

Researcher Finds Teaching Moments in Hypocrisy

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When it comes to certain behaviors, Jeff Stone, a UA associate professor of psychology, says people have a tendency to do one thing although they value and believe something else entirely.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Jeff Stone, who has studied the issue of hypocrisy, says that people may feel compelled to change their behaviors when they realize that they became active advocates in their personal change.

No matter the number of advertisements and public messages promoting healthy habits, some people have a difficult time committing to them – even when those messages meld with their personal beliefs.

University of Arizona associate professor of psychology Jeff Stone – whose work involves motivating people to change their behavior – says

the problem is in the human tendency toward hypocrisy.

Of course, nobody likes a hypocrite. But when it comes to issues of safe sex, exercise, dieting, sun protection, smoking and interpersonal relationships, Stone says hypocrites are everywhere.

Yet something does happen when a person realizes their own contradictions, he said.

As Stone explains, “In social psychology, there is a long history of research that shows discomfort motivates people to justify or rationalize their behavior by changing their attitude to say that what they did was not so bad.”

That sort of contradictory behavior piqued Stone’s interest and drove him to being studying the issue of hypocrisy while focusing on the topic of behavior.

He recently co-authored a chapter on dissonance theory – which states that people feel uncomfortable or stressful in situations where contradictions are evident – with Nicholas C. Fernandez, a doctoral degree candidate in the UA psychology department. The chapter, which also spoke about hypocrisy, was published last month in a book titled “Attitudes and Attitude Change.”

Stone, who heads up the Self and Attitudes Lab and the Social Psychology of Sport Lab at the UA, has spent nearly 20 years studying “cognitive dissonance” – the reaction people have when they experience a rift between the way they act and what they think or believe.

This serves as motivation to do something – whether it is to change one’s behavior or to change one’s mind about the issue.

Stone has determined that a teaching moment exists when a person experiences cognitive dissonance and that people aren't called out on their contradictions nearly enough

"It's about getting people to actively process messages in a way that leads to self-persuasion," he said. "It's a very active process."

Stone, who has studied behaviors associated with safe sex and exercise, is now working with the Arizona Cancer Center to devise research programs that would hone in on those teaching moments, focusing particularly on smoking cessation and skin cancer prevention.

"We're doing cancer prevention type studies with this research aimed at the issue of sun protection behaviors," said Stone, who also serves as a research associate with the Arizona Cancer Center. "They're the type of studies that are designed to get people to change their attitudes and to believe it is more favorable to use sunscreen."

It's not a matter of humiliating a person but "figuring out how to influence people," he added. The key, he said, is to be privately reminded of the hypocrisy.

Stone also has published a number of articles on the topic, the most recent being an article, co-authored with Fernandez, that was published in Social and Personality Psychology Compass.

In the article, "To Practice What We Preach: The Use of Hypocrisy and Cognitive Dissonance to Motivate Behavior Change," Stone and Fernandez analyzed some of the research surrounding cognitive dissonance that has been published around the world in recent years.

In their article, Stone and Fernandez wrote: "The dissonance and the need to restore consistency are induced by subsequently making people

aware of the fact that they themselves have failed to practice the target behavior in the past. Mindfulness for past failures is accomplished by having people examine or generate a list of their reasons for not performing the behavior when they had the opportunity.”

When a person has the realization, the co-authors wrote, they begin to feel discomfort which then leads them to feel motivated to make a change.

One study in particular asked students to help develop an AIDS prevention and education program. During the process, students talked publically about important safe sex acts and half of them were later asked to write down their own personal behaviors. Others were also asked to video tape messages about safe sex.

“It’s really most effective when people publically advocate to people and allow people to discover on their own – or lead them to discover on their own – that they don’t perform the behaviors that they tell others to do,” Stone said.

The researchers found that those students who were realized that their words did not necessarily follow their actions were most likely to report that they would change.

This is tied to a person’s perceptions of self-integrity and also to honesty and sincerity. “Following a hypocritical act,” the co-authors wrote, “maintaining or restoring these perceptions of self-integrity requires that people act in a more honest and sincere manner than in the past. Thus, when they behave like a hypocrite, people become motivated to be honest and sincere about the norms for behavior, which is most directly accomplished by bringing their behavior into line with the proposed course for action.”

The research is important for several reasons, Stone said.

For instance, if a person leads a healthier life, that could potentially lead to less stress on the health care system. If people conserved more, it could result in less pollution, Stone.

“One of the reasons for doing this kind of work,” he said, “is the applicability to making changes that benefit the person and society.”

Provided by University of Arizona

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