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[Online Courses](#)
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CRITICAL THINKING / PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT / PSYCHOLOGY

Changing Beliefs

BY **ERIK MEIRA** · AUGUST 23, 2016

Many people in the skeptic community are often frustrated when, after they have laid out so many sound arguments based on clear reasoning, they still can't seem to change what someone believes. Once you believe something, it is so easy to see the reasons for why you hold that belief but for others it seems impossible. Try as you might to share your beliefs with others, you still fail at winning them to your side.

“*The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be*

found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects.”

– Francis Bacon

What we are talking about here is, at the least, confirmation bias, the tendency to seek only information that supports one's previous belief and reject information that refutes it. But there is also the issue of belief perseverance. In other words, even when a person has clear evidence against, they still hold on to their previous belief.

Much of this stems from people's preference for certainty and continuity. We like our knowledge to be consistent, linear, and absolute. "I already came to a conclusion and am absolutely certain that what I believe is true. I no longer want to think about it. If I exert all of the work required to admit that I am wrong and was wrong, there will be a lot of additional work to learn and integrate that new information. In the meantime, I will have a very difficult time functioning. My life will be much easier if I simply accept that my previous belief was true." Or as Daniel Kahneman says:

“Sustaining doubt is harder work than sliding into certainty.”

– Daniel Kahneman

But, it's not good for people to be wrong. For example, in physical therapy practice we have people still holding on to outdated ideologies and treatment approaches which hurt our standing as a profession. We need to change what they believe. So what should we do?

I have an idea! Let's break out the big guns!

Direct confrontation

**“A man came up to me and said
“I'd like to change your mind**

***By hitting it with a rock," he said,
"Though I am not unkind."***

– They Might Be Giants, Whistling in the Dark

I see this strategy commonly taken. "I've tried telling them that they are wrong. I've pointed out that they aren't thinking clearly. I've tried yelling, hell, I've even called them stupid!"

Confrontation, by definition, is antagonistic, and this is a problem when trying to change beliefs. The moment you become antagonistic, you are likely to set off the backfire effect. Weirdly as you start attacking someone's belief, it actually hardens their belief.

There are a couple potential reasons for this. First off, when you go on the attack their instinct will be to get defensive. Secondly, humans are tribal by nature – they look for "their tribe". These are the people who support and agree with them. Chant it with me:

“One of us. One of us. One of us.”*

**See: Twitter, Facebook, etc...*

When you start aligning yourself against their preferred belief, they start viewing you as an outsider, no longer part of their tribe. You are now "The Other". You are "The Enemy". They stop trusting you.

Their supporters will rally around them, just as your supporters will rally around you. Beliefs harden. Nothing changes. And before you think I'm admonishing or judging anyone for doing this, let me be clear – I do this all of the time myself, even when I try not to. I'm not perfect, nobody is.

Now, don't get me wrong. These confrontations can be good in some ways. They can show that there even IS a disagreement. They also give a sense of community (us vs them) that is comforting to "your side". Personally, I love watching skeptic comedians talk about the stupidity of

non-skeptics and their lack of reasoning. It is a nice way to vent. It is fun within the tribe, but it doesn't win any arguments with "The Other".

That said, with enough humor and some hyperbole, confrontation can skirt around its own inherent antagonistic nature but this takes a very skilled hand. This kind of ribbing is not to be tried by the rest of us.

My final point about direct confrontation is that you yourself need to work hard NOT to get defensive when you are on the receiving end of criticism. [Adam Meakins has explored this in the past](#) and I agree with him.

Try not to be ruled by your EMOTIONS when you are engaging in a RATIONAL discussion.

So how do you change someone's belief if you can't tell them that they are wrong? Don't we need to point out the error in their thinking?

Well, not directly. The first thing you need to do is address the onslaught of feelings that your confrontation will likely evoke. The person will feel attacked with labels being inferred like "stupid", "wrong", and "outside the tribe". In other words, "threatened". It is your job to try to account for these potential feelings before their defenses come up.

