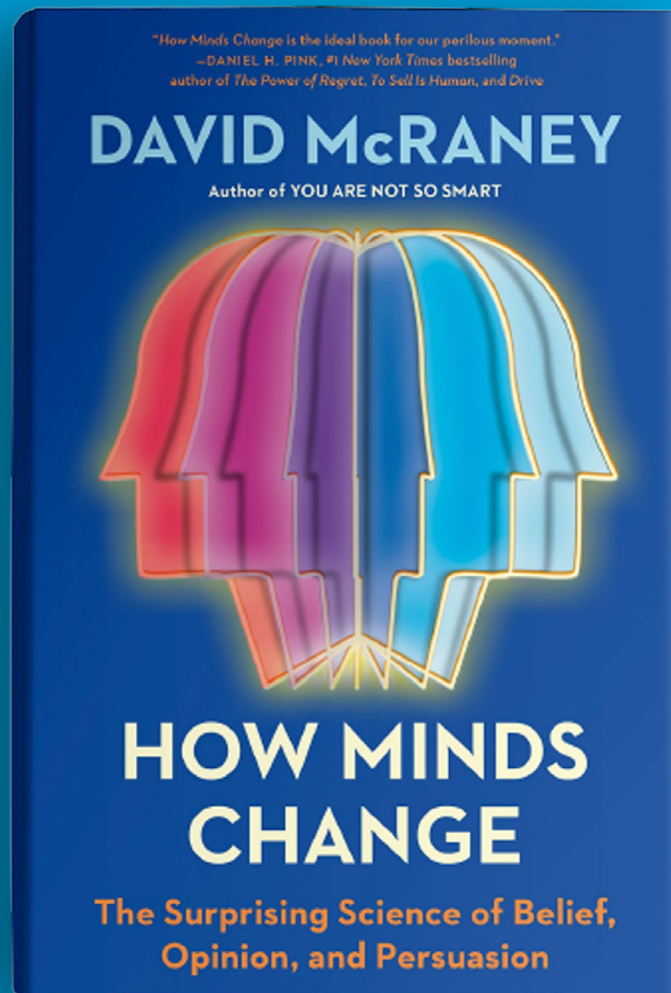


# HOW MINDS CHANGE

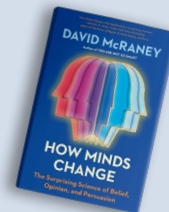
... AND HOW TO CHANGE THEM IN 10 STEPS



*A guide to persuasion and better disagreements*

# HOW MINDS CHANGE

## DISCUSSION GUIDE



Thank you so much for preordering *How Minds Change*. I truly appreciate it, and I'd like to offer you this birds-eye view companion guide for the book. First, an overview of some of the key concepts and how they fit together. Then, a step-by-step walkthrough of how to get the most out of a disagreement. Don't worry, it's short and simple.

Why a guide? I mean, you have the whole book already, right? Well, my hope is that this will be helpful to readers who finish the book, or skip straight to the parts about persuasion, and feel compelled to apply some of the insights and techniques in their own conversations. You might consider using this as a discussion guide as well, if you plan on reading the book in a group. If you do, I recommend respectfully and empathetically trying out the conversational tactics outlined in the persuasion quick sheet below.

First, a few concepts from the book:

### ARGUING

Early on in the book, we explore how human brains evolved to reach consensus—sometimes on the facts, sometimes on right and wrong, sometimes on what to eat for dinner—by banging our heads together. That led to the innate psychology that compels us to persuade others to see things our way, especially when we feel as though others are mistaken, misled, or misguided. Thanks to that innate psychology, we are all capable of changing our minds and changing the minds of others.

To leverage that capability, it's crucial to avoid debate and start having conversations. Debates have winners and losers, and no one wants to be a loser. But if both sides feel safe to explore their reasoning, to think about their own thinking, to explore their motivations, we can each avoid the dead-end goal of winning an argument. Instead, we can pursue the shared goal of learning the truth.

### COGNITIVE EMPATHY

Each of our brains creates its own private understanding through unique experiences and observations. In more scientific terms, minds slowly accumulate cognitive material to construct broadly similar, but individually unique, models of reality. We use those models to make sense of what's happening outside our skulls from moment to moment.

In chapter three, we learn the science behind all this and why different life experiences can lead to very different disambiguations, and thus very different subjective realities. When that happens in the presence of substantial uncertainty, we may vehemently disagree over reality itself—but since no one on either side is aware of the brain processes leading up to that disagreement, it makes the people who see things differently seem, in a word, wrong.

