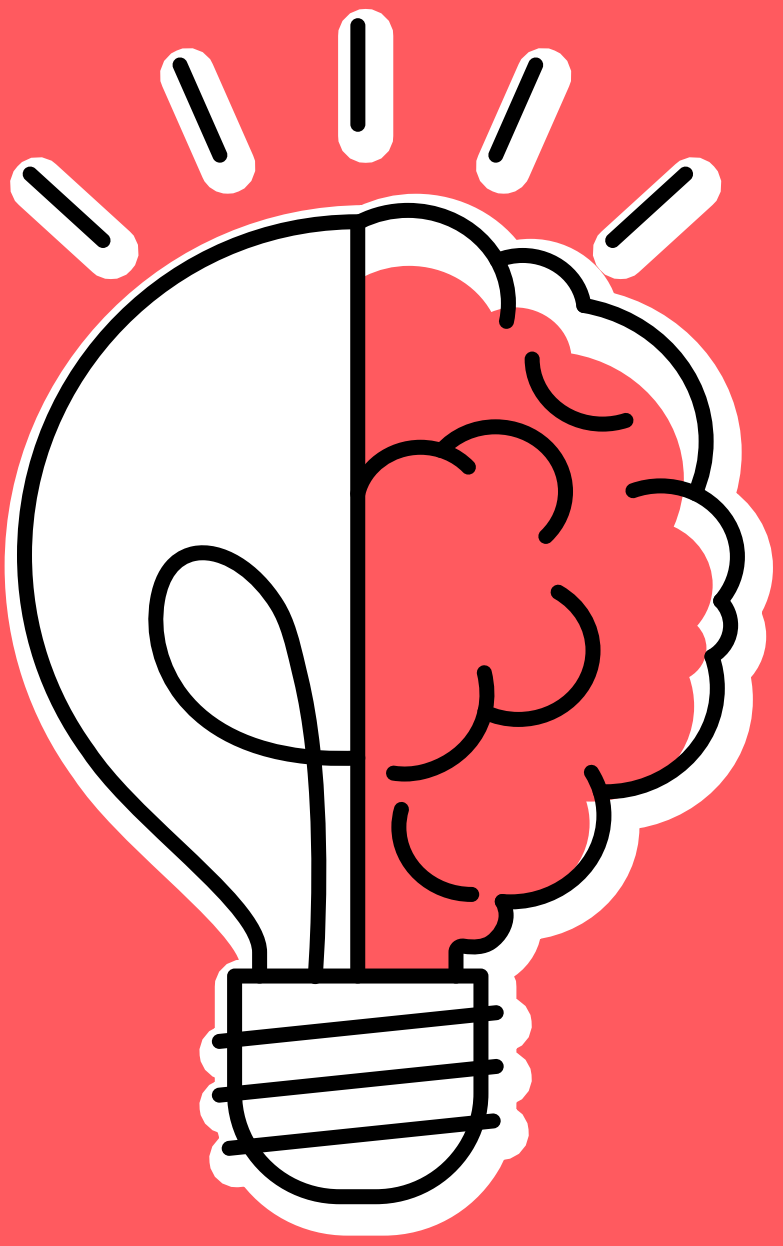
SUE | Behavioural Design Academy

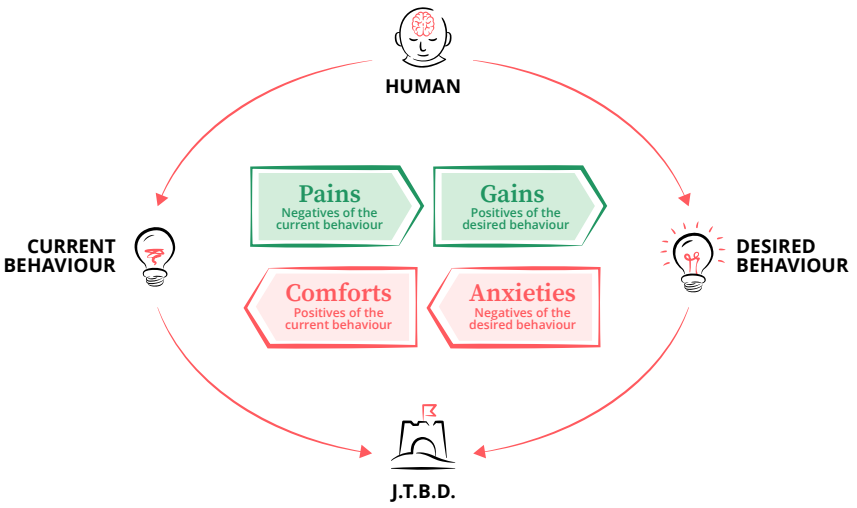
How to Persuade Someone Who Believes the Opposite?

