Who are the members of cancel culture? More so than we want to admit, all of us. As the social psychologist Stanley Schachter argued based on a [series of pioneering experiments in 1951,](https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1951-08043-001) the tendency to ostracize people who persist in positions we find objectionable is a near universal group process. And while a popular media narrative would have us believe that there’s an “Us-vs.-Them” [conflict between members of cancel culture and supporters of free speech](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/opinion/cancel-culture-free-speech-poll.html), both identities exist in us. Almost all Americans like free speech in principle, but in practice we have a big problem with views different from our own on issues we care about. Ironically, our impulse to cancel “deviants” does a disservice to the very causes we want to advance.

From online bullying to school board brawls, too many of us behave like little authoritarians, assuming that [“our way” is the right way](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/8458225_Objectivity_in_the_Eye_of_the_Beholder_Divergent_Perceptions_of_Bias_in_Self_Versus_Others) and that those whose opinions differ from our own must be converted, vilified, silenced, or shunned—a toxic cognitive bias that’s just [as common among liberals as conservatives.](https://www.pnas.org/doi/abs/10.1073/pnas.1912301117) But even when we are on the side of virtue, we win few hearts and minds with an authoritarian style.

Research suggests that one of the worst psychological states in which to learn is the feeling of being under threat, a state that is especially likely when we feel attacked or ostracized. Our evolved “fight or flight” response is not designed to understand other people and the world but to protect ourselves from danger. In this self-protective state, we abandon rational thinking and empathic relating. Experimental studies reveal that when people feel excluded—for instance, by being led to believe no one picked them for a team—they [perform worse on IQ tests](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jean-Twenge/publication/11086437_Effects_of_social_exclusion_on_cognitive_processes_Anticipated_aloneness_reduces_intelligent_thought/links/554b9ee70cf29f836c974613/Effects-of-social-exclusion-on-cognitive-processes-Anticipated-aloneness-reduces-intelligent-thought.pdf), [behave more impulsively](http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.842.4690&rep=rep1&type=pdf), [see others as more hostile](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/24001216_It's_the_Thought_That_Counts_The_Role_of_Hostile_Cognition_in_Shaping_Aggressive_Responses_to_Social_Exclusion), and [lash out when provoked](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11761307/). We [focus on self-protection rather than self-improvement](https://ed.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/annurev-psych-psychology_of_change_final_e2.pdf). In one series of experiments, excluded people were found to be [more prone to conspiracy theories](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31928312/) that ascribe complex problems to malevolent actors working in secret. As [Christian Picciolini,](https://www.ted.com/talks/christian_picciolini_my_descent_into_america_s_neo_nazi_movement_and_how_i_got_out?language=en) a one-time neo-Nazi who has now dedicated his life to rehabilitating extremists, says, almost all former extremists will tell you that they became extremists not because of “dogma or ideology” but because “they wanted to belong.”

On top of this, research shows that the more pressure we put on people to adopt our views, [the less likely they are to change their own](https://www.amazon.com/Person-Situation-Perspectives-Social-Psychology/dp/1905177445) in a deep and enduring way.

Is there a way to authentically communicate views across the chasms that increasingly separate us? Between cancel culture and complacency lies a third way: Scientific studies show that small steps that convey respect and create belonging can go a long way to easing tension, reducing hate, and bridging divides:

When Twitter users with a history of sending racial slurs were sent the message, “Hey man, just remember that there are real people who hurt when you harass them with that kind of language” by a popular White user, they showed a [lasting reduction in their use of racist language.](https://mirror.explodie.org/munger2016.pdf)

When partisans on such issues as capital punishment, abortion rights, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were [asked about their most cherished, non-political personal values,](https://ed.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/annurev-psych-psychology_of_change_final_e2.pdf) they became more open to the other side’s arguments.

New research from my lab finds that just saying “I think” before you give your political opinion increases the likelihood that people on the other side of an issue will be interested in your point of view and learn from it.

A [10-minute, carefully crafted conversation](https://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~broockma/broockman_kalla_transphobia_canvassing_experiment.pdf) with politically conservative voters about transgender rights—initiated by a canvasser who shared personal stories and listened to voters in a nonjudgmental, affirming way—led to a lasting increase in voters’ support for transgender rights. This research helps explain why door-to-door canvassing is such an effective tool for spreading social change; indeed, it [played a large role](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/09/22/how-ordinary-petitions-helped-end-slavery-and-make-women-into-political-activists/) in the American abolitionist movement.

[White college students learned more about slavery](https://lirsm.psychology.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/publication/The%20implicit%20power%20motive%20%282017%29_0.pdf) when a Black peer not only explained the hard truths about this part of American history and the pain it still caused to Black Americans, but conveyed respect for their White interlocutor with nonverbal gestures (leaning in, forward-facing body-posture) and verbal affirmations (for example, by saying, “White Americans and African Americans will sit together at the table of brotherhood one day”).

Of course, some occasions merit forceful reputations of views expressed or of harmful behaviors perpetrated. But we seem much too quick to go down this path, condemning as hopeless individuals who might become allies under better circumstances. C. P. Ellis, a White man from Virginia, became staunch advocate for desegregation throughout the 70s and 80s and a union leader who won the majority of votes from black union leaders. But this same man had once been a grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. His involvement in a town forum for respectful, democratic deliberation—known as a “charette”—and his friendship with a prominent black activist [transformed him.](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1788109.American_Dreams) While freedom of speech is a cardinal virtue that should be cherished and protected, we can remember that, just as important as *what* we say, is *how* we say it. If we express ourselves even in fraught situations in a way that minimizes harm to other people’s belonging, we’re more likely to get our point across. The pressures to avoid or give up on people with whom we disagree are great. But by learning to be comfortable with our discomfort and to embrace a growth mindset about the possibility of change even in those who express objectionable views, we may find ourselves surprised at the distances people travel.