Facts don't care about feelings.

Science isn't concerned about sensibilities.

Reality could't care less about rage.

UNCOMFORTABLE IDEAS

Prepare for a bumpy ride.



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UNCOMFORTABLE IDEAS

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Dedication

To all the people I've offended before
Who travelled in and out my door
My meaning they mistook
I dedicate this book
To all the people I've offended before

... and to Willie Nelson

Preface

"The suppression of uncomfortable ideas may be common in religion or in politics, but it is not the path to knowledge, and there's no place for it in the endeavor of science." - **Carl Sagan**

Imagine for a moment that a Neo-Nazi group is speaking at a local university. They are advertising that they are reaching out to the general public to help them understand that the Nazi party has been unjustly demonized, and they promise to discuss historical facts that will put the party in proper perspective. Do you go? Why or why not? Think about this for a moment. We'll refer to this question in the next section.

Cognitive Biases

I wrote this book for a general audience, but I don't shy away from technical terms—especially when they explain so nicely how we deal with, or **not** deal with, uncomfortable ideas. But I promise you this: when I do mention a technical term, I will do my best to explain it well and provide examples where appropriate.

Let's start with the term "cognitive bias." A *cognitive bias* is like an illusion for the mind. It is a deviation from rationality in judgment. Our brain did not evolve with rationality and reason as a goal; the only goals are reproduction and survival. Rationality is only needed to the extent that it supports one or both of those goals. Here's the big problem: evolution works over tens of thousands of years, and we have made dramatic changes to our social environment in the last several hundred years. Evolution hasn't had time to catch up. An example to which most of us can relate, unfortunately, is overeating. We have a desire to overeat because food was scarce in our ancestral environment, and the cost of starving was far greater than the cost of eating too much. Today, for most of us, there is no shortage of food, and we have a serious problem with obesity. The evolutionary trait that once aided in our survival is now killing us. Like the behavior of overeating, most cognitive biases are also relics of our ancestral environment that

once helped us survive, but now, in the age of reason, are problematic. Some just make us look silly, some lead to poor judgments and decision making, some threaten our lives, and some actually are responsible for killing us.

Consider *stereotyping,* which is a cognitive bias that allows us to quickly and efficiently (but not always accurately) make judgments about people. Tens of thousands of years ago, if our ancestors were approached by individuals who looked different from them, it was a safe bet to assume the strangers were a risk. They didn't have the luxury of time to get to know all about the strangers. If they hesitated in taking action, they might die. Today, stereotyping has become less effective (although far from useless) since there is less risk associated with taking the time to learn about others and stereotyping is now more of a liability to us than it is an asset.

Which groups are more likely to avoid uncomfortable ideas? To answer this, we can turn to research in cognitive science that has focused on the question, "who tends to be more biased?" Republicans or Democrats? Christians or atheists? Men or women? The answer is a bit tricky since it depends on the bias being studied,[1] the passion the members have for their group,[2] and the metacognitive abilities of the members (the ability to think about their thinking process),[3] just to name a few of the factors. Perhaps the most important point in understanding biases is that the biases are not correlated with general cognitive ability;[4] that is, **intelligent people are not immune to biases**. Social scientist Keith Stanovich has done extensive research in the area of reasoning[5] and proposed that one's ability to reason effectively—to recognize and avoid biases largely responsible for our avoidance of uncomfortable ideas, is a separate intelligence just like emotional intelligence differs from general intelligence. Rational intelligence is an intelligence that is learnable. This book will help you become more intelligent in the area of rationality primarily by helping you to learn and recognize the biases that work against this intelligence. This improves your *metacognition*—your ability to think about how you reason.

A Few Words About Me

As a social psychologist, my goal is to see issues as objectively as possible while recognizing my own biases. For full disclosure, I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual, married, well-educated, upper-middle-class male. I don't have strong political beliefs, but I am definitely left of center. I am an atheist with a naturalistic worldview, but I can certainly appreciate religions for the benefits they offer some people and communities. Given my background, I cannot speak to the lived experiences of the members of the transgender and gay communities, non-whites or women, but I can explore related topics scientifically, objectively, and without passion or ideology. If we want to know about climate change, we're better off getting our information from climatologists than from Inuits, even though Inuits experience the effects of climate change. Knowledge and experience are not the same.

I've done my best to be fully objective in creating this book. This has allowed me to present some uncomfortable ideas that I don't necessarily agree with but know that other people do. I am not presenting a balanced assessment of the ideas because virtually all of us have heard the "arguments" against these ideas already. I am presenting arguments for ideas that you likely have not heard before. Just because this book is not balanced, it doesn't mean it is not fair or that the arguments are not strong and factual. I have cited all claims where data support the claims, and when I come to my own conclusions, I have done my best to reasonably justify those conclusions.

