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## Belief Perseverance Why we cling on to old ideas

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### Preamble

Our beliefs can help us navigate the world around us. However, when our beliefs do not line up with reality, they can cause harm to ourselves and others. Also, these beliefs can become so deeply ingrained that they become very challenging to unlearn, even when presented with new information. This phenomenon is called **belief perseverance**.

### When we cling to false beliefs

Our beliefs about ourselves, others, and how the world works come from many places. Initially, the ideas we hold about ourselves and others begin in early childhood from our experiences interacting with our family. Later, our formal instruction and education and secondary sources like the media sharpen our belief systems. Belief perseverance happens when a person holds onto a belief even when presented with evidence that this belief is false.

There are three types of belief perseverance. First, **self-impressions**, which are beliefs about yourself, such as “beliefs about your athletic skills, musical talents, ability to get along with others, or even body image.” The second involves **social impressions**, which are beliefs about specific other people, such as “beliefs about your best friend, mother, or least favorite teacher.” Finally, the third type is called **naive theories** — these are beliefs about how the world works, including beliefs about the causes of war or poverty, stereotypes about teenagers, lawyers or other cultures, and any other social theories.

A common way researchers study belief perseverance is through the debriefing method. For example, the first study of belief perseverance involved an experiment that asked participants to complete a task. Once the task was complete, researchers gave the participants feedback on their performance. Either they completed the job successfully, or they failed. However, after sharing the initial feedback, researchers told the participants that the feedback was fake.



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Logically, if researchers asked the participants how they would do on the task a second time, they would ignore their initial false results in their self-assessment. However, that's not what happened. The researchers report: **"Participants who received fake success feedback continued to believe that they were pretty good at this task, whereas those who received fake failure feedback continued to believe that they were pretty bad at it."**

Again, this is despite being told the feedback they initially received was wrong! Multiple similar studies that followed found the same results. So, why do we stick to beliefs even after being told they are not true?

Researchers have offered several propositions. First, psychologists Corey Guenther and Mark D. Alicke suggest that our brains tend to stay "stuck" on the initial feedback we receive. An important source of cognitive biases relevant to belief perseverance is that people's brains are wired to seek coherence and order. When that coherence is disrupted, we sometimes seek information that better aligns with our existing beliefs. This is a form of confirmation bias.

Or, we interpret the new information in a way that works with our belief structures. For example, illusory correlations mean that we tend to remember times when we were successful more than when we failed/performed poorly. The availability heuristic also shows that we tend to assess our beliefs based on the most available memories in our minds. In the debriefing example, it appears that participants relied on their most recent memories about how they performed in the past to predict how they would perform in the future, despite being debriefed on the experiment.

### **The impact of belief perseverance**

When our belief systems align with reality, belief perseverance can help us predict outcomes and feel some sense of control over our social environment. However, if we cling to false beliefs, we risk causing harm to ourselves and those around us.

Researchers Morgan Slusher and Craig Anderson give multiple examples of how clinging to false beliefs results in adverse effects:

- People with negative belief perseverance about their social abilities may avoid interpersonal interactions and develop problems such as loneliness and shyness.
- Employees with a belief perseverance in their superior skills may fail to request the needed assistance when faced with a given challenge.



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- Dangerous decisions may be made because of a belief in perseverance in one's ability to manage risk. Using the example of the destruction of the space shuttle Challenger and the deaths of seven crew members, they write: "The expertise for the proper decision was available but ignored (several engineers on the project strongly recommended against a launch attempt in the abnormally cold weather)."

Giving people the correct information about their beliefs may even backfire. For instance, a study with participants expressing their concerns of the side effects of flu shots found that they became even less eager to accept them after being told that the vaccination was completely safe. In other words, they used the updated information reinforcing the idea that they already had before, distrusting the vaccine even more as a result.

### **How to manage belief perseverance**

You would think that belief perseverance can be managed by explaining that other factors that may have influenced a person's success or failure that are outside of their control, giving a person new information that contradicts their beliefs, such as sharing news articles or research about a given topic.

Or maybe by asking a person to be more open-minded and aware of their environment to see if new observations change their minds, or by interacting with others and using the experiences to challenge their beliefs.

However, research shows that these methods **fail to reduce belief perseverance**, though they seem the most logical ways to address it. The only way to somehow manage belief perseverance is to become aware of it. So, congratulations – you have completed the first step!

The next step is to increase your self-awareness about your beliefs and where they come from. If you want to increase your self-awareness and challenge your beliefs about yourself and others, consider trying this short exercise, with only five questions:

- 1) What beliefs do I have about myself and my abilities?
- 2) What assumptions do I hold about other people?
- 3) Where did these beliefs come from? (e.g., childhood experiences, feedback from authority figures, interactions with friends)
- 4) Are the beliefs I hold about myself and others accurate?
- 5) What experiences have I had that counter these beliefs?



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Remember that our minds are prone to cognitive biases that may discord the way we consider these questions. Our need for coherence, combined with cognitive biases, make it very difficult to unlearn our false beliefs. Trusted friends or colleagues can help jog your memory to moderate the availability bias, the confirmation bias, and stay clear of illusory correlations.

**Conclusion:** when left unaddressed, belief perseverance has serious consequences for ourselves and others. Awareness and self-reflection are the best ways to address this phenomenon. Questioning our false beliefs can help us all grow and better achieve our goals. ■

## About the Author

Lindsay Morgia, M.S., M.P.P., is an independent researcher with over ten years of experience conducting research in nonprofit, academic, and government settings. She has experience in project management, research methods (e.g., surveys and interviews), and qualitative and quantitative analysis.

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Wikipedia

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