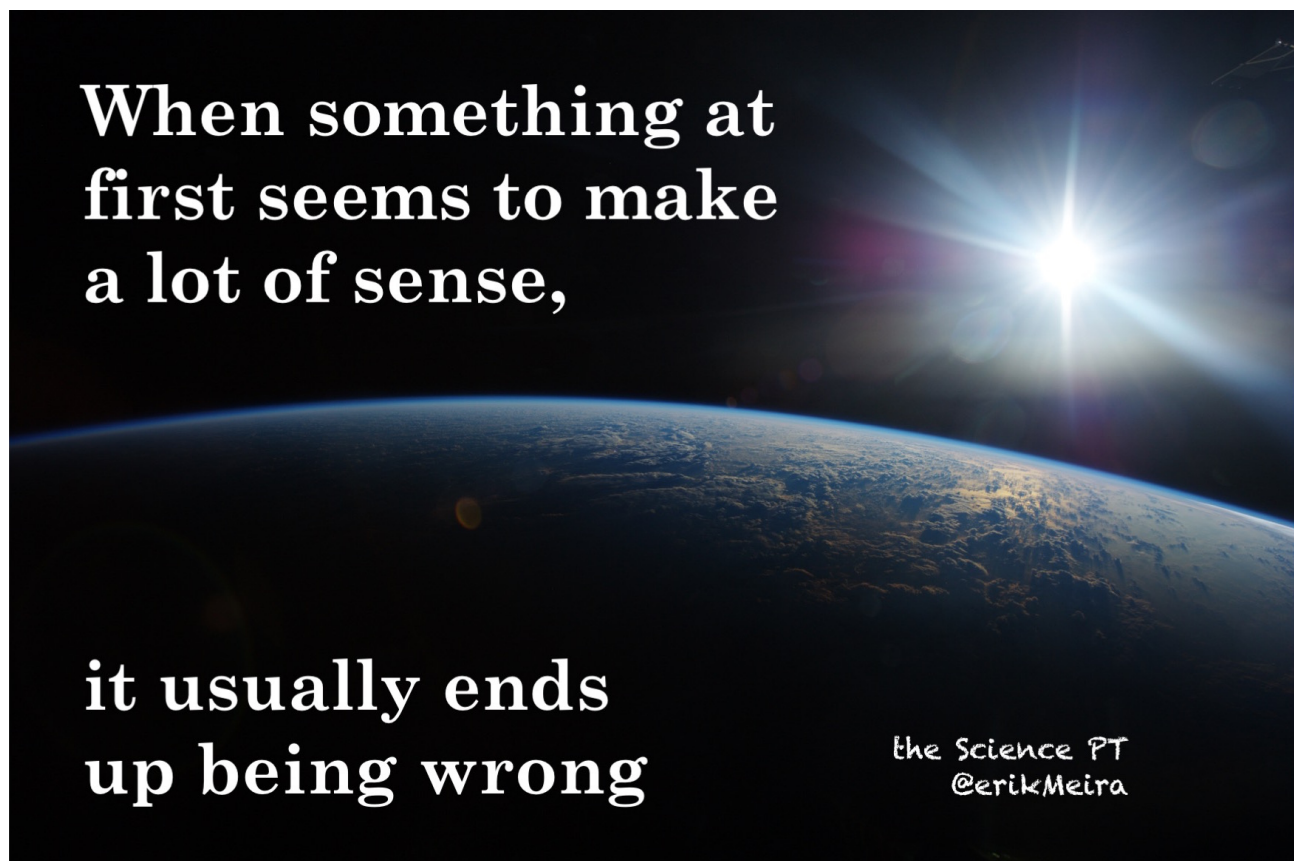
First thing that needs to be established is that the two of you are friendly. You are part of the same tribe. You need to find some kind of agreement. And I don't mean that you need to agree with their dumb-shit belief. Discussing that part actually comes later.

You do this by finding common ground as humans. For example, start with some jokes. Ideally be self-deprecating, pointing out how wrong

and imperfect you have been in your own life. In other words, get off your high horse. Lighten-up a bit and don't take yourself so damn seriously. The more you can narrow the tribe the better. Find your similarities.

At this point you need to establish another truth: Things aren't always what they seem. Everyone knows this of course, but bring it into focus. It can be a really weird scientific fact or even a magic trick. When I teach my weekend course there is a recurring theme throughout:

When something at first seems to make a lot of sense, it usually ends up being wrong.



As an example I have them think about how they KNOW the Earth goes around the Sun instead of the other way around. When you go outside and look at the sky there is no reason to believe that. The obvious explanation, that the Sun goes around the Earth, makes so much more sense until you REALLY understand what's going on. Thinking about this brings down defenses. "We are all part of the same tribe that

understands that the world is really weird and complicated. We get stuff wrong all the time and that is okay. As a matter of fact, it would be weird not to.”

