

How Groupthink Impacts Our Behavior

Why going along with the group can lead to poor decisions

By Kendra Cherry, MEd | Updated on June 19, 2024

 Fact checked by Emily Swaim

Have you ever been in a situation where everyone seems to agree without giving the problem much thought? This is often an example of a psychological phenomenon known as groupthink. Groups tend to think in harmony, which can make reaching a consensus easier while also reducing critical thinking and novel ideas.



What Exactly Is Groupthink?

Groupthink is a psychological phenomenon in which people strive for consensus within a group. In many cases, people will set aside their own personal beliefs or adopt the opinions of the rest of the group. The term was first used in 1972 by social psychologist Irving L. Janis.

People opposed to the group's decisions or overriding opinions frequently remain quiet, preferring to keep the peace rather than disrupt the crowd's uniformity. This phenomenon can be problematic, but even well-intentioned people are prone to making irrational decisions in the face of overwhelming pressure from the group.

Keep reading to learn more about how to spot the signs of groupthink, what causes it, and the effects it can have on decision-making and behavior.

8 Signs of Groupthink

Groupthink may not always be easy to discern, but there are some signs that it is present. There are also some situations where it may be more likely to occur. Janis identified eight different "symptoms" that indicate groupthink.

1. **Illusions of unanimity** lead members to believe that everyone is in agreement and feels the same way. It is often much more difficult to speak out when it seems that everyone else in the group is on the same page.
2. **Unquestioned beliefs** lead members to ignore possible moral problems and not consider the consequences of individual and group actions.
3. **Rationalizing** prevents members from reconsidering their beliefs and causes them to ignore warning signs.
4. **Stereotyping** leads members of the in-group to ignore or even demonize out-group members who may oppose or challenge the group's ideas. This causes members of the group to ignore important ideas or information.
5. **Self-censorship** causes people who might have doubts to hide their fears or misgivings. Rather than sharing what they know, people remain quiet and assume that the group must know best.
6. **"Mindguards"** act as self-appointed censors to hide problematic information from the group. Rather than sharing important information, they keep quiet or actively prevent sharing.
7. **Illusions of invulnerability** lead group members to be overly optimistic and engage in risk-taking. When no one speaks out or voices an alternative opinion, people believe that the group must be right.
8. **Direct pressure** to conform is often placed on members who pose questions, and those who question the group are often seen as disloyal or traitorous.

Recap

Four of the main characteristics of groupthink include pressure to conform, the illusion of invulnerability, self-censorship, and unquestioned beliefs. Other signs include rationalizing, self-censorship, mindguards, and direct pressure.

How Groupthink Works

Why does groupthink occur? Think about the last time you were part of a group, perhaps during a school project. Imagine that someone proposes an idea that you think is terrible, ineffective, or just downright dumb.

However, everyone else in the group agrees with the person who suggested the idea, and the group seems set on pursuing that course of action. Do you voice your dissent or just go along with the majority opinion?

In many cases, people end up engaging in groupthink when they fear that their objections might disrupt the harmony of the group or suspect that their ideas might cause other members to reject them.

What Causes Groupthink?

Groupthink is complex and there are many influences that can impact when and how it happens. Some causes that may play a part include:

Group Identity

It tends to occur more in situations where group members are very similar to one another. When there is strong group identity, members of the group tend to perceive their group as correct or superior while expressing disdain or disapproval toward people outside of the group, a phenomenon known as the ingroup bias.

When people have a lot in common and are very similar to one another, their beliefs and decision-making are often biased in similar ways. This means that they may come to the same conclusions and interpret the available information in the same ways.

Leader Influences

Groupthink is also more likely to occur when a powerful and charismatic leader commands the group. People may be more likely to go along with authoritarian leaders because they fear punishment. Transformational leaders can sometimes produce this same effect because group members are more willing to buy into their vision for the group.

Low Knowledge

When people lack personal knowledge of something or feel that other members of the group are more qualified, they are more likely to engage in groupthink. Since they lack the expertise and experience, they tend to let other people set the pace and make the decisions.

Stress

Situations where the group is placed under extreme stress or where moral dilemmas exist also increase the occurrence of groupthink. It's easier to maintain peace and stick to the group consensus rather than rock the boat and slow things down by introducing conflicting ideas.