By Astrid Groenewegen



What you will learn

- What is the real challenge of persuasion?
- Confirmation bias: Our Cognitive Pitfall
- How does confirmation bias affect our memory?
- Why do we have confirmation bias?
- How to persuade someone with a different opinion?
- Case Study 1: The U.K.'s Organ Donation Opt-Out System
- Case Study 2: IKEA's Sustainability Strategy
- Circumventing confirmation bias
- How can you learn more?



Introduction

You've probably been there: sitting across from someone — a colleague, client or stakeholder — and realising you see the world through different lenses. You have the data, the arguments, the plan. But the other person seems firmly attached to their own story. And the more you push, the more they dig in.

This isn't stubbornness — it's psychology.
Our brains are wired to filter information, protect what we already believe, and reject anything that doesn't fit. This thinking error is known as confirmation bias — and it's one of the most powerful forces that can block real influence.

In this short mini-masterclass, you'll learn:

- Why facts often fail to convince, no matter how strong they are
- How to navigate resistance without creating tension
- How to open the door to change — even when someone sees things differently

Because real persuasion doesn't begin with what you say — it starts with what someone is willing to hear.

Happy reading!

Astrid Groenewegen

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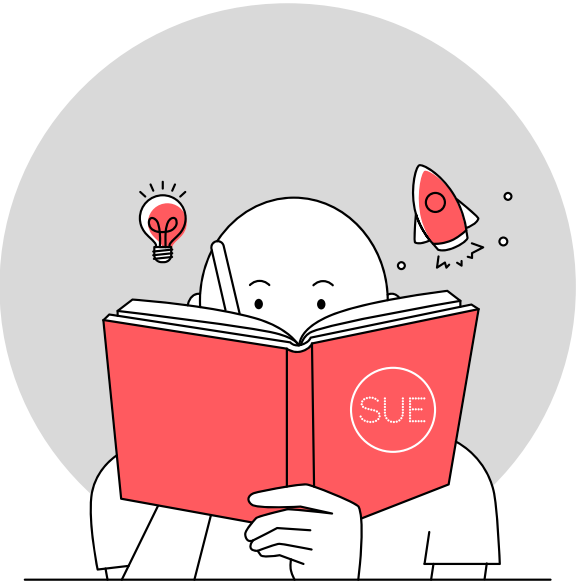
The Challenge of Persuasion

We all influence people every day. On a small scale ("could you pass me the salt") and on a larger scale ("choose my proposal").

But how do you get people on your side who believe exactly the opposite of what you're advocating? Or how do you motivate people to adopt behaviours that are better for themselves or their environment when they don't believe these behaviours are worthwhile or feasible?

We often try to persuade people with information, arguments, figures and facts.

However, behavioural science shows us how our brains actually process information - and why this approach usually fails.



