# HOW TO UNDERSTAND REACTANCE

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As a starting point when discussing any conceptual model, it is important to remember the adage of British statistician George Box, Ph.D. (1953, Mathematics Genealogy, University of London) who wrote the famous line: "All models are wrong, some are useful" (1976, p. 972). His point was that we should focus more on whether something can be applied to everyday life in a useful manner rather than debating endlessly whether an answer is correct in all cases.

The terms *reactance* and *susceptance* have specific meanings in the field of electronics engineering. In the words of Tony R. Kuphalt, a Senior Instructor in Electronics Engineering Technology, here's how they are defined in electronics engineering:

"The terms 'reactance' and 'susceptance' have a certain linguistic logic to them, just like resistance and conductance. While reactance is the measure of how much a circuit reacts against change in current over time, susceptance is the measure of how much a circuit is susceptible to conducting a changing current" (Kuphalt, 2009, para. 7).

The purpose of this article is to discuss reactance and susceptance from a behavioral and psychological perspective.

## Reactance

*Reactance* is a psychological phenomenon in which people do the opposite of what they're told to do to protect their perceived personal freedom. *Psychological reactance* is the more formal term used in psychological theory and journal articles. *Behavioral reactance* is the term sometimes used to describe the observable behaviors that result from the psychological state of reactance. The two terms are often used interchangeably and refer to the same concept.

### History of Term

The concept of *psychological reactance* was introduced by psychologist Jack Brehm (1928–2009) when he was on the social psychology faculty at Duke University. Earlier in his career, Jack had worked with the renowned psychologist Leon Festinger, Ph.D. (1919–1989), who originated the theory of *cognitive dissonance*. Brehm's paradigm was the first dissonance study to be published. [1] In 1966, Brehm published his classic book, *A Theory of Psychological Reactance*.

*Reactance theory* predicts that a target behavior will increase if a person perceives that their personal freedom is challenged (Brehm, 1966, 2007; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). According to Brehm (1966), when people perceive a threat to their personal freedom, they experience a motivational state directed towards attaining the restricted freedom ("psychological reactance"). Such threats can occur whenever an influence or attempt at control causes people to feel pressure to change (Clee & Wicklund, 1980).

When people experience reactance, they are often motivated to reassert their independence by adopting hostile attitudes towards the source of control or by opposing the restriction that is being imposed on them. This process underlies the observation that a target behavior will typically increase if the person is told to change the behavior. [2] Behavioral reactance is often seen in action in response to signs such as "Keep off the grass."

**How Nagging Works**

Reactance is also an underlying mechanism of how nagging works—to increase the target behavior: "Arguing, blaming, complaining, nagging, and needling, are forms of attempting to control another person's behavior. Nagging a person has the effect of exacerbating rather than diminishing the problematic behavior. Thus, nagging a family member is likely to increase rather than decrease a target behavior such as drinking" (Doverspike, 2025, p. 3).

**Increased Attractiveness and Desirability**

Psychological reactance can also increase the desirability of a restricted activity or object (Ma, Tang, & Kay, 2019). It is the classic "forbidden fruit" effect. The more something is restricted, the more appealing it becomes. When an activity, object, or product is banned or prohibited, there may be an increase in the appeal or attractiveness of the restricted activity or object. In the eyes of consumers, banning a product can increase its desirability (Mazis, Settle, & Leslie, 1973).

**Scarcity Principle**

The limited supply aspect of psychological reactance is similar to the *scarcity principle*, which suggests that we tend to value things more highly when they are rare, difficult to obtain, or limited in availability or supply. When an object, product, or opportunity appears scarce, we desire it more—even if we don't need it. Recall the hoarding of toilet paper during the pandemic. People place a higher value on an object that is scarce, and a lower value on objects that are abundant. For example diamonds are more valuable than rocks because diamonds are not as abundant (Mittone & Savadori, 2009).