The goal of this book is to explore many uncomfortable ideas that are often not expressed, entertained, or accepted for a myriad of reasons. If I did my job right, you will no doubt be offended or at the very least, be made uncomfortable by many of these ideas. Based on the ideas I do support, you might call me a bigot, racist, misogynist, snob, elitist, sympathizer, shill, godless heathen, or perhaps just an asshole. With the exception of the "godless heathen" label, I don't think I am any of those, but I also think my jeans from high school still fit me fine.

Political Correctness

Political correctness is defined as "the avoidance, often considered as taken to extremes, of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude, marginalize, or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against." Think of social behavior on a continuum. At one end, we have overtly racist, sexist, and mean-spirited forms of expression or action directed towards those who are incapable of defending themselves due to lack of power. On the other end of the continuum, we have **any form of expression or action** that is **interpreted** as overtly racist, sexist, and mean-spirited. Political correctness exists between the two extremes. This means a socially unaware person can think she is politically correct by referring to a black person as a "negro" (and avoiding the other N-word) where most others would consider her comment politically incorrect. Conversely, a college student could start a protest over the term "Black Friday," connecting the day after Thanksgiving somehow to slavery, then call it "racist." There is no universally agreed upon ideal level of political correctness and what is extreme to one person might be perfectly reasonable to another. Be prepared to argue for your opinion and convince others why you are right.

Uncomfortable Idea: You are not the authority or standard on what is or is not politically correct. You don't have moral superiority; you have the illusion of it.

The Structure of This Book

In part one, we look at the meaning of "uncomfortable idea," specifically what uncomfortable ideas are, what it means to avoid them, and why it's so important to entertain them and, at times, embrace them.

Part two deals with the most common unconscious and conscious reasons why we avoid uncomfortable ideas and includes

dozens of examples, most of which will fall outside your comfort zone.

Part three looks at why we refuse to accept uncomfortable ideas that we would likely accept if they weren't uncomfortable.

In part four, you are presented with several uncomfortable ideas that should make you rethink many of your core beliefs.

Finally, in part five, you will find a listing of over a hundred uncomfortable questions that will make excellent discussion questions for college classes, social media, or fun questions to break out at a party—assuming you don't mind some heated discussions.

Not everyone will find all of these ideas uncomfortable, but the chances are most of you will find most of these ideas uncomfortable. Don't avoid them; entertain them and either accept them or educate yourself as to why they shouldn't be accepted, so you will be prepared with reasons as to why the ideas are bad when someone is attempting to convince you otherwise. This is the foundation of critical thinking.

Part I: The Uncomfortable Idea

What is an "Uncomfortable Idea?"

Simply defined, an *uncomfortable idea* is an idea that makes you uncomfortable. This is a *subjective concept* meaning that any given idea can be uncomfortable to you but not to another person or vice versa. More specifically, **an uncomfortable idea is a thought that is difficult to entertain due to real or anticipated psychological pain or social consequences that result from entertaining the thought**.

Recall the opening question about attending the Neo-Nazi event. For most of us, just considering attending this event makes us feel uncomfortable, and we didn't even get to the ideas presented in the event. Perhaps you wouldn't attend the Neo-Nazi event simply because you have no interest whatsoever in the topic. You don't care if Hitler had a good side or if there were aspects of the Nazi party that made good social and economic sense. It wouldn't surprise you, offend you, or make you uncomfortable in any way—you just don't care. There are countless ideas and even more perspectives on those ideas. One couldn't possibly entertain them all in a lifetime, let alone someone who works, has a family, and enjoys one's spare time. However, any ideas that fit into this category would, by definition, not qualify as "uncomfortable ideas." Perhaps if more people supported the "nice guy Hitler" idea, then it would become an uncomfortable idea worthy of being entertained, but for now, it is simply an idea unworthy of our consideration. It is up to those who are trying to get us to consider the idea to convince us as to why it matters.

In addition to being apathetic to the idea (i.e., not giving a rat's ass), you might be well informed and not likely to be exposed to any new information that will change your mind. Perhaps you have studied Nazi history and are well aware of the arguments and reasons presented by Nazi sympathizers. Your "avoidance" of the idea would more accurately be a refusal to waste your time on hearing information you already know, or can reasonably

anticipate hearing. Indifference and being well-informed aside, ideas are often avoided for a reason.