Understanding the Information Context

We live in a complex information age. News and information reach us through countless channels, **but not all sources are equal.**

We're trapped in filter bubbles created by digital algorithms that primarily serve us content that aligns with our existing beliefs, with a preference for polarising viewpoints. **This widens the gap between different perspectives.**

Confirmation Bias:

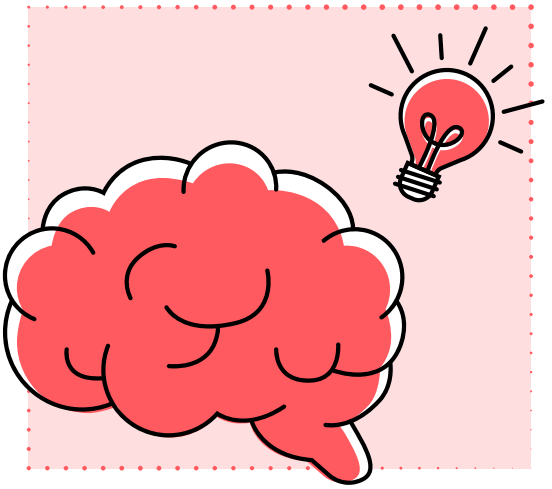
Our Cognitive Pitfall

Before we can understand how information is processed, we must acknowledge that we all suffer from **'confirmation bias'.**

We attach more value to information that supports our viewpoints than to new insights that challenge them. Whether this information is true or false barely matters. Our brains make us feel good about our positions by simply ignoring opposing views.

Social media algorithms act like mirrors in a maze: you keep seeing your own opinion reflected back at you. Combined with our tendency to seek confirmation, this creates a vicious cycle that fuels polarisation. People with strong views start interpreting evidence in an increasingly one-sided way.

As humans, we are champions at retrospectively justifying our beliefs and decisions.



The Power of Bias

A famous experiment by researchers at Stanford University demonstrated how strong bias can be. Even scientific facts are rejected if they don't align with our beliefs.

In an experiment, both supporters and opponents of capital punishment were divided into groups. Each group was shown research conclusions that either supported or opposed capital punishment. The results were remarkable:

Pro-capital punishment conclusion:

"Kroner and Phillips compared murder rates before and after the introduction of capital punishment in 14 states. In 11 of the 14 states, murder rates decreased after implementation. This research supports the deterrent effect of capital punishment."

Anti-capital punishment conclusion:

"Palmer and Crandall compared murder rates in 10 pairs of adjacent states with different capital punishment laws. In 8 of the 10 pairs, murder rates were higher in the state with capital punishment. This research refutes the deterrent effect of capital punishment."

Supporters of capital punishment who read the pro-capital punishment conclusion were strengthened in their conviction:

"The experiment was well thought out, the data collected was valid."

But when they read the anti-capital punishment conclusion, they rejected the research:

"The evidence given is relatively meaningless without data on how overall crime rates rose during those years," and "There were too many errors in choosing the states."

Opponents of capital punishment showed the same pattern in reverse.

This bias is so strong that previously formed beliefs lead people to reject scientific evidence. The evidence only reinforced their existing beliefs, leading to further polarisation.

This and other research shows:
People can come to different conclusions after exposure to the same evidence, depending on their existing beliefs.

People accept 'confirming' evidence easily, but judge information that challenges their beliefs much more critically.