The next thing you do is reframe the belief. You simply explain their belief in a different way while not asserting that you know the answer. (SIDE NOTE: [Greg Lehman is very good at this.](#)) This is easier explained with an example.

Let’s say the other person believes that therapeutic ultrasound makes people feel better because the sound waves break up tissue or relax something or whatever, it really doesn’t matter. Now, you could open your “teaching” with disgust and aggressively point out that they are wrong and should be ashamed of their stupidity, but that will most likely just backfire. First thing you need to recognize is that they believe this for a reason that probably comes from a place of ignorance more than a place of stupidity (if you don’t know the difference between ignorance and stupidity it is because you are stupid).

Now assuming you are already off your high horse and that you have established that we are all a little confused in our own way, you “attack”:

- **Validate:** First you would validate them. “I see. That makes sense.” Smirk – We are in on the same joke.
- **Refute:** Then refute them, “But there was a study that showed when you run an ultrasound machine with the sound head disconnected inside, it feels just as good afterwards. So it couldn’t be breaking up stuff...” or whatever they believe. The fact that you established a friendly rapport gives you a moment here before the defenses go up.
- **Reframe:** Quickly, you reframe in multiple ways, “So maybe it feels better simply because of the contact of the sound head against the skin or maybe just the fact that it looks high tech or maybe something else about your interaction with the patient. I wonder if other things could have that same effect?” and then shrug.

- **Suggest:** I also like to add, “I wonder if there are ways to get these same effects through exercise?” which is my favorite antidote-of-hokey-treatments for many reasons. Get them thinking about “better”, more intentional ways to get those same effects. I wouldn’t push this too hard on a first encounter, however, sometimes stopping at the reframe.

What the hell just happened?!

Did you just change their practice? No. Not yet. As I mentioned before, that is too difficult to do that fast. It would be jarring. You validated, refuted, and reframed, allowing them to hold their dignity AND their use of that stupid machine.

Wait. What?! They are still using the ultrasound?! You didn’t change ANYTHING!

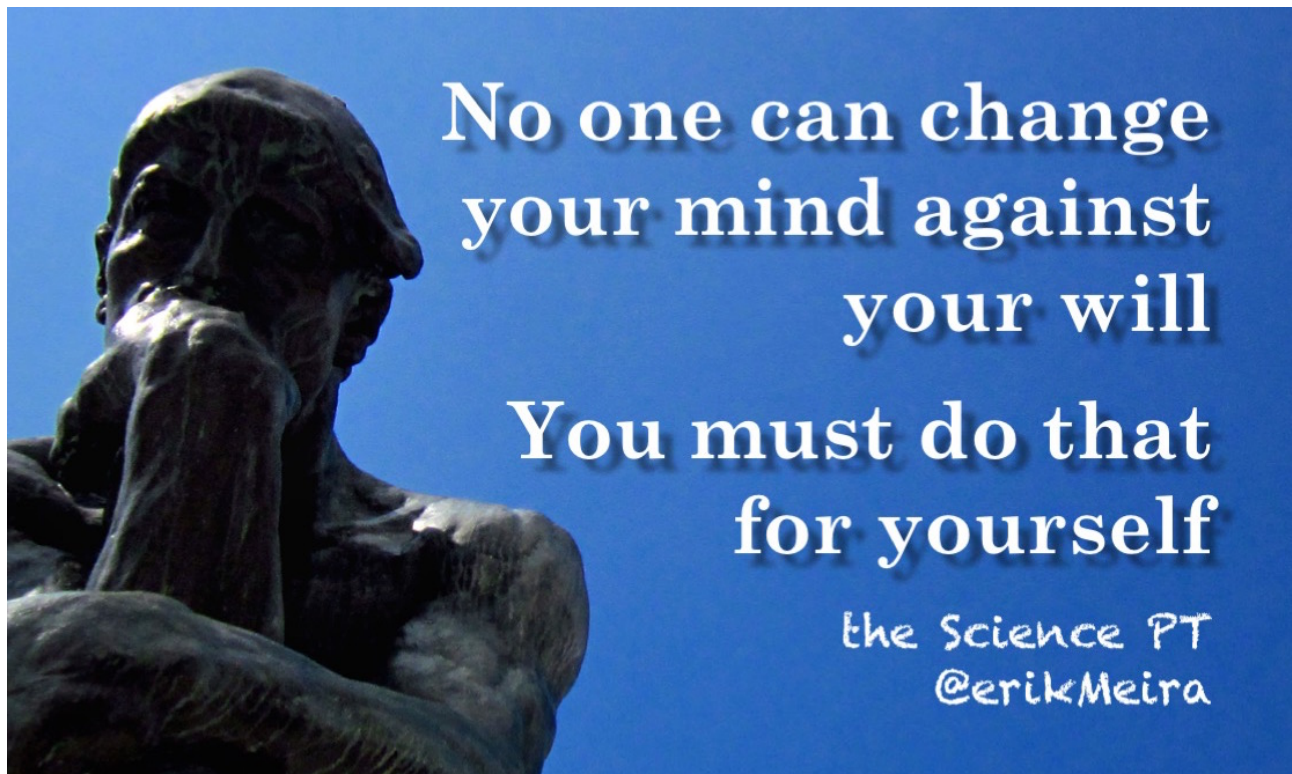
No. Not at that moment. But the very next time they use ultrasound, they have about 7 minutes for that reframing to work in their mind. “I’m not doing it for breaking up tissue or whatever. I’m doing it for those non-specific effects,” and their mind starts working it out for themselves. “So that means...I don’t need the sound waves. I need to get the contact, the face validity, and/or the interaction. How can I get that another way?” All the while still using the ultrasound as a now (hopefully) temporary crutch. Let that seed of doubt grow organically in their own head.