This usually leads to our greatest disagreements and most intractable disputes. Contentious issues are contentious because we are disambiguating them differently, unconsciously, and not by choice. If we can see that...it can lead to "cognitive empathy," an understanding that what others experience as the truth arrives in their minds unconsciously. This is why arguing over conclusions so often feels like a waste of time. In *How Minds Change* we learn about better ways for both parties to focus on their processing, on *how* and *why* they see what they see, not *what*.

## ASSIMILATION AND ACCOMMODATION

A few chapters in, I explore the science of how, when brains feel uncertain and when new information and experiences seem ambiguous, we use our current understanding cobbled together from previous experiences to make sense of things. Brains do this via two mechanisms.

One is **assimilation**, which is the process of disambiguating the ambiguous by attempting to fit novel information into an existing model. That way, new experiences and information can be interpreted as confirmation that our beliefs, attitudes, and values were right all along. **Accommodation**, however, is acknowledging that our current understanding is either incomplete or incorrect, and then updating our models to make room for a new layer of understanding. Great conversations encourage accommodation as everyone trades unique ideas and perspectives.

## THE AFFECTIVE TIPPING POINT

In many ways, persuasion is convincing a brain (yours included) to commit to a calorically expensive, time-consuming, globally disruptive accommodation effort (while it struggles to avoid all that through assimilation instead). When confronted with novel information, we often experience cognitive dissonance, especially when it calls into question our beliefs, attitudes, allegiances, or identities.

The brain can quickly resolve that dissonance by updating its interpretation of the information so that it seems supportive instead of challenging. That is to say, it can get out of the conflict and avoid all that effort, by finding a way to see what it expected to see. But there is a breaking point—something psychologists call the affective tipping point. It's that "I might be wrong feeling," and we evolved to feel a sharp twinge of doubt that encourages us to stop, pay attention, and carefully consider changing our minds. We are careful, and often resist, because changing our minds when we shouldn't is dangerous (we might become wrong); but not changing our minds when we should is also dangerous (we might stay wrong).

So our brains walk a tightrope, changing our minds carefully based on a variety of motivations and goals. A great conversation requires everyone involved to extend a hand and help others walk that tightrope.

## REASONING AIN'T LOGIC

Reasoning is often confused with "reason," the philosophical concept of using intellect, logic, and rationality to make decisions and form judgments. To be sure, logic is an amazing tool, a formal language for trading and evaluating propositions, and humans possess an array of cognitive talents we can categorize as reason itself, but "reasoning" is something else.

In the book we explore how research suggests reasoning, in the psychological sense, is coming up with justifications—plausible explanations for what we think, feel, and believe, and plausible means, which we intuit our trusted peers will accept as reasonable. Because this is how and why we come up with our reasons for our positions, the true motivations for why we disagree often remain hidden to us, especially in the heat of an argument, which can make resolving disagreements difficult for both sides.

To reach accommodation, to change a mind, a persuasion attempt must patiently walk the other party backwards through their own processing chain, to discover their true motivations and goals. If you remain at the end of the chain instead, you'll end up debating all the supporting facts, claims, and feelings, and may never encourage change.

How do you do it? It takes time and effort and a lot of conversation, but the steps are similar across many different persuasive techniques which emphasize guided metacognition over brawling debate. When it works, it can seem like magic, because the other person will change their own mind as a better route out of dissonance becomes clear.

# PERSUASION QUICK SHEET

## HOW TO CHANGE SOMEONE'S MIND IN 10 STEPS

Ok, here's the part where we will walk through some simple, actionable steps for changing minds. Each method covered in the book falls under something psychologists call "technique rebuttal." There are many forms of technique rebuttal, which just means you focus on a person's reasoning in a conversation.

The Socratic method is a form of technique rebuttal, but there are many others, like deep canvassing, cognitive behavioral therapy, and motivational interviewing. Each emphasizes listening in a non-judgemental and empathetic manner in an effort to help people explore their own thinking, to discover their true reasons for feeling certain. The many methods covered in the book vary depending on the issue at hand. For instance, if you wish to encourage or discourage a behavior, or change a person's attitude from positive to negative or vice versa, the method below would differ a bit. But since many times our arguments concern the truth of the matter, in this quick guide we will use a variation of street epistemology, a technique covered in Chapter 9, to help a person question a belief.