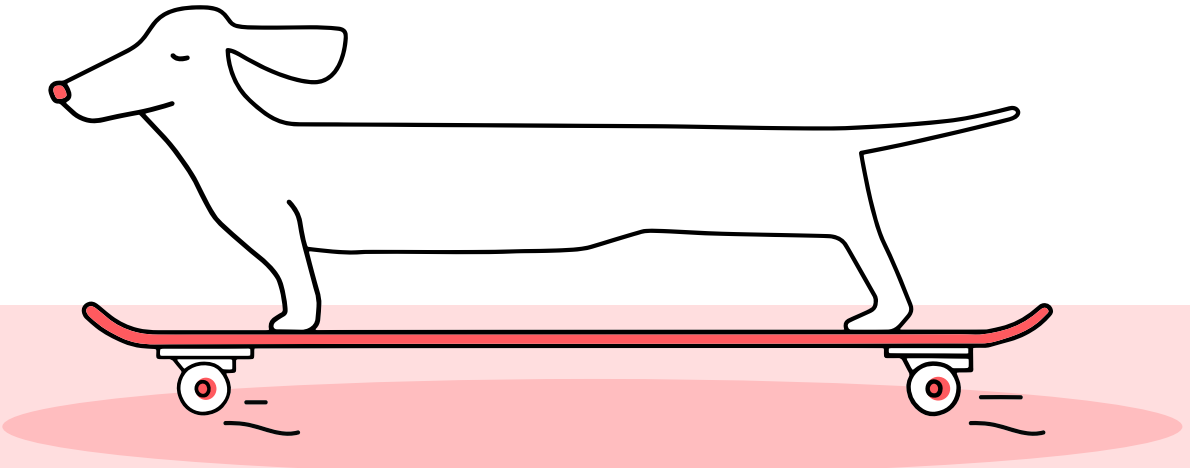
Confirmation Bias Affects Memory

Confirmation bias determines not only what we focus on or value, but also what we *remember*. We all have selective memory. Research has shown that information confirming our prior beliefs is better stored in our memory than contradictory evidence.

People also remember information that confirms existing stereotypes about social groups better than information that challenges these.

Confirmation bias affects not only our individual decision-making but also that of groups. As social beings, we regularly adjust our views to belong to the group.

The urge to agree with one another acts like fog in a meeting room: it clouds the view of alternative ideas. This leads to groupthink, where dissenting opinions fade away and decisions become less considered.



Why Do We Have Confirmation Bias?

Confirmation bias exists because it helps us. Our brains constantly try to reduce our cognitive effort by using shortcuts **(heuristics)**.

Absorbing and processing new information costs energy. Confirmation bias is an efficient way to quickly scan and assess information.

Additionally, a deeply held belief forms part of our identity. Holding onto that belief helps us maintain our self-worth.

Changing our mind often feels like admitting we made the wrong decision earlier, which is psychologically uncomfortable.

This means that as humans, we never make fully informed decisions; we automatically choose the path of least resistance.

We process information in a way that aligns with what we believe makes us feel good about ourselves.

How to Persuade Someone with a Different Opinion?

If we want to persuade someone who has a very different opinion or doesn't yet share the same beliefs about desired behaviour, we must determine three things:

1. **Where we stand**

   Looking at the decision or behaviour we want to influence, are we in someone's zone of acceptance or rejection? In other words, how much distance is there between you and that person?

2. **How strong someone's beliefs are**

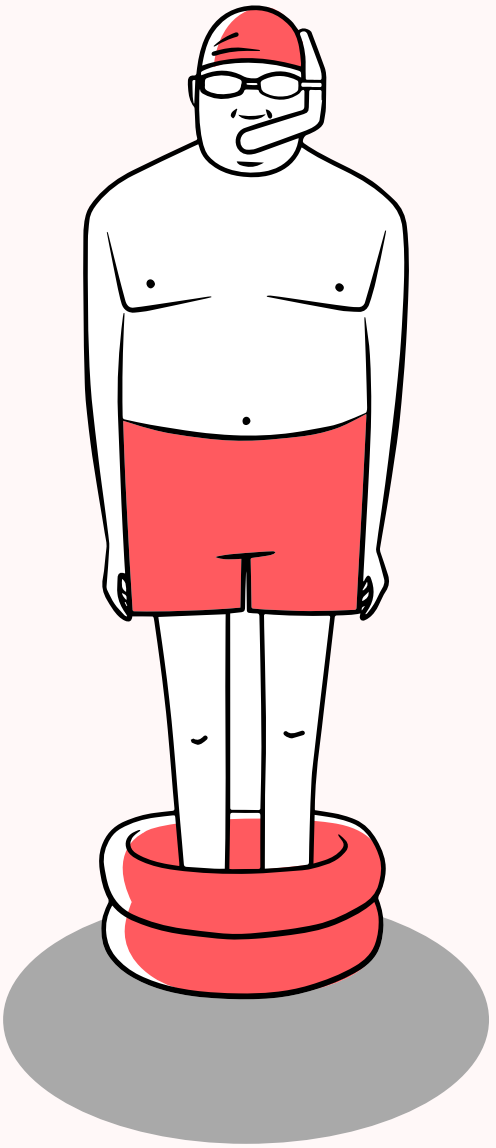
   With strong beliefs, the acceptance zone shrinks and the rejection zone grows.

