Purpose-Driven Employee Engagement Workbook*.