



Self Deception is Necessary and Delightful

[TedXIndianaUniversity logo and words appear: ALL TOO HUMAN]

[Image of Leah Savion and words appear: LEAHSAVION]

[IUSA, IU Grand Challenges, Hutton Honors College, Indiana University Foundation logos and words appear: IU Research]

Leah Savion speaks: Self-deception sinks the ship. Many planes fall out the sky because of the overconfidence of pilots. Self-deception encourages ignorance, it eliminates the need for self-control, and you can get so intoxicated with the sense of power that you can end up saying something like I can kill someone in the middle of Fifth Avenue and get away with it.

So we don't really, we intelligent people, don't really engage in self-deception. Do you engage in self-deception? No, but your husband, he's full of it. Yeah so the point is, we don't do it. When others do, it is so transparent to us. We can see exactly when other people engage in self-deception. So it's obvious to the other people.

[PowerPoint slide appears with title: Obvious?]

So let's look at these two guys. This is Johnny, comes back to his dorm room after his party, and tells Danny his roommate that he just met the love of his life. He met the mother of his future children. She is so wonderful. And then he says what is so special about her? And Johnny says she is so smart and sensitive, and she has a fantastic sense of humor. And she's curious about so many different things.

And he goes on and on about things he knows absolutely nothing about. The real reason for that attraction is this.

(PowerPoint slide appears with image of large-breasted young woman displaying cleavage)

Why is it ... you want to see it again? That's the real reason. Okay we don't see that, here it is. Why is it that Danny is buying all this bullshit from Johnny? Because he would have thought and said exactly the same thing under these same circumstances. So it's not that obvious to us when others are doing that.

So let's look at another misconception about self-deception, which is, is it always about promoting our ego? What do you think? Is self-deception about promoting ego? Oh well I'm about to tell you, it's not

only about that. There's so many other ways in which we deceive ourselves. We trust our memory, and our memory is so fragile. It is so easy to instill memories in your heads. The episodic memory, which is the type of memory that eye-witness testimony calls upon, is so fragile and so reconstructed that there is actually an inverse relationship between the level of conviction you have, as a weakness, and the veracity of what you say. Totally inverse relationship.

What other things about ego don't appear there? We have a belief that we know what makes us happy. We have a perception of well-being that is actually the major motivation we have in life. We design our life in order to meet the goals I would like to be happy in life. Actually, we are terribly wrong about that too. Let's talk about mental states. Do we have what's called privileged access? Do I know I'm in pain, I'm in love, I'm infatuated? By the way, infatuation has a shelf-life. Right and you can see from the Johnny and the Danny story why the shelf life is about nine weeks only. If it's based on such ignorance, right. These are a glorious nine weeks, I'm not taking anything away from that.

Do you think that you know why you laugh? Laughter is something that we practice almost every day. We think that we laugh because something is funny, yes? I got news for you: more than 80% of the time that you laugh, there was nothing funny around. Absolutely nothing. We think that we laugh because we communicate pleasure. No we laugh in the movie house when we are all alone, looking at the screen. We think that laughter indicates pleasure. No laughter also has a sinister side to it. The Columbine murderers were laughing as they were shooting their friends.

Do we think that self-deception is a mark of some mental disease, like narcissism or pathology? Do we think that it should be eradicated at all cost? I hope that after my 15 minutes in the sun today, you will think otherwise. Okay.

[PowerPoint slide appears with three images: Post-it Notes with words "DON'T FORGET" titled: Memory; Jeckyl and Hyde images of a man titled: Personality Stability; and tall ship floating in the clouds titled: Perception.]

So memory is a self-deception that we engage in on a constant basis. Personal stability: we think that we are exactly the same person that we've always been, or if we are smart enough to notice a change, we think that we are the person we'll be tomorrow and for the rest of our lives. And actually, we don't. We don't know ourselves that way. Milgram's notorious experiment some 50 years ago showed that the

majority people are capable of doing incredibly terrible things that they would never dream they can do with the slightest amount of pressure. Not even any risk to their life, just someone in a white coat in the room with an air of authority. Yes?

So self-deception is not about ego, not all the time.

[PowerPoint slide titled "Just some of the time" appears with three images. Star image words: 70 percent of college students think they are above average in leadership ability. Only 2% think they are below average. Circle image words: 70 percent of college student believe they... the top 1% in...social ability. Triangle image: 79% of Americans believe in miracles, 22% in aliens, 42% communicate with dead, 52% believe in astrology.]

Just some of the time. Okay, so let's look at this. Raise your hand if you think that you're better than the average driver. Some forms of self-deception come highly recommended, and not only by me, by bigger brains than me. We need to have some optimistic view of the future that is not well-warranted. We need to have a sense of self-efficacy that is not actually sustained by defect. Helen Keller for instance, we would have never known about her if she only lived up to the visible potential that she had at the time.

