

Ignorance is bliss when it comes to challenging social issues

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The less people know about important complex issues such as the economy, energy consumption and the environment, the more they want to avoid becoming well-informed, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

And the more urgent the issue, the more people want to remain unaware, according to a paper published online in APA's [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#).

"These studies were designed to help understand the so-called 'ignorance is bliss' approach to [social issues](#)," said author Steven Shepherd, a graduate student with the University of Waterloo in Ontario. "The findings can assist educators in addressing significant barriers to getting people involved and engaged in social issues."

Through a series of five studies conducted in 2010 and 2011 with 511 adults in the United States and Canada, the researchers described "a [chain reaction](#) from ignorance about a subject to dependence on and trust in the government to deal with the issue."

In one study, participants who felt most affected by the [economic recession](#) avoided information challenging the government's ability to manage the economy. However, they did not avoid [positive information](#), the study said. This study comprised 197 Americans with a mean age of 35 (111 women and 89 men), who had received complex information about the economy and had answered a question about how the economy

is affecting them directly.

To test the links among dependence, trust and avoidance, researchers provided either a complex or simple description of the economy to a group of 58 Canadians, mean age 42, composed of 20 men and 38 women. The participants who received the complex description indicated higher levels of perceived [helplessness](#) in getting through the [economic downturn](#), more dependence on and trust in the government to manage the economy, and less desire to learn more about the issue.

"This is despite the fact that, all else equal, one should have less trust in someone to effectively manage something that is more complex," said co-author Aaron C. Kay, PhD, of Duke University. "Instead, people tend to respond by psychologically 'outsourcing' the issue to the government, which in turn causes them to trust and feel more dependent on the government. Ultimately, they avoid learning about the issue because that could shatter their faith in the government."

Participants who felt unknowledgeable about oil supplies not only avoided negative information about the issue, they became even more reluctant to know more when the issue was urgent, as in an imminent oil shortage in the United States, according the authors. For this study, 163 Americans, with a mean age of 32 (70 men and 93 women), provided their opinion about the complexity of natural resource management and then read a statement declaring the United States has less than 40 years' worth of oil supplies. Afterward, they answered questions to assess their reluctance to learn more.

"Beyond just downplaying the catastrophic, doomsday aspects to their messages, educators may want to consider explaining issues in ways that make them easily digestible and understandable, with a clear emphasis on local, individual-level causes," the authors said.

Another two studies found that participants who received complex information about energy sources trusted the government more than those who received simple information. For these studies, researchers questioned 93 (49 men and 44 women) Canadian undergraduate students in two separate groups.

The authors recommended further research to determine how people would react when faced with other important issues such as food safety, national security, health, social inequality, poverty and moral and ethical conflict, as well as under what conditions people tend to respond with increased rather than decreased engagement.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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