Avoiding Uncomfortable Ideas

We avoid uncomfortable ideas in three main ways: we avoid *entertaining* them, we avoid *accepting* them, and we avoid *expressing* them. These processes can be deliberate or done subconsciously or have components of both. Many of the same reasons we avoid entertaining uncomfortable ideas apply to why we avoid accepting and expressing these ideas. Refusing to entertain an uncomfortable idea is a conscious decision not to think about, investigate, or consider the evidence for the idea. There are dozens of reasons why we do this. Many times there are multiple reasons combined that cannot be articulated, but we just "know" that an idea is not up for debate or consideration. The problem is, virtually all of these reasons are irrational, based on biases, cognitive effects, heuristics, fallacies, or other obstacles in reason.

We can, and do, accept ideas without entertaining them. We do this all the time when we trust authority, when we are raised with a certain idea, when we are cognitively exhausted, or if we are gullible and just not very good at critical thinking. While accepting a good idea for a bad reason is better than accepting a bad idea for a bad reason, it's best to accept a good idea for a good reason. In other words, entertaining the ideas we do accept or thinking critically about them is an important component of reason.

Let's get back to our opening question. If you were to immediately reject the invitation to attend the presentation by the Neo-Nazi group simply because you think Neo-Nazis are "animals," you would be refusing to entertain the ideas in what might be a mostly subconscious process. If you were to agree to go but sat through the entire event with your arms crossed uncritically dismissing every point that was made, you would be refusing to entertain the ideas in what would most likely be a deliberate thought process where you decided ahead of time that if you heard anything that made sense, it would only be propaganda and lies. Perhaps you did entertain the ideas critically while recognizing your biases, and now comes the time when you decide if you

accept the ideas or not. This is the most difficult part. As we will explore in this book, you might have perfectly reasonable justifications for not accepting the idea, but there are many ways in which our brain "protects us" against uncomfortable ideas, no matter how factual and true they might be. Remember, truth-seeking and understanding reality are not the goals of evolution; survival and reproduction are.

Why it is Important to Entertain Uncomfortable Ideas and Accept Uncomfortable Facts and Truths

So what if you choose not to listen to a Neo-Nazi justify his ideas? So what if you refuse to entertain ideas that contradict your religious beliefs? So what if you support your political party's ideas 100% no matter what? Depending on the idea, the costs can range from embarrassing to catastrophic.

Credibility

To some people, credibility still matters. If you are arguing for one side of an issue and you fail to acknowledge valid points by your opponent, or worse, outright reject valid points, you will lose any credibility you do have with your opponent, and you are likely to lose credibility with the audience, as well. I recently heard a debate where one of the debaters was defending consequentialism as a moral theory. His opponent made the point that we rarely know the long-term consequences of our actions, and most people are lousy at predicting even short-term human behavior in response to an action. Rather than accept this uncomfortable idea as a valid point (which it is), the debater defending consequentialism refused to address this criticism. Perhaps it was just a debate tactic, and he was counting on avoiding the criticism being a better strategy than acknowledging it. But the whole exchange did result in me concluding that the debater defending consequentialism really didn't think his position through very well. His credibility was lost with me due to his failure to acknowledge an idea that was clearly uncomfortable to him.

Expose Dangerous Thinking

The world is full of some really dangerous people with even more dangerous ideas. When we put restrictions on the expression of ideas, we make it more difficult to identify potentially dangerous people and their dangerous ideas. While it might be more comfortable avoiding these people and their ideas, and pretending they don't exist, the better strategy is confronting them and doing our best to explain why we think their ideas are dangerous. Isolation breeds extremism; integration promotes moderation.

The casual use of deliberately insulting labels such as "racist," "misogynist," "homophobe," and "xenophobe" might feel satisfying and might even be perfectly justifiable, but rarely causes the accused to change their way of thinking. Instead, it lets people with dangerous ideas know that their ideas are socially unacceptable, which is not the same as being wrong or dangerous. We need to encourage the free exchange of ideas, not banish those with dangerous ideas into exile where their ideas fester and eventually are expressed as behaviors and possibly even devastating actions.

Attempting to Solve the Wrong Problem

If you're convinced that the United States has a problem with racist cops, then you would focus on the problem of racism—no doubt a worthy social issue. But what if you consider the less socially acceptable ideas that the United States has a problem with police brutality and the use of excessive force? Entertaining this idea might lead you to facts and data that justify that conclusion (such as the percentage of white suspects who are also unjustly shot), which would turn your attention to what might be the larger problem. Racism might have an effect on the number of black suspects being unjustly gunned down by cops, but the excessive force used by police and the laws that protect such force might have a much greater effect on the number of all suspects, regardless of skin color, being unjustly gunned down by cops. If we don't entertain the alternative ideas, even if they go against our

ideology, personal experience, or anecdotal evidence, we can be wasting our time on solving the wrong problem.

Uncomfortable Idea: The police in the United States have a much greater problem with excessive force than racism.