(PowerPoint slide titled, "Recommended self-deception practices" appears with three bullet points: Hold an unwarranted, flattering view of yourself; Overestimate control of self and environment; Exercise unrealistic optimism.)

So here are the recommended self-deceptions: this was a seminal paper that came up in 1988 or so. And it says we exercise unrealistic optimism. And why would you do that? Because you want to have better relationship with your wife, you want to forget these baby mistakes, and so on. You want to overestimate control of yourself and the environment. So the question is, how do we go about doing that? How can we do that?

(PowerPoint slide with image of Leah Savion and her racquet ball partner Ethan appears)

So I like you to see my racket ball partner. This is Ethan. Okay, I like it if you look really really hard, you're going to notice that there are some discrepancies in the initial resources, right? Like maybe wing span, and testosterone level. But census are that he's going to wipe the floor with me. Yes?

Okay what do I do in order to mitigate the pain of defeat? I walk to the court like yeah. Maybe my shoulder, I want like this, and the racket, I didn't restring it for three months. Now this is called self-handicapping, and it works like a charm. Because if I fail in this endeavor, it was expected. And if I beat him, I get twice the glory at no price. And self-handicapping is actually so prevalent that there is a term for a student who actually pretends not to learn for a test and actually violates this social contract. It's called sneaky Booker. So now we know about that.

And there are some other ways.

(PowerPoint slide titled, "Mental tools in service of self-deception" appears with five bullet points: Self-handicapping; Rationalization; Attribution; Denial; Magical beliefs; Ethical fading.)

We have a big insistence that tells us, that gives us, incredible tools for managing a terrific, healthy level of self-deception. One of them is rationalization. I'd like you to imagine that you come out of say Walmart and realize that you got more change than you deserve. Right you gave the cashier 50 bucks, she gave you change from 100 bucks. You take yourself to be a good citizen, a decent person, yeah? What do you do? You keep walking to your car. By the time you get to your car, you have 37 solid, valid reasons for keeping the money that you don't deserve. Rationalization saves us right and left.

Attribution is a fantastic way to hypocritically assign causes to your success and failure. So let's call external causes those that are caused, right like I had the flu, and internal are due to your personality or attributes. So the two of us are taking a test. And the two of us are doing well. I did well because I'm smart. You did well because you're the teacher's pet. The two of us are applying for a job and neither one of us got it. Why do you think I would say that she didn't get it? Excuse me, you're stupid, you're just incompetent. Why is it I didn't get it? I had the flu on the day of the interview.

So attribution is something that you can put a mirror in front of them and show them that they are hypocritical about how they assign internal causes to their success and external causes to other people's success. I failed because the dog ate my homework. You failed because you are an idiot. Denying is something that we are doing right and left, we rewrite history and so on. Magical beliefs are incredible source of amusement actually. When people were given a golf ball that they were told was magical, they actually were 35% more successful in putting it.

So it works. Now, ethical fading means that the more you do something that is immoral or goes against your values, the less painful it becomes. So just more, like the first time it's hard, but the second one it's a little easier and so on.

(PowerPoint slide titled, "Adaptive benefits of self-deception" appears with five bullet points: Economize on mental resources; satisfy basic dispositions; Better relationships; Reduces stress, increase T-cells, lowers depression; high self-efficacy can be a self-fulfilling prophecy.)

So, why is it that we do that? We have incredible adaptive benefits. The major one is economize mental resources. Our brain consumes over 20% of the body's energy, the glucose and the oxygen. The brain parts constantly fight for real estate. When we engage in self-deception and we eliminate reality so to speak, the brain is much better capable of actually meeting daily goals. It satisfies basic dispositions, like a sense of control that we need. We have better relationship if we just gloss over the daily little things. If we actually confront our spouse for everything, we can create more damage than initially was done by the source of the conflict.

Do you know that we actually produce more T-cells in our immune system out of self-deception? And it lowers the pressure. The people who actually view life realistically, have a tendency for clinical depression. So watch it. High self-efficacy, which is your sense of how well you can do something, depends on that. You don't go to a job interview without believing that you can get it. So we are about to exercise, to practice what we preach. So can I ask you all please to get up? Everyone stand up.

We are gonna do a very low-key jumping jack, like that. Okay? We are gonna do five of them, and then you don't have to go to the gym for a week. Okay? Can you all count with me? Ready, and one, two, three, four, five. Yes! Thank you.

[Audience claps and Leah Savion exits stage]

[Logo words appear: ALL TOO HUMAN]

[Transcript ends]