Here are the steps:

### STEP ZERO: WHY DO I WANT TO DO THIS?

The first step, step ZERO, is to ask yourself why you are so sure. Ask yourself who you trust and why. Admit to yourself that you are likely not an expert on the topic, and that you are basing your attitudes and beliefs on personal experiences, incomplete information, and on experts you trust. Explore, for yourself, why you harbor that trust. Most importantly, ask yourself why you want to change the other person's mind.

WHY?



### STEP ONE: BUILD RAPPORT

Next, in the conversation, make it your number one priority to build trust and express both curiosity and compassion. It's important to remember that the other person must be open to all of this. You must ask for consent, and you must remain transparent.



Then, as you open the dialogue, assure the other party you aren't out to shame them or put them in a position to be ostracized by their peers. Demonstrate your openness and respect, and work to collaborate on a shared goal of understanding why you disagree. The goal is to build rapport and to avoid-us-versus-them framing. If your relationship with the other person has suffered from disagreements and arguments in the past, building rapport could take a few conversations. This may take time, but until you establish trust, it's best not to move on to the other steps.

### STEP TWO: ASK THEM TO IDENTIFY THEIR BELIEF

If the issue is fact-based, ask for a claim. This could be anything from "the moon landing is a hoax," to "cars run on the sadness of ghosts." Since the rest of the steps will encourage the other person to investigate the personal reasoning they feel supports their claim, both parties must agree on what they will be discussing.



### STEP THREE: REPEAT THEIR CLAIM + CONFIRM UNDERSTANDING

Repeat the claim back to the other person in your own words. It's important to truly listen and understand, and just as important to communicate your understanding. Assure the other person you are listening by asking if you have it right, and when they say you do, move to the next step.



## STEP FOUR: IDENTITY THEIR DEFINITIONS AND USE THEIR TERMINOLOGY

Clarify their definitions. Once you have, use their definitions, not yours. From the book: “The problem with most arguments is that we often aren’t actually arguing, because our definitions of the terms aren’t the same as theirs. Take ‘the government,’ for example. You might see it as a collection of civil servants trying to appease their constituents. They might see it as a smoke-filled room where a ring of wicked billionaires share plans to divvy up the country. If you assume that you are both talking about your concept of ‘the government,’ then you end up arguing with yourself rather than focusing on the other person’s ideas.”



## STEP FIVE: ON A SCALE OF 1 TO TEN, ASK HOW CONFIDENT THEY FEEL

Ask your conversation partner to put a number on their feeling of confidence. It could be 1 to 10 or 0 to 100. Use whatever you prefer. The idea is to encourage active processing so they can begin to think about their own thinking. From here, ask why that number feels right to them, and hold space for their explanations. You can prompt further exploration by asking “why not higher?” Or “why not lower?”



## STEP SIX: ASK YOUR PARTNER TO ARTICULATE THEIR REASONING

Identify the reasons they feel support their confidence. If they offer several, look for what seems common amongst them. The reasons that come to mind might not be the true reasons they feel strongly about the issue. We often avoid introspection and offer provisional justifications at first, sometimes parroting common arguments or offering what seems like a reasonable explanation without considering if there might be something else motivating our certainty or lack thereof.

One way to help someone investigate their thinking is to ask about a particular reason they’ve presented, “If you discovered that was not true, would it change your mind?” If they say no, then you can put that reason aside and continue to explore.



## STEP SEVEN: ASK QUESTIONS THAT ENCOURAGE REFLECTION

In this, the most important step, the goal is to help the other person test the reliability of their methods for arriving at certainty on this issue, and maybe others as well. There are many ways to go about asking questions in this step.

You could start by simply asking what method they use to determine their reasons are good. Another variation is to ask if someone else were to look at the same evidence but reach a different conclusion, how would a third person looking at both of their arguments determine which was true? Whatever they answer, you can keep exploring by asking if someone using their method could arrive at a different or competing conclusion. The goal is to help the other person judge the quality of their reasoning process when it comes to their certainty on this particular belief.



## STEP EIGHT: CLARIFY, REPEAT, AND CONNECT TO THEIR VALUES.

Paraphrase as best you can what they’ve shared so far and ask if you’ve heard them correctly. Repeat until it feels like you’ve reached a stopping point, and then feel free to share your own beliefs on the matter. Ask if the other person wants to explore them in the same way you explored theirs. If so, go through the steps yourself. Otherwise, finish with the next step.



## STEP NINE: CLOSE WITH APPRECIATION FOR THEIR OPENNESS

Wrap up, wish them well, and part company by suggesting you have more conversations like this in the future.