Here is a fact. The U.S. locks people up at a higher rate than any other country.[6] Clearly, the United States has a problem with crime. Or does it? What if we took a closer look at the laws, policies, and social norms and questioned them? Should we be locking people up for using recreational drugs? Should we be locking people up for selling and buying sex? Should an 18-year-old girl serve jail time for having sex with her 17-year-old boyfriend? The United States has many laws that are based on outdated ideology, iron-age morality, and incorrect assumptions. Unless we deal with the uncomfortable idea that our concepts of morality and justice might be way off, we will continue to create more crime by making more things illegal. In other words, our outrageous incarceration rate in the "land of the free" is a symptom of the real problem. The problem, however, is not an excessive number of evil people hurting other people; it is locking people up who don't live up to our moral standards.

Uncomfortable Idea: We are locking too many people up because of our rigid understanding of morality and justice.

Treating Symptoms and Not the Disease

When we have a cold, we eat chicken soup, take extra vitamin C, and have our chakras realigned while placing healing crystals in our navel. This is all fine and dandy if it makes us feel better, but it does nothing to make the cold go away. When it comes to the common cold, the best we can do with our current medical knowledge is treat the symptoms but not the disease. If we could

treat the disease, this would clearly be the preferable option that would prevent a lot of future suffering. When it comes to social issues, our desire to avoid uncomfortable ideas can cause us to focus on the symptoms while ignoring the disease.

Why is saying "people of color" appropriate, but saying "colored people" is offensive to most people in 2016? Is it the word "of" that has some special power to diffuse racism? Does putting the adjective before the noun make it offensive? No, because "Black people" is acceptable (at least in 2016), and nobody says "people of black." The reasons why terms become offensive and sometimes become acceptable after being deemed offensive are mostly due to association and negative connotations. There are terms used to label every race, class, nationality, sexual preference, gender identity, physical and mental difference, and what's acceptable is constantly changing. While we are all so concerned about terminology, the underlying problems of prejudice and discrimination continue. The negative connotations that become associated with the labels are just a symptom of the prejudice and discrimination.

Uncomfortable Idea: No matter how many times marginalized groups change their preferred label, they will still be marginalized unless the real difficult underlying problems are addressed.

In our age of political correctness, we might be infuriated by the expression of any negative stereotype, but some stereotypes are supported by data. If we dismiss the stereotype as a form of prejudice and focus on suppressing the stereotype, the underlying problem that gave rise to the justified stereotype and associated prejudice will continue. Consider that black adult males are seen as more violent than white adult males[7]—this is a common stereotype. We can blame this on racism and try to get people to drop this stereotype, but that is difficult to do when the stereotype is supported by the data.[8] What we need to do is look at why blacks are more likely to commit a violent crime (or at least found

guilty of it—yes, there is no question that due to prejudice, blacks are more likely to be found guilty[9]). Once we solve the problem, it will be reflected in the data, and the stereotype will become an unjustified one that will weaken over time and likely disappear. Unless the underlying causes are addressed, there is little chance the symptoms (stereotypes) will go away.

Uncomfortable Idea: Stereotypes are sometimes supported by the data and reflections of reality.

Understanding Unintended Consequences

When we get caught up in ideology and political correctness, we overlook the downside of our actions. Yes, there are downsides to just about every action, even if one pretends there are not. I spoke at a conference for skeptics recently that adopted a "color communication badge" policy originally created for those on the autism spectrum. In short, conference attendees had the option of placing a sticker on their badge that indicated the level of social interaction they wanted. For example, according to the posted policy:

> *Showing a red square sticker means that the person probably does not want to talk to anyone, or only wants to talk to a few people. The person might approach others to talk, and that is okay; the approached people are welcome to talk back to them in that case. But unless you have been told already by the badge-wearer that you are on their "blue list," you should not approach them to talk.*

The reason for implementing this kind of policy at a convention where the perception of those on the autism spectrum is unlikely to be much different than the general population, is stated in the same policy:

> *Color communication badges also help all people, abled or disabled, to more easily and effectively let people know whether they want to be approached for conversations or*

not. This can create a positive impact on the social atmosphere where communication badges are being used.

While this policy sounds great for those on the autism spectrum, there is a significant downside that, from a social psychological perspective, I would argue is more damaging than helpful. Social interaction is not easy for everyone, but "difficult" has never been a good reason not to do something or persist at improving. Communication is like a muscle; if we don't use it, we lose it. We might try to read people and get it completely wrong, but this is how we learn. We might have a difficult time communicating to others in a non-awkward way that we don't want to be talking to them, but with each interaction, we get better at it—unless we avoid all potentially uncomfortable interactions through "communication badges."