3. **Finding the 'movable middle'**

   This concept from Jonah Berger recognises that you can't persuade everyone. People at the extremes of the rejection zone (such as staunch abortion opponents or climate change deniers) are extremely difficult to influence. Focus instead on the large middle of people who haven't yet formed strong convictions.

The key to persuasion is reducing the distance between your viewpoint and theirs.

You don't do this by providing more facts or information, which only activates confirmation bias. Instead, you need to use behavioural science.



Case Study 1:

The U.K.'s Organ Donation Opt-Out System

The UK faced a significant challenge with organ donation rates. Rather than simply trying to convince people with facts about how many lives could be saved (information that often failed to overcome existing beliefs and inertia), they applied behavioural science principles.

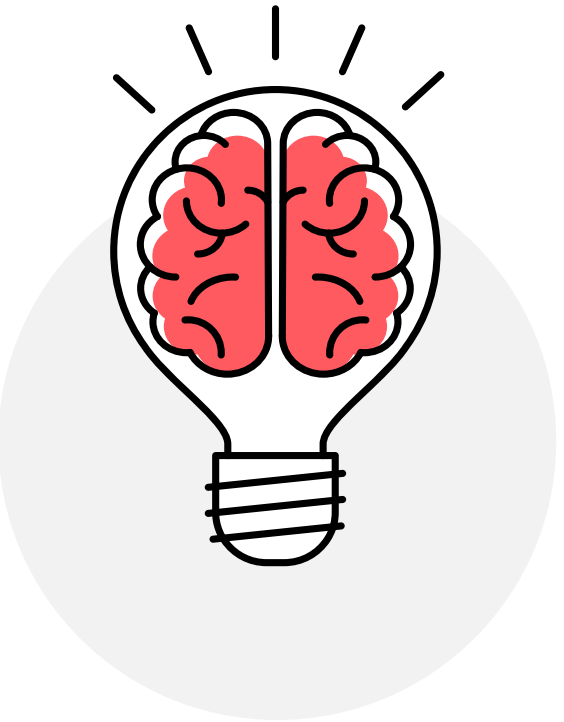
In 2020, England and Scotland switched to an opt-out system for organ donation, following Wales' earlier implementation.

This approach recognised the power of default options and status quo bias - instead of asking people to actively sign up (opt in), the new system presumed consent unless people actively opted out.

The approach found common ground: most people supported organ donation in principle but simply never got around to registering. By changing the default, they bypassed the confirmation bias that might lead people to avoid thinking about mortality or to prioritise immediate concerns over future possibilities.

The campaign also effectively used social proof by highlighting that the majority of people support organ donation, and it asked for small commitments rather than big changes - people only needed to have a conversation with family members about their wishes, rather than making an immediate decision.

The result has been a significant increase in the number of available organs for transplant, potentially saving thousands of lives, all by working with human psychology rather than against it.



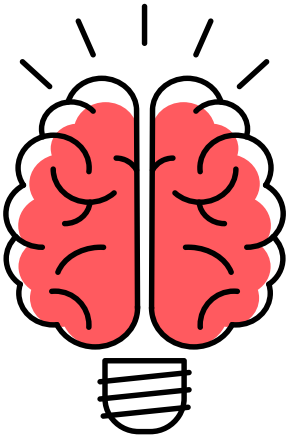
1 Circumventing Confirmation Bias

Find Common Ground

First, we need to find common ground or a shared interest. For example, with someone sceptical about climate change, first find a shared belief. Perhaps that's the importance of family.

Beliefs are closely linked to motivations. The belief that family is important can be a stronger motivator for protecting children's living environment than climate arguments.

This is what we call a **"job-to-be-done"** - a deeper motivation that drives behaviour. People with different beliefs may have similar jobs-to-be-done. Here you can find touchpoints to bridge the distance.



