Living With Difference · About 4 minutes

When a Question Can Change Your Account

Curiosity has room for an answer you did not expect.

Before asking, “Why did you do that?”, pause over the answer you've already supplied in your head.

“Why do you always think only of yourself?” has already reached a conclusion. Even a gentler question can carry the same certainty. The other person explains, and every reply is absorbed into the account you brought with you.

Curiosity asks something more demanding: let the answer change what it actually corrects. You can do that without pretending all your evidence is uncertain or giving up a preference of your own.

Dara and Luis, fictional partners, disagree about replacing a damaged kitchen table. Dara believes his wish to repair it is another refusal to spend money on their home. She is also doing most of the work of finding a replacement. Luis says repair would meet their needs and leave money for an upcoming bill.

Dara asks which costs he is including. His answer shows that he has thought about a real expense. She can revise the belief that he has given the decision no thought. That does not determine whether repair is affordable, whether replacement is worth the cost or who should do the research.

“I see you have considered the bill. I still want a new table, and I need us to share finding out what the options involve.”

A correction can be that specific. Dara need not move from “He has considered nothing” to “His plan must be right.” She can learn something and continue to disagree.

Let the answer be inconvenient

Kunda's review of motivated reasoning describes how desired conclusions can shape the reasons people select and evaluate.[1] That tendency can support comforting beliefs as well as critical ones. Wanting to think a relationship is fine can narrow curiosity just as much as wanting to prove someone uncaring.

Suppose Luis admits he has not checked the bill. Dara need not supply a kinder explanation to demonstrate openness. The answer may confirm part of her concern. Curiosity has value because it admits information, not because it always leads toward reassurance.

Different questions require different kinds of attention. A bill's amount can be checked. A preference can be heard without documentary proof. Dara's account of feeling alone with the research deserves attention even if Luis disputes her interpretation of his motive.

If you use this example to practice anything, keep the revision narrow. What did Luis's answer change? What remains unresolved? This can prevent a conversation from becoming an all-or-nothing contest in which one corrected fact discredits everything someone has said.

Nobody owes an endless explanation. A person may have answered repeatedly, be unsure or want to stop talking. A genuine question leaves room for those responses too. You can also decide you have enough information and do not want another discussion.

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Dara's question becomes useful when an answer can change how she understands the table and the person across from her.

A real question can leave you sitting there for a moment, reconsidering something you were sure of when you walked into the room.

Companion reading · If You Loved Me, Wouldn't You See It My Way?

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Living With Difference (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. Psychological Bulletin, 108(3), 480–498. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.108.3.480 Source.

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