Electric mobility scooters make it easier and more effective for able-bodied people to shop in the mall, but most of us can agree this is not a good idea if we care about maintaining our ability to get around unassisted (think of the Disney movie *Wall-E*). Likewise, unless the entire world agrees to implement communication badges, we will lose our ability to easily and effectively interact with others who don't use this badge system. Refusing to implement an "accessibility" policy for any reason is generally not an idea that's very popular. Defenders of such policies think they have the moral high ground by protecting the disabled, but don't realize that they are also creating the disabled.

Uncomfortable Idea: In our efforts to be accommodating, we can do more harm than good to those we are trying to help. There is a fine line between accommodation and coddling that we often cross when attempting to be politically correct.

Another example of the unintended consequences of avoiding uncomfortable ideas has to do with *identity politics* or a political style that focuses on the issues relevant to various groups defined by a wide variety of shared personal characteristics. Some of the

more common characteristics include race, religion, sex, gender, ethnicity, ideology, nationality, sexual orientation, gender expression, culture, shared history, and medical conditions. We celebrate marginalized groups that focus on promoting equality for their group, but we don't like the idea that this kind of deliberate self-classification based on superficial traits could have some significant unintended consequences. While it may feel cathartic to commiserate with a group of people just like you while demonizing those who are not like you, focusing on our whiteness, blackness, maleness, femaleness, gayness, straightness, or any other "ness" robs people of their individualism and is the polar opposite of the proven strategies that have been used to reduce prejudice and bring groups together. These proven strategies include focusing on similarities and common objectives.

Uncomfortable Idea: Identity politics is a dangerous game where the unintended consequences could be even greater prejudice against the group.

Understanding Reduces Animosity

Depending on how passionate one might be about certain issues, one can dislike or even **hate** people who hold opposite views on those issues. If we want to understand why someone holds the idea they do, we need to entertain the idea. What we often realize is that biological differences, different life experiences, or different values account for these different ideas. In the case of biological difference, the fairly new area of neuroscience shows us that biological differences in the brain affect how we process and understand information, including political and religious beliefs. Different life experiences may include the indoctrination we received as a child, education or lack thereof, or some strong emotional experience that had a great impact on how we see the world. Even though we all may claim that we value the same things, how we define those things and to what degree we value each thing varies greatly. For example, two

people both might value justice and compassion, but one might support the death penalty because to them, death is a just punishment for murder and justice is more important to them than compassion. Or perhaps, one might claim that they value compassion more, but it is through their sense of compassion for the loved ones of the victim that they support the death penalty. Once we understand why people hold the ideas they do, we are far less likely to hate them for it.

Uncomfortable Idea: Opposite views can often be reduced to prioritizing different values, where there is no wrong or right.

Avoiding Manipulation

Very often, one who presents fringe ideas is well aware of the common objections to the idea and like a good salesperson has crafted answers that address the objections. These answers can be fallacious, flawed, or outright lies designed to get one to buy into the idea. Once a person has accepted the idea, evidence against the idea has less of an effect on them rejecting the idea. This is why it is important to entertain an idea without pressure and have enough time to evaluate the arguments for and against the idea critically. For example, if someone tried to sell you on the idea that the earth was flat, they might claim that the horizon always rises to meet eye level, which is *impossible* on a ball earth. Not having investigated this, you can be skeptical, but you would really not be able to refute their claim. A few minutes of research, however, would demonstrate that this claim is simply untrue. The point is not to debunk what you have predetermined to be a false claim (this is reactionary thinking, not critical thinking), but to entertain the claims and evaluate them for accuracy.

The Importance of a Shared Reality

One unifying force of humanity is our shared reality. Similarities bring people together, while differences tend to tear us apart. We are able to thrive as a species because we are a *social*

species, one that is capable of creating a system in which each person's unique contributions benefit the group. For example, a farmer will raise cows that provide milk, a doctor will help people stay healthy, and a builder will build homes. This kind of system works because we share a common reality where people need food, healthcare, and shelter. This reality is founded on reason, logic, evidence, and experience. But this system breaks down when reason, logic, facts, and evidence are discarded, and experiences are interpreted in heavily biased ways. A group of people who feel that their god wants them to kill those who don't believe in their god, a group of people who reject facts of science and hinder the kind of scientific advancement that saves lives because it is inconsistent with their beliefs, or a group of political extremists who have been manipulated by emotional arguments, are examples of how personal realities contribute to the suffering of a society. The starting point of cooperation is a shared reality.

Uncomfortable Idea: In order to live harmoniously with others, when your personal beliefs are in conflict with our shared reality that is based on reason, logic, facts, and evidence, shared reality must take precedence.

