

How We Support Our Beliefs (i.e. There Must Be A Reason) **By Marlene and Bob Neufeld**

In a study published in the most recent issue of the journal *Sociological Inquiry*, sociologists from four major research institutions focus on the strength and resilience of the belief among many Americans that Saddam Hussein was linked to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. They claim that this belief came from an urgent need by many Americans to seek justification for a war already in progress.

Co-author of the study, Steven Hoffman, Ph.D. says, "Our data shows substantial support for a cognitive theory known as 'motivated reasoning,' which suggests that rather than search rationally for information that either confirms or disconfirms a particular belief, people actually seek out information that confirms what they already believe. In fact, for the most part, people completely ignore contrary information."

Hoffman says, "The argument here is that people get deeply attached to their beliefs. We form emotional attachments that get wrapped up in our personal identity and sense of morality, irrespective of the facts of the matter. The problem is that this notion of 'motivated reasoning' has only been supported with experimental results in artificial settings. We decided it was time to see if it held up when you talk to actual voters in their homes, workplaces, restaurants, offices and other deliberative settings."

The study team employed a technique called "challenge interviews" on a sample of voters who reported believing in a link between Saddam and 9/11. The researchers presented the available evidence of the link, along with the evidence that there was no link, and then pushed respondents to justify their opinion on the matter. For all but one respondent, the overwhelming evidence that there was no link left no impact on their arguments in support of the link. "People were basically making up justifications for the fact that we were at war," he says. "They wanted to believe in the link," he says, "because it helped them make sense of a current reality."

We see this same phenomenon daily in our office. People form a belief like "my partner is not to be trusted" or "my partner doesn't care about me" or "my partner doesn't support me." This belief may be based on an actual incident or may be a holdover from something that happened to the person in a previous relationship, or in their family of origin. Then they unconsciously make up justifications for this belief, seeing and hearing only the "evidence" that they believe supports this belief, focusing on information that confirms what they already believe and ignoring contrary information.

To assist clients we use the process from Byron Katie's *Loving What Is: Four Questions That Can Change Your Life* (2002):

Begin by writing down your totally unenlightened complaint or judgments about a person with whom you are in relationship. Summarize the complaint or judgments into a belief. Example “He doesn’t care about me.” Then, with an attitude of curiosity and a genuine desire to uncover what’s true for you in this moment, ask:

1. Is it true? Do you really know that it is true?
2. How do you react when you think that thought?
3. Can you think of one stress-free reason to keep the thought?
4. Who would you be without that thought?

Then turn around the original statement. Example: for “He doesn’t care about me” try on “I don’t care about me” or “I don’t care about him” or “he does care about me.” Ask yourself if any of these are at least as true or truer than the statement you started with.

Often to really let go of the false belief, clients need to heal the original belief. When they are convinced that their partner doesn’t care about them, they often realize that they believe that their parents didn’t care about them. No amount of caring from a partner will ever replace caring that was missing from parents. Instead, what needs to happen, is expression of feelings (in a safe and friendly way) about the original wounds, genuine love and caring for yourself and then a choice to open to the possibilities of caring that are available now.

Marlene & Bob Neufeld practice body-centered Coaching and Psychotherapy. They are a couple who help couples learn life-changing skills and create closer, more loving relationships with one another. To learn more, see www.marleneandbob.com or call 613-594-9248 to arrange a complimentary 1-hour introductory session.

For more about the study see University at Buffalo (2009, August 23). How We Support Our False Beliefs; ScienceDaily.