To change attitudes, don't argue —? agree, extremely

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What if the best way to change minds isn't to tell people why they're wrong, but to tell them why they're right? Scientists tried this recently and discovered that agreeing with people can be a surprisingly powerful way to shake up strongly held beliefs.

Researchers found that showing people extreme versions of ideas that confirmed - not contradicted - their opinions on a deeply divisive issue actually caused them to reconsider their stance and become more receptive to other points of view. The scientists attribute this to the fact that the new information caused people to see their views as irrational or absurd, according to a study published this week in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

"We truly believe that in most intractable conflicts, the real problems are not the real issues," said Eran Halperin, a psychologist at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya in Israel and an author of the study. In reality, he said, both sides know what needs to be done; however, there are many "psychological barriers that prevent societies from identifying opportunities for peace."

To see if tightly held attitudes could be pried loose, the scientists looked to one of the most polarizing issues on the planet, the decades-old conflict between Israelis and Palestinians that flared again violently last week. People on both sides hold strong beliefs that make compromise difficult, as years of failed negotiations have proved.

The scientists, led by Halperin's graduate students Boaz Hameiri and Roni Porat, recruited more than 150 Israelis and exposed half of them to video clips that related the conflict with Palestinians back to values that many Israelis hold dear. The other half watched neutral TV commercials and served as a control.

But instead of pointing out how the conflict stood at odds with Israeli values - a common approach in persuasion - the experimental videos illustrated how the conflict was consistent with many participants' beliefs, taken to their extreme limit.

"For example, the fact that they are the most moral society in the world is one of the most basic beliefs of Israeli society," Halperin said. So when the researchers showed participants a video that claimed Israel should continue the conflict so that its citizens could continue to feel moral, people reacted angrily.

"You take people's most basic beliefs and turn them into something that is absurd," Halperin said. "For an outsider, it can sound like a joke, but for them, you are playing with their most fundamental belief."

Although participants did not enjoy watching the clips, after numerous rounds of exposure over a period of months leading up to the 2013 Israeli elections, participants' attitudes softened considerably; they reported almost a 30 percent increase in their willingness to re-evaluate their position compared with participants in the control group and took a more neutral stance on common political narratives like the idea that Palestinians bear responsibility for continuing the conflict. This shift persisted even a year after the study concluded.

In addition, when the election rolled around, more people exposed to the so-called paradoxical thinking experiment reported voting for moderate parties - those that favor conciliatory measures like evacuating some

Israeli settlements in the West Bank - suggesting the intervention led not just to changed attitudes, but also to changed behavior.

Traditional approaches for dislodging strongly held attitudes have proved stubbornly ineffective; numerous studies have shown that confronting people with information that challenges their beliefs often has no effect at all, or even strengthens their initial position.

But in this study paradoxical thinking seemed to encourage some people to privately re-evaluate their strongly held beliefs or political narratives, authors said. It may succeed precisely because it sneaks through the psychological security system that protects our deepest beliefs from inconsistent information without tripping the alarm.

The scientists say the method needs further validation in the lab, and they noted several glaring issues that made applying it to real-world situations difficult.

For one, there was the "motivation problem": How do you get people to watch videos they find disturbing? Outside of a lab setting, nothing would force people to sit through more than one or two clips, which probably wouldn't produce the same effects found in the study, Halperin said.

There is also a risk of backfire - some people in the study took the videos at face value, assimilating the extreme messages into their personal beliefs. And, of course, nothing would stop governments or organizations from employing the same technique to promote their own agendas.

In fact, because the people who receive the paradoxical information know nothing about its intended purpose - an integral component to the method's very success - the approach treads into ethically questionable

territory.

"We are not supposed to fool participants," said Gavriel Salomon, a psychologist at the University of Haifa who was not involved in the study. "But the paradoxical approach is still open to ethical debate."

Halperin, however, sees paradoxical thinking as a potentially valuable tool for promoting peace.

"You can say it's a kind of propaganda," Halperin said, "I just see it differently. We all agree that reducing violence and promoting peace is a good cause."

More information: Paradoxical thinking as a new avenue of intervention to promote peace, *PNAS*, www.pnas.org/content/early/201… /1407055111.abstract