Embracing Uncomfortable Ideas

There is a common misconception that we need to choose between happiness and some of the more "depressing" aspects of reality that are commonly seen as uncomfortable ideas. While I can think of a few cases where this might be the case, humanity is far more resilient than we give ourselves credit for. A landmark study published in 1978 demonstrated that lottery winners are no happier and paralyzed accident victims are no less happy a few months after their life-changing events. In addition, the lottery winners were often less happy than they were prior to winning the lottery because they took less pleasure in mundane events.[10] Unlike being paralyzed, accepting uncomfortable ideas can be relatively benign,

such as realizing you're not as good-looking as you think. However, they can also be even more devastating, such as realizing that there is no benevolent god looking out for your well-being after spending a lifetime as a devout Christian. Optimists undoubtedly do better embracing uncomfortable ideas because these ideas often involve perspective. To give you a personal example, I spent the first 35 years of my life believing in an afterlife—the comfortable idea that I was going to live for eternity. Then I had to go ahead and start studying philosophy, world religions, and psychology. And if that weren't enough to turn my worldview upside down, I read the Bible from cover to cover—not just the warm and fuzzy parts. I could no longer believe in an afterlife, and that was difficult for me to handle, but only at first. I am an optimist, and I quickly began to realize that every moment I am alive is now more precious. I don't have eternity to do things or enjoy time with my family; I just have this life. In the last nine years since that realization, I started several businesses, wrote and published seven books, including my memoirs, earned a master's degree in general psychology, earned a PhD in social psychology, lost 30 pounds (and kept it off), vacationed in over a dozen countries, accepted a teaching position at a local college, spent a lot of quality time with my wife and kids, wrote a screenplay for a movie[11] and the entire first season of a sitcom[12]. Just because an idea is uncomfortable at first does not mean it will remain uncomfortable.

The Conscious, Unconscious, Group, and Individual Aspects of Avoidance

Within the context of avoiding uncomfortable ideas, "avoiding" can refer to a) keeping the idea from entering one's own thoughts or b) the conscious decision to not think about, investigate, or consider evidence for the idea. We avoid uncomfortable ideas consciously and unconsciously, as groups and as individuals.

Conscious, Group Avoidance

Conscious group avoidance occurs when two or more people deliberately plan to keep themselves and/or others from exposure to or the entertaining of uncomfortable ideas. This kind of avoidance is common with universities, student groups, parents, and activist groups.

According to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), since 2000, 82 total invited speakers were unable to speak at a university event because they were either formally disinvited, they voluntarily withdrew, or they were prevented from speaking due to substantial disruption by protesters in the audience.[13] There are many more speakers who are protested by student or faculty groups who still end up speaking despite the efforts to stop them. Take Michael Bloomberg for example. In 2014, when word got out that he was scheduled as the Harvard commencement speaker, several students protested because of Bloomberg's policies that they felt discriminated against minorities.[14] This is a reasonable concern and certainly not unjustified. The problem is, actions, behaviors, and policies are very often a reflection of a person's beliefs, moral code, and politics. Avoiding exposure to ideas from people whose actions, behavior, or policies we don't agree with is the same as avoiding them for their ideas that we find uncomfortable. By avoiding these ideas, we are creating an echo chamber environment where principles in group psychology such as *groupthink*, *group polarization,* and *memory biases* all but assure that ideas uncomfortable to the group become even more uncomfortable to that group. For example, *group polarization* is the phenomenon that when placed in group situations such as student groups or entire student populations, people will form more extreme opinions than when they are in individual situations.

Uncomfortable Idea: Refusing to allow people to share their ideas, no matter how dangerous you may think their ideas are, can often do more harm than good.

Parents are well known for shielding their children from uncomfortable ideas. This is called *parenting*. Although there are as many philosophies to parenting as there are parents, virtually all parents would agree that there are some ideas to which young children should not be exposed. However, too many parents continue to shield their children from ideas throughout adolescence and even into adulthood. They teach their children what to think rather than encourage them to learn how to think for themselves. They teach them what they believe is right and wrong rather than how to determine for themselves what is right and what is wrong. This leads to generations of people who don't know the difference between *obedience* and *morality*. Perhaps this is their goal.

Uncomfortable Idea: Parents are more interested in creating obedient children than moral children.