According to e-commerce writer Yu-Che Lin (2025), there are four types of "scarcity marketing strategies" used by in-store and online retailers in their attempts to sell products:

1. **Limited quantity scarcity** (e.g., "only two left in stock," "only two items per customer"),
2. **Limited time scarcity** (e.g., countdown timers, "one day only," "sale ends at midnight,"),
3. **Exclusivity scarcity** (e.g., "members only," "loyalty rewards," "longevity rewards"), and
4. **Demand-based scarcity** (e.g., "trending now", "top seller")

Scarcity triggers action through a three-step process that includes the following (Lin (2025):

1. **Eliciting a fear of missing out** (FOMO) associated with a desire to act before it's too late,
2. **Loss aversion** or avoidance of missing opportunities (because people are concerned with avoiding losing something than with missing out on a potential gain), and
3. **Exclusivity** or association with status and prestige (making customers feel connected to what feels exclusive and difficult to obtain)

Although these scarcity marketing strategies are based on the reactance principle, they are often ineffective with savvy shoppers, who find them annoying attempts at manipulation. Faking low stock, overusing scarcity tactics, resetting deadlines, and "leveraging" (manipulating behavior) through scarcity marketing tactics can erode consumer trust in a company.

## Aggressive Driving

Reactance can also be seen in aggressive driving. According to the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University, "People who frequently drive aggressively report more psychological reactance than people who rarely or never drive aggressively" (Center for Health and Safety Culture, 2021, p. 1). There are at least two ways that reactance can easily be seen by observant drivers: tailgating and slow poking.

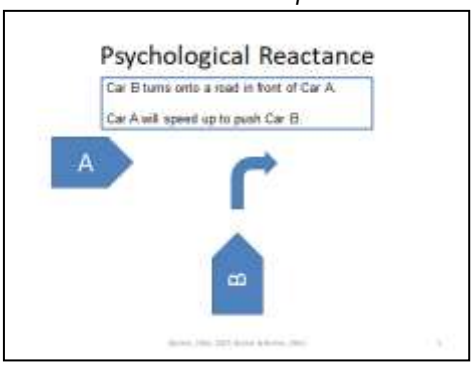
*Tailgating* is sometimes a form of reactance when drivers may speed up when following behind a slower car. As illustrated in Figure 1, (Reactance When in Front of Another Car), Car B turns onto a road in front of Car A, in response to which Car A reacts by speeding up to "push" Car B. Aggressive drivers may follow too closely or tailgate as "a way of teaching someone a lesson they need" (Center for Health and Safety, 2021, p. 3). In the two scenarios depicted by Figures 1 and 2, it is this first scenario that creates the most reactance by the driver in Car A.

*Slow poking* can sometimes be a form of reactance in which drivers may slow down when they perceive that someone is tailgating them. Although they may do so to increase their safety buffer, it may also be a form of reactance as a way to assert control and express frustration. As illustrated in Figure 2, Car B (Reactance When in Back of Another Car) turns onto a road behind Car A, in response to which Car A reacts by slowing down to impede Car B. The State of Georgia has a "Slow Poke" law (OCGA § 40-6-184), which states, "No person shall drive a motor vehicle at such a slow speed as to impede the normal and reasonable movement of traffic, except when reduced speed is necessary for safe operation (Impeding Traffic Flow, Ga. Code Ann. Ch. 40, § 6, 184, 2014). [3]

## Figures

**Figure 1**

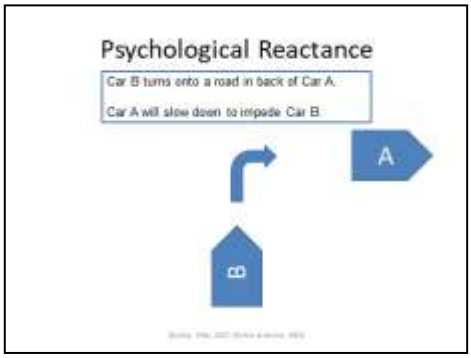
*Reactance When in Front of Another Car*




*Note.* Adapted from Doverspike (2011)

**Figure 2**

*Reactance When in Back of Another Car*




*Note.* Adapted from Doverspike (2011)

## Susceptance

*Susceptance* is the opposite of reactance. Although susceptance is a valid term in electronics engineering, it is not a defined term