To tell or not to tell, that is the question

Torn over whether to report a family member who is radicalised? People often have mixed feelings about an issue or decision. In this guide to navigating ambivalence, a psychology professor says understanding Goals, Insights, Values and Expectations can help you tackle the dilemma.

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Human beings are complex creatures, most of us do not have monolithic feelings, but have mixed feelings and thoughts about someone or something. We can see both positive and negative traits in a person or act, in our personal lives and at work. When it comes to our reactions to public events, a public leader or a public policy, our feelings and responses often form an ambivalent caldron.

Consider some examples: We both like and dislike certain traits of our spouse, business partner or friend. When we make a decision on our word or lifestyle (say, start work earlier so you can go home earlier), our work or lifestyle (say, start work later) may conflict with us. Our beliefs about a person could change over time. When conflicted by competing motivations, we may feel torn between feelings of loyalty to kinship or friendship and the need to decide whether to report the person to security agencies. They may be torn between feelings of loyalty to a leader we respect and the need to support a leader we disagree with, or a political party we are involved in and a political party we are not involved in. When we feel ambivalent, we are not always coherent.

Conflicts in ambivalence People, decisions and actions have both positive and negative features. When we feel ambivalent, we recognise the pros and the cons. But being in ambivalence is psychologically disconcerting – you have strong feelings and thoughts that are opposing. You may have the two or three conflicting sides, and you are unsure to feel, think or do about it. Rather than sitting on the fence, it is more like being in the middle of a “tag-of-war”. It is not feeling neutral towards two opposing positions; it is feeling “torn between”. Ambivalence is a state of active conflict, and not passive indifference.

The quick way to get out of the conflicting state is to take a position and reject the other. Thus, when people experience ambivalence, they are eager to take a position and reinforce it. This makes them susceptible to cognitive biases and emotional influences. They become more vulnerable to self-confirmation and persuasion by others. When the position taken is inconsistent with the facts, or inadequate to address the future, it becomes maladaptive.

To deal with ambivalence, we must understand its conflicting nature. There are three main types of conflicts.

MOTIVATIONAL CONFLICTS Ambivalence occurs when two different motivations pull a decision in opposite directions. Should you seek out a sumptuous meal? For many, the enjoyment of eating and losing weight are often in opposing motivations relating to the decision. Motivational conflicts also exist in social and economic situations. For example, someone may feel conflicted about what to spend time on when he is highly motivated to both pursue his career and help others in need.

Another example is what to do with our money when pulled by motivations to spend on ourselves versus donate to others, or spend on what we want versus save for our future needs.

BELIEF CONFLICTS We hold certain beliefs about specific individuals, and also specific groups. The beliefs that matter most are those related to integrity, competence and benevolence in intention. Our beliefs about a person could be based on empirical evidence, our own encounters and experiences, opinions of others or salient stereotypes. Flawed biases of how they were formed, we want our various beliefs about the same person or group to be internally consistent. We have a human need for coherence of thought, even though we are not always coherent in our arguments or consistent when taking positions.

We see positive traits as consistent with each other but not with negative traits, and conversely we see the same for negative traits. Which is why seeing a mix of positive and negative traits in the same person or group leads to a belief ambivalence.

Belief conflict also occurs when there is inconsistency between what a person or group practices and preaches. The effect is especially potent when the issue touches on core values such as integrity and impartiality, and fairness and meritorcy. Belief conflicts are powerful cognitions that guide the way we think, feel and act towards others, and subsequently our trust in them.

EMOTIONAL CONFLICTS Ambivalence is most felt when we experience strong emotions that are incompatible – love and anger towards someone we care about, or respect for and disappointment with the leaders we support. Emotional conflicts can also involve uncertainty and social needs. For example, we may simultaneously experience hope for success and fear of failure or the need to express our view and pressure to conform to a contrary viewpoint adopted by the group that we belong to.

The impact of emotional conflict is relevant in the current security situation related to terrorism. With more attacks undertaken not by militant outsiders but by radicalised citizens within Westernised industrialised societies, law enforcement agencies, including in Singapore, are urging family and community members to be on the lookout for people who might be radicalised by extremist Islamic teachings and tempted to take up violent actions.

This places family members and close friends of a radicalised individual in a difficult situation. They will experience strong emotional conflicts when they have to decide whether to report the person to security agencies. They are torn between feelings of loyalty to kinship or friendship and feelings of responsibility to society.

When people are in emotional ambivalence, their feelings discomfort and overpower any rational thinking. That is why the security message needs to go beyond telling families and friends to be vigilant to detect signs of radicalisation in an individual.

We need to highlight the severity of the consequences involved if a lone radicalised individual launches an attack; help them anticipate the regret they will feel from not reporting, if that attack were to take place, and focus on the positive difference that they will make by reporting.

Resolving ambivalence To resolve ambivalence, focus on what we can drive the way we think, feel and act. I suggest we focus on goals, insights, values and expectations.

GOALS When conflicted by competing emotions or opposing motivations, ask what the goals that we really want to have are. When goals are clarified, some of the positives and negatives in the mix may change in their relevance and impact. Also considered how goals are related to one another. If the goals are contradictory, we need to prioritise, coordinate, choose or make trade-offs. But if they are actually common or at least not mutually exclusive, we can connect them to converge or complement one another.

INSIGHTS Learn and apply the insights on ambivalence. This involves understanding our motivations and regulating our emotions. It is more aware of our beliefs and biases, including the belief of a bias and evaluating its validity. We can also gain new insights when we examine issues in content and find out facts objectively, instead of selecting information that confirms existing beliefs and prejudices. Consider those who are knowledgeable in the relevant area and can be trusted to tell the truth.

VALUES When we express our convictions of what is important and what ought to be, they shape our attitudes, affect our thoughts, influence our emotions and guide our behaviours. Our emotions may content our rationality. Our emotions are often influenced by our values, which are critical when we are emotionally conflicted. Our values may content our rationality. Our emotions are often influenced by our values, which are critical when we are emotionally conflicted.

We need to make the effort to learn and understand who we are, to view information and verify facts. On the part of those who hold the information, share more data to engender more realistic and well-informed expectations. Mixed feelings and thoughts that are not integrated or rationalisations are natural, and they occur often. When confronted with them, nor be overwhelmed by the sense of conflicting thoughts, feelings and values. Instead, we can reflect on the conflicts and resolve them. Adopt the “GIVE” approach – clarify the goals, capitalises on the insights, centre on our values, and calibrate our expectations.

Ambivalence can be adaptive or maladaptive. Passive to understand the mixed feelings and thoughts. Prevents stigmatising the sit of negativity. Promote empathy, the suggestions of positivity.

We can address ambivalence in ways that benefit self and others, personal and work lives, leadership and teamwork, policy formulation and implementation, and even community relations and cross-cultural exchanges.

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