The online group South African Feminists state that "not all ideas are worth debating,"[15] with which I would agree. I'm not spending my time debating a flat earth. Many years back, out of curiosity, I did look at the arguments and found them easily debunked. Unless a flat-earther has some new and compelling evidence that disproves hundreds of years of mathematical proofs along with geological, cosmological, and astrological evidence, it is not worth debating. The problem is with the reasons that are given as to **why** some ideas are not worth debating. The South African feminists' group states that "One of our rules is that victim-blaming is absolutely forbidden; we assume that everyone in the group knows that victim-blaming is wrong." Fair enough. It's sick when people blame girls for getting raped because "they were asking for it" by the way they dressed. But is "blaming" the

same thing as sharing some of the responsibility? If I go into a black neighborhood and start yelling "White people rule!" repeatedly at the top of my lungs, then I get the bejesus kicked out of me, do I not bear at least some of the responsibility for the fact that I have been beaten up even if I am not responsible for the crime of assault? We don't know how the members of this feminist group would answer these questions because these are questions that we are expressly forbidden to ask. It is my guess that this group is conflating blame for the crime with sharing some of the responsibility for the action. While it is an uncomfortable idea, there have been several studies that link provocative dress and alcohol use to rape[16][17][18]—at least enough that I, as a social scientist who understands the research, would be concerned enough about the safety of my teenage daughter to warn her how her behavior can increase the odds of becoming a victim of a crime. It sucks that we live in a society where this is true, but the fact that it sucks doesn't change the fact that it's true, and refusing to discuss this may make girls feel more liberated but certainly does not make them any safer.

Uncomfortable Idea: Victims of crimes often share some of the responsibility for the situation. Taking preventative measures (such as locking your car doors to prevent auto theft) can reduce the odds that you will become a victim.

Conscious, Individual Avoidance

Conscious, individual avoidance occurs when a person deliberately plans to keep oneself from exposure to uncomfortable ideas or decides not to entertain uncomfortable ideas. This kind of avoidance is commonly demonstrated through our preferences.

Since the beginning of human communication, we have had some level of discretion over the ideas to which we are exposed. Books, plays, public debates, movies, and radio shows all expressing ideas and exposing us to different points of view, and most of which we could choose to avoid and ignore. Prior to the

mid-nineties, our media sources were extremely limited compared to the choices we have today, thanks to the Internet. With what is a practically unlimited choice, systems have been put in place that allows individuals to only get information from sources of their choice. Some of these systems include social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter, newsfeeds, podcasts, YouTube subscriptions, recommendation algorithms (e.g., Netflix's "because you watched X..."), and downloadable news apps. With this kind of control over the information to which we are exposed, we can easily avoid sources that expose us to uncomfortable ideas.

Uncomfortable Idea: It's very likely that your impression of the world is highly inaccurate due to how you are choosing to get your information.

One of the primary characteristics of a cult or cult-like behavior is isolation. *Isolation* includes cutting social ties with people who don't subscribe to the beliefs of the group. Some religious groups encourage and even require their members to disassociate themselves from all those outside the group. They often do this by demonizing or dehumanizing the outgroup. The popular Christian website "GotQuestions.org" makes this point clear: "Unbelievers have opposite worldviews and morals" and "The idea is that the pagan, wicked, unbelieving world is governed by the principles of Satan and that Christians should be separate from that wicked world, just as Christ was separate from all the methods, purposes, and plans of Satan."[19] The belief that nonbelievers are puppets of Satan aside, many studies in social behavior have demonstrated that intergroup contact is one of the best ways to dissolve false stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination.[20] Of course, if a person truly believes through faith that the outgroup is evil incarnate, then attempting to persuade that person that they should seek to understand the outgroup is unlikely to be effective.

Uncomfortable Idea: If an authority figure is trying to keep you from interacting with others outside your group, that's a strong sign that you are in a cult.

Unconscious, Group Avoidance

Unconscious group avoidance occurs when two or more people shelter themselves and/or others from uncomfortable ideas without realizing it. This kind of avoidance is demonstrated in the creation of social norms.

If one were asked to provide a few examples of racists and racists acts just ten years ago, the answers would be very different than the answers given today. Ten years ago, one might say that a KKK member is an example of a racist and stating that Japanese Americans should "go back where they came from" would be considered an act of racism. Today, one might say that Ellen DeGeneres is an example of a racist, and having yourself photoshopped getting a piggyback ride from the fastest man in the world (who happens to be black) is an act of racism. This change is due to changing social norms.

Uncomfortable Idea: Racism, sexism, and bigotry are evaluations based on social norms. America is becoming more racist, sexist, and bigoted not because of changing behavior but because of changing social norms and perceptions.

Defined within social psychology, *racism* requires the belief in the **superiority** of one's own race.[21] Today, however, through years of incremental and mostly unconscious processes, the definition of racism has been redefined (in the minds of the public) to include unconscious preferences for people who look like us[22] (academically known as *implicit bias*), criticism of any person of color despite the criticism being unrelated to their race, agreeing

with racists on non-racist issues, eating a taco on Cinco De Mayo[23], and dressing like a person from another culture on Halloween. All these "displays of racism" may just be prejudicial, discriminatory, culturally insensitive, bad political decisions, or none of the above. Regardless, the moment we attach the label "racist" to them, we stigmatize them to the extent where even discussing the innocence of the ideas becomes an act worthy of being "racist." Social norms say that we can entertain ideas that might be prejudicial, discriminatory, and even culturally insensitive, but not "racist" ideas. Those are ideas we want to avoid appearing to support or even defend in any way.