With climate sceptics, instead of asking:

"Would you like to engage in sustainable behaviour?"

you might better ask:

"Would you like to help build a healthy environment for your children?"

This is a much more accessible question that aligns with their values. That this healthy environment also requires sustainable behaviour (less litter, less car use in the neighbourhood, etc.) becomes a logical consequence, without directly confronting their beliefs.

Case Study 2:

IKEA's Sustainability Strategy

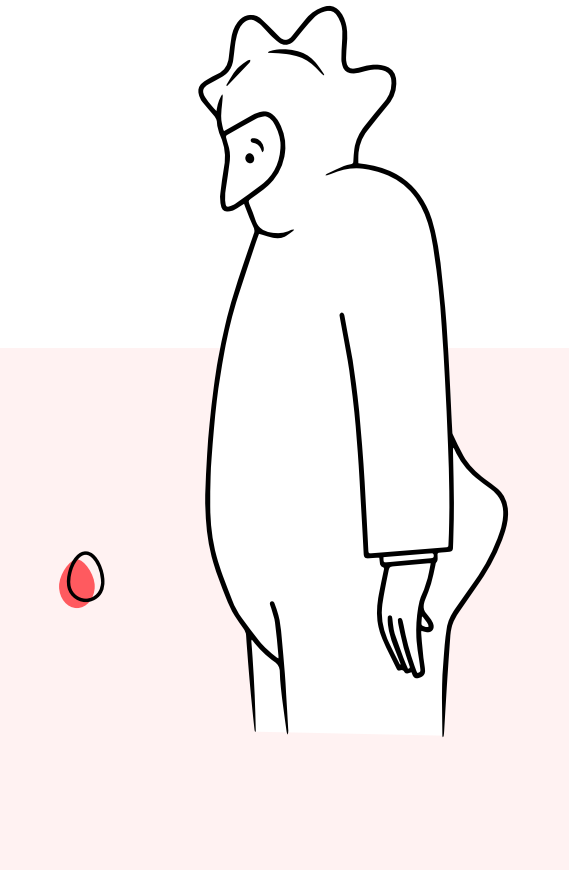
IKEA faced the challenge of motivating consumers to make more sustainable choices without making them feel they had to compromise on price or convenience. Rather than merely emphasising environmental benefits (which would clash with many consumers' beliefs about affordability), **IKEA focused on common ground: saving money.**

> **When introducing LED bulbs, IKEA emphasised the cost savings for households (up to 85% less energy consumption than incandescent bulbs).**

This was an argument that appealed to almost everyone, regardless of their position on climate change. Additionally, IKEA made the transition easy by drastically reducing prices and gradually phasing out the traditional bulb assortment.

IKEA also demonstrated social proof by communicating how many people had already made the switch and asked for small, achievable steps (replacing just one bulb first).

The result? In just a few years, IKEA sold more than **85 million LED bulbs** worldwide, demonstrating that behavioural change on a large scale is possible when applying the right psychological principles.



Show Social Proof, Not Arguments

People have a strong need for certainty. New behaviours or decisions bring uncertainty, activating our status quo bias and loss aversion. We're afraid to lose what we currently have and take our present situation as a reference point.Facts and figures alone rarely change minds. People are more persuaded by seeing others they relate to already adopting the new behaviour — that's powerful evidence. - OR - With strong convictions, people need more than facts and figures to change their minds. What truly convinces is seeing others — especially peers — already behaving differently. That's the kind of social proof that breaks through.

We adjust our beliefs when we see that enough other people with whom we identify have a different opinion.

As social beings, we learn by observing others. We can use this natural tendency to positively influence beliefs and behaviour by showing that more people are exhibiting the desired behaviour (social proof).

The strategy for providing social proof depends on where people stand:

- **For people leaning more towards the rejection zone:** use a concentration strategy - focus on a smaller group and repeatedly confront them with evidence over a short period.

- **For people leaning towards the acceptance zone:** use a dispersed strategy - one or two examples may be sufficient to convince them.