Contributing Factors

Janis suggested that groupthink tends to be the most prevalent in conditions:

- When there is a high degree of cohesiveness.
- When there are situational factors that contribute to deferring to the group (such as external threats, moral problems, and difficult decisions).
- When there are structural issues (such as group isolation and a lack of impartial leadership).

Examples of Groupthink

Groupthink has been attributed to many real-world political decisions that have had consequential effects. In his original descriptions of groupthink, Janis suggested that the escalation of the Vietnam War, the Bay of Pigs invasion, and the failure of the U.S. to heed warnings about a potential attack on Pearl Harbor were all influenced by groupthink.

Other examples where decision-making is believed to be heavily influenced by groupthink include:

- The Watergate scandal
- The Challenger space shuttle disaster
- The 2003 invasion of Iraq
- The 2008 economic crisis
- The Tiananmen Square disaster
- Internet cancel culture

In more everyday settings, researchers suggest that groupthink might play a part in decisions made by professionals in healthcare settings.

In each instance, factors such as pressure to conform, closed-mindedness, feelings of invulnerability, and the illusion of group unanimity contribute to poor decisions and often devastating outcomes.

Groupthink Can Have Serious Effects

Groupthink can cause people to ignore important information and can ultimately lead to poor decisions. This can be damaging even in minor situations but can have much more dire consequences in certain settings.

Medical, military, or political decisions, for example, can lead to unfortunate outcomes when they are impaired by the effects of groupthink.

The phenomenon can have high costs. These include:

- The suppression of individual opinions and creative thought can lead to inefficient problem-solving.
- It can contribute to group members engaging in self-censorship. This tendency to seek consensus above all else also means that group members may not adequately assess the potential risks and benefits of a decision.
- Groupthink also tends to lead group members to perceive the group as inherently moral or right. Stereotyped beliefs about other groups can contribute to this biased sense of rightness.

Groupthink can be a way to preserve the harmony in the group, which may be helpful in some situations that require rapid decision-making. However, it can also lead to poor problem-solving and contribute to bad decisions.

Groupthink vs. Conformity

It is important to note that while groupthink and conformity are similar and related concepts, there are important distinctions between the two. Groupthink involves the decision-making process.

On the other hand, conformity is a process in which people change their own actions so they can fit in with a specific group. Conformity can sometimes cause groupthink, but it isn't always the motivating factor.

Potential Pitfalls of Groupthink

While groupthink can generate consensus, it is by definition a negative phenomenon that results in faulty or uninformed thinking and decision-making. Some of the problems it can cause include:

- Blindness to potentially negative outcomes
- Failure to listen to people with dissenting opinions
- Lack of creativity
- Lack of preparation to deal with negative outcomes
- Ignoring important information
- Inability to see other solutions
- Not looking for things that might not yet be known to the group
- Obedience to authority without question
- Overconfidence in decisions
- Resistance to new information or ideas

Group consensus can allow groups to make decisions, complete tasks, and finish projects quickly and efficiently—but even the most harmonious groups can benefit from some challenges. Finding ways to reduce groupthink can improve decision-making and assure amicable relationships within the group.

What Can You Do to Avoid Groupthink?

There are steps that groups can take to minimize this problem. First, leaders can give group members the opportunity to express their own ideas or argue against ideas that have already been proposed.

Breaking up members into smaller independent teams can also be helpful. Here are some more ideas that might help prevent groupthink.

- Initially, the leader of the group should avoid stating their opinions or preferences when assigning tasks. Give people time to come up with their own ideas first.
- Assign at least one individual to take the role of the "devil's advocate."

- Discuss the group's ideas with an outside member in order to get impartial opinions.
- Encourage group members to remain critical. Don't discourage dissent or challenges to the prevailing opinion.
- Before big decisions, leaders should hold a "second-chance" meeting where members have the opportunity to express any remaining doubts.
- Reward creativity and give group members regular opportunities to share their ideas and thoughts.
- Assign specific roles to certain members of the group.
- Establish metrics or definitions to make sure that everyone is basing decisions or judgments on the same information.
- Consider allowing people to submit anonymous comments, suggestions, or opinions.

Diversity among group members has also been shown to enhance decision-making and reduce groupthink.

When people in groups have diverse backgrounds and experiences, they are better able to bring different perspectives, information, and ideas to the table. This enhances decisions and makes it less likely that groups will fall into groupthink patterns.

8 Sources

Verywell Mind uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts within our articles. Read our editorial process to learn more about how we fact-check and keep our content accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

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Additional Reading

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