

'I'd rather not know': Why we choose ignorance

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When given the choice to learn how their actions will affect someone else, 40% of people will choose ignorance, often in order to have an excuse to act selfishly, according to recent research.

"Examples of such willful ignorance abound in everyday life, such as when consumers ignore information about the problematic origins of the products they buy," said lead author Linh Vu, MS, a doctoral candidate at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. "We wanted to know just how prevalent and how harmful willful ignorance is, as well as why people engage in it."

The research was [published](#) in the journal *Psychological Bulletin*.

Vu and her colleagues conducted a [meta-analysis](#) of 22 research studies with a total of 6,531 participants. The studies were all conducted in research labs or online, and most followed a protocol in which some participants were told the consequences of their actions, while others could choose whether to learn the consequences or not.

In one example, participants had to decide between receiving a smaller reward (\$5) or a larger reward (\$6). If they chose \$5, then an anonymous peer (or charity) would also receive \$5. If they chose the larger \$6 reward, however, the other recipient would receive only \$1. One set of participants were offered the option to learn the consequences of their choice, while another group was automatically told the consequences.

Across the studies, the researchers found that when given an option, 40% of people chose not to learn the consequences of their actions. That willful ignorance was correlated with less altruism. People were 15.6 percentage points more likely to be generous to someone else when they were told the consequences of their choice compared with when they were allowed to remain ignorant.

The researchers hypothesized that one reason for willful ignorance might be that some people behave altruistically because they want to maintain a positive self-image of being an altruistic person. In those cases, willful ignorance can allow them to maintain that self-image without having to

act in an altruistic way.

The meta-analysis backed that up, according to study co-author Shaul Shalvi, Ph.D., a professor of behavioral ethics at the University of Amsterdam. That's because people who chose to learn the consequences of their action were 7 percentage points more likely to be generous compared with participants who were given information by default. That suggests that truly altruistic people choose to learn the consequences of their actions.

"The findings are fascinating as they suggest a lot of the altruistic behaviors we observe are driven by a desire to behave as others expect us to," Shalvi said.

"While most people are willing to do the right thing when they are fully informed of the consequences of their actions, this willingness is not always because people care for others. A part of the reasons why people act altruistically is due to societal pressures as well as their desire to view themselves in a good light. Since being righteous is often costly, demanding people to give up their time, money and effort, ignorance offers an easy way out."

All of the studies included in this meta-analysis took place in labs in the United States or Western Europe, or on [online platforms](#) such as Amazon Mechanical Turk. Future research should aim to examine willful ignorance in more diverse settings, according to the researchers, and to investigate ways to combat this behavior.

More information: Ignorance by Choice: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Underlying Motives of Willful Ignorance and Its Consequences, *Psychological Bulletin* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/bul0000398](https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000398)

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