It's important to show multiple people exhibiting the desired behaviour, as people prefer to follow others similar to themselves. The more different sources saying the same thing, the stronger the evidence becomes.

Don't Ask Too Much

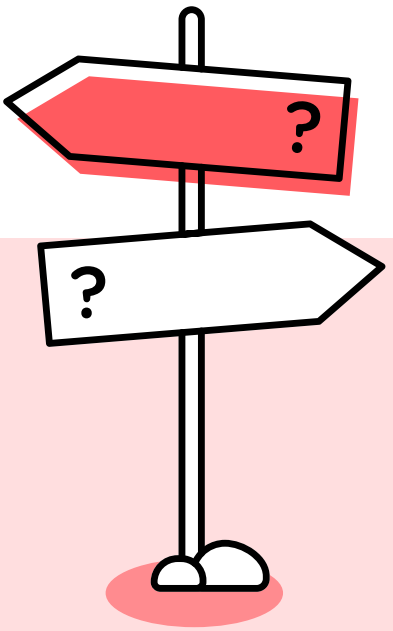
Behavioural change doesn't happen overnight. To lower the threshold for change, we need to break down end goals into smaller, specific behaviours.

An end goal might be "living healthily", but specific behaviours are things like "drinking six glasses of water daily" or "exercising twice a week for 20 minutes". Start with a small, achievable request on common ground.

Changing behaviour is a process. If you can get someone to commit to the process, change will occur.

If you can get people to commit to a first step, they'll likely take it. This is known as the commitment/consistency principle. From this first action, you can build further and gradually expand their acceptance zone.

With our climate sceptic, you shouldn't ask them to immediately live more sustainably, but perhaps to recycle paper at their children's school. Make it easy (a container next to the playground) and relevant to their motivation (a clean play environment for their children).

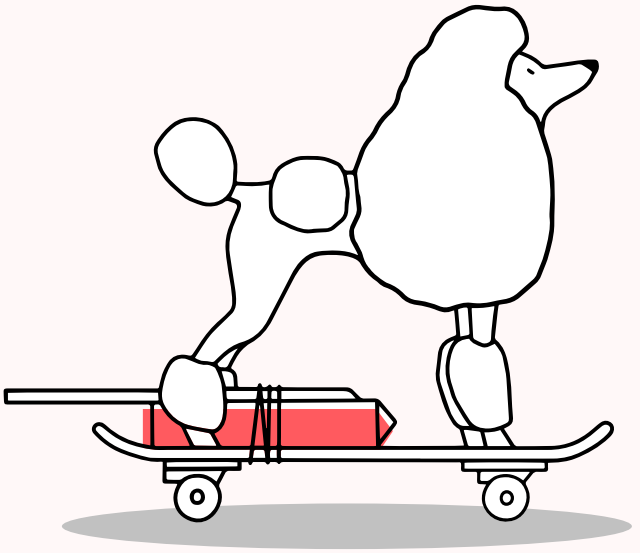


Summary

Confirmation bias is the human tendency to only seek, focus on, or prefer information that confirms our existing beliefs. It's a strong 'thinking error' that works unconsciously and is reinforced by our digital filter bubbles.

If you want to change the behaviour of people with different beliefs, you won't achieve this by providing more information, facts, or arguments. Instead, you need to:

1. **Find common ground**
2. **Show social proof instead of arguments**
3. **Start with small, achievable steps**



By applying these behavioural science principles, you first make people receptive to the information needed for change, rather than merely focusing on delivering even better arguments.

Mastering the Power of Behavioural Design in Your Work

Would you like to apply the principles of behavioural psychology to your everyday work?

The Behavioural Design Fundamentals Course by SUE is designed for forward-thinking professionals who want to make better decisions, influence more effectively, and strengthen their existing expertise with proven insights from behavioural science.

You'll learn to recognise cognitive biases, understand behaviour more deeply, and apply behavioural science to develop strategies and ideas that reliably steer choices and actions. No dry theory—just practical tools you can start using straight away.

