



# e-quilibrium

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## Confirmation

One of the most pervasive and predictable patterns in how people think is the tendency to automatically assume that our perceptions/thoughts/beliefs are accurate, and then selectively attend to information that confirms our beliefs. The phenomenon is known as the confirmation bias.

Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatte, authors of The Resilience Factor, refer to the confirmation bias as the "Velcro-Teflon effect." We tend to be Velcro for information or experience that supports our beliefs (i.e., evidence sticks), but Teflon for data that contradicts our beliefs (i.e., evidence slides off).

Because much of what we believe or perceive is accurate, the bias to confirm works well in most situations. For example, if I act on my belief that if I am friendly toward others they will be friendly in return, usually the evidence will confirm my belief. In this case, the confirmation bias perpetuates prosocial behavior.

However, there are many examples of how the confirmation bias does not serve us well. Stereotypes are fueled by the confirmation bias. The negative thoughts of a person who is depressed are reinforced by the confirmation bias. Many conflicts are intensified by the confirmation bias in that failure to see another point of view solidifies one's current position.

Note that the confirmation bias is automatic. We don't have to choose to selectively attend to information that is

consistent with our beliefs. This makes the tendency hard to override, but not impossible to supersede.

It can be useful to try to counteract the confirmation bias in situations when one is struggling with a negative emotion (e.g., anger, fear, or depression), stressed in an interpersonal situation, or otherwise feels stuck. The reason for this is that negative emotions tend to narrow attention, and tunnel vision reinforces the confirmation bias. Counteracting the confirmation bias basically involves looking for disconfirming evidence. What evidence is there that I may not be accurate? What's another way to look at this situation? What evidence would the opposing attorney bring to court if I were attempting to convince a jury that I am right?

Most of us want to be right and accurate in our perceptions, and the confirmation bias solidifies the conviction that we are right. However, there certainly are times when being open to the possibility that one is wrong, and looking for disconfirming evidence, can ultimately lead to a more accurate belief. Being able to dispute negative thoughts is the most basic skill that is taught in cognitive therapy. It is also a skill that is extremely valuable for stress or anger management, for quality relationships, and for general decision-making and problem solving.

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