Uncomfortable Idea: Your use of the term "racism" is almost certainly inaccurate. Racism requires the belief in the superiority of one's own race.

When we *romanticize*, we make something seem better or more appealing than it actually is. Think of the dozens of movies and television shows you have seen where the protagonist is faced with a decision: to keep his high-paying job where he will be away from his family for five days each week, or quit and spend lots of time with his family. We all know the ending. He quits his job, and we see the whole family spending some quality time together as happy as can be. Did you ever ask, "then what happens?" The kids eventually have to go to school, the wife has to take care of the kids, and now the father is unemployed at home all day binge-watching '80s sitcoms on Netflix. The father becomes a miserable bastard with an alcohol problem; his wife leaves him, and his kids never want to see him again—the end. Admittedly, my ending is unlikely, but not any more unlikely than the romanticized endings we see on film. The reality is most often somewhere in the middle. Through expressions of culture such as movies, television, books, stories, poems, religious parables, anecdotes, and aphorisms, we unconsciously and automatically accept romanticized versions of ideas as truth. Following are some other examples of romanticized ideas. As you read this list, imagine a scene playing out describing the idea. Does it make you feel all warm and fuzzy inside? Realize

that how the idea makes you feel is more of a function of the value a culture puts on the idea than any inherent goodness in the idea.

- Couples should stay together for life
- Love is always a beautiful thing
- Faith is good to have
- There is a perfect someone for everyone
- Anyone can succeed in life if they just try hard enough
- The Constitution is a blueprint for a perfect nation
- God is perfectly good, as is all the advice in the Bible
- People deserve what they get in life
- Giving money to beggars is the kind and right thing to do

Unconscious, Individual Avoidance

Unconscious, individual avoidance occurs when a person shelters him or herself from uncomfortable ideas without even realizing it. Some examples of this kind of avoidance include common cultural presuppositions and committing logical fallacies.

In Islamic cultures, it is presupposed that not only a god exists, but that just one god exists, and the god's name is ALLAH, and the Koran is the word of this god. To *presuppose* something means to accept some idea as a fact without the need for critical examination of that idea. Some people call these presuppositions "self-evident truths," which, ironically, are only evident to those who call them "self-evident." Often, presupposed ideas that are critically examined and found to be unworthy of acceptance could completely unravel an individual's worldview, a society, a country, and even humanity. For this reason, cultural norms protect certain ideas by demonizing outsiders who don't accept the idea, deeming it "offensive" or "rude" to question the idea, and even make the disagreement or questioning of ideas illegal and, in some cases punishable by death. In America, it is presupposed that "In God, we trust," pledging allegiance to our country is the right thing to do, and those who kill people when our government tells them to are "heroes." The chances are, you have never given any of those ideas much thought, not because you chose not to, but because in

America, these things are just a given. No critical thought required (or welcomed).

Uncomfortable Idea: Presuppositions and "self-evident truths" are ways to avoid rational justification. We need to realize that what is self-evident to us may not be self-evident to others.

Another way we unconsciously avoid exposure to ideas is by associating ideas with stigmatized people or groups and dismissing the idea based on that association—a version of the ad hominem fallacy also known as *guilt by association*. Let's use Hitler, the classic American supervillain. How many men have you seen sportin' a Hitler-style mustache? The odds are none outside of watching old Charlie Chaplin films. Fashion trend aside, men don't have mustaches like Hitler's because it would associate them with Hitler. For the same general reason, parents with the last names of infamous people don't give their children certain first names. You don't see many young people named "Jeffrey Dahmer" or "Ted Bundy." Besides facial hair and names, we also distance ourselves from the notorious by ideas. This is seen all the time in politics when one side of the political spectrum embraces an idea, and the other side has an immediate and unconscious aversion to the idea due to the many cognitive biases found within group psychology[24]. In short, if the idea comes from our enemy, we don't want to hear it. Unfortunately, this initial aversion combined with other cognitive biases such as *rationalization*, *confirmation bias*, and the *backfire effect* make the idea more uncomfortable and increasingly difficult to entertain. We'll explore these ideas and many more in the following section.

End of the free sample

You have just read the preface and all of Part I of *Uncomfortable Ideas* by Bo Bennett, PhD.

The complete ebook (EPUB and PDF) is available direct from the author at

bobennett.com/bookstore