The Fundamentals Course can be followed in three ways:

- Live at our academy in Amsterdam
- Self-paced online
- As a team training

- How the brain really works when it comes to decision-making.
- How to use Behavioural Design to enhance products, campaigns, policy, marketing and UX, and more with principles from behavioural science.
- Practical methods and tools to help you design choices and behaviour.
- How to use the **SUE | Influence Framework®** to systematically uncover the psychological forces that stand between current and desired behaviour.
- Immediately applicable techniques for your daily work.

Who is this training for?

This course is designed for professionals who want to influence behaviour and decision-making — whether from clients, colleagues or teams. If you work in HR, marketing, communication, product development, policy or leadership: if you work with people, you work with behaviour.

This training is for you if you are:

- An HR professional looking to apply behavioural insights to recruitment, talent development or change management
- A marketer or communication professional wanting to design better campaigns, messaging or customer journeys
- A product owner or UX designer aiming to create solutions that truly align with how people think and behave
- A team leader or manager seeking to guide behaviour change within your team or organisation
- A policy maker or programme manager working to design interventions that actually change behaviour
- Or simply curious about how to achieve more by understanding and shaping human behaviour more effectively

Why choose SUE?

- Accredited by the Education Quality Assessment Committee (EQAC)
- Average rating of 9.7 from over 5,000 participants in 45+ countries
- Practical tools and templates you can use right away
- Small group sizes for personal attention and rich interaction
- Trainers with deep expertise in Behavioural Design

What do past participants say?

"A truly human-centred approach, grounded in a solid methodology. The training brings together insights from various disciplines into a practical and scalable process."

- CPO - Allianz-Tiriac Asigurari SA

It's an incredibly valuable training to better understand people and design solutions for the complex problems they face. I can't wait to start influencing behaviour in a positive way!

- Customer Experience Consultant – ABN AMRO

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The Behavioural Design Fundamentals Course is an investment in skills that will serve your entire professional career:

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★★★★★
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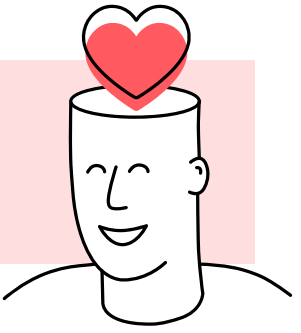

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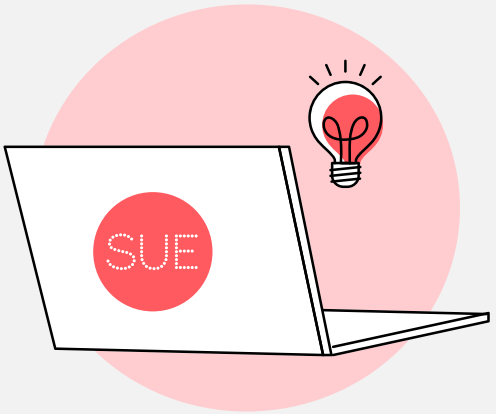

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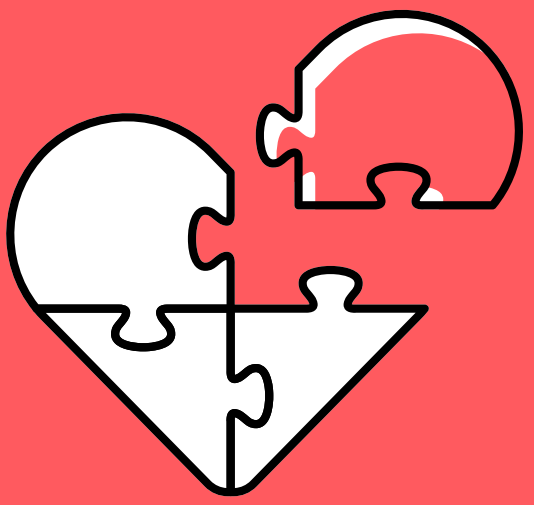

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