The reframing doesn’t have to be exactly right; it just needs to be uncertain

Being wrong wasn't the root of the problem – we are ALL wrong in some ways. It was the being certain that was the problem. Notice that you reframe by providing SEVERAL different explanations. Get them questioning. That's the goal. The more explanations that they are considering to be possible, the more they lose faith in their own belief. Also, the more likely they are to change their belief again when it turns out that YOU were wrong.

Sure, they may keep right on doing the ultrasound forever with their new explanation (I'm not going to overtly draw parallels to OTHER treatments besides ultrasound here but let's say that it does happen). But they should now be more susceptible to the next reframing nudge such as, "Maybe try this instead?" Or maybe they will be more receptive to watching two other people argue about ultrasound and they themselves will switch sides. The point is, you can keep planting seeds but they need to change their mind for themselves. Or as I like to say:

No one can change your mind against your will – You must do that for yourself



Change your own mind

But seriously. Who CARES what OTHER people believe? Let's be selfish and care about what WE believe! We need to make sure that WE are constantly trying to update our own beliefs, second guessing our own explanations for how things may or may not be working. As Quine and Ullian state:

“The desire to be right and the desire to have been right are two desires, and the sooner we separate them the better off we are. The desire to be right is the thirst for truth. On all counts, both practical and theoretical, there is nothing but good to be said for it. The desire to have been right, on the other hand, is the pride that goeth before a fall. It stands in the way of our seeing we were wrong, and thus blocks the progress of our knowledge.”

– Quine and Ullian

Stop desiring to HAVE BEEN right and instead desire to BE right. You will then find that you are much more likely to critique your own views by doing the same thing that I recommended you to do to others. Use the same strategy on yourself.

Obviously you should already be in the same tribe as yourself so the next thing to do is recognize that your explanation could be wrong. Then start seeking alternative hypotheses to explain what you see every day. Go easy on yourself. Try to reframe your explanations first, BEFORE you try to change your practice.

But don't be lazy and settle for the reframe. Push the change. Are there better alternatives that also fit this new explanation? Can you push self-efficacy? Can you get more “bang-for-your-buck” by incorporating these concepts into exercise-based interventions? Could the requirements of your exercise interventions themselves be simpler than

you had originally thought? And continue to question again and again and again.

Finally remain uncertain looking for explanations that explain the most things most completely. [For you could always be wrong.](#)

In summary...

- Confirmation bias is a bitch
- Holding on to old beliefs with certainty is much less work than doubt
- Direct confrontation can result in a backfire effect
- Members of “The Other” will be killed (or at least not trusted)
- Validate – Refute – Reframe – Suggest
- No one can change your mind against your will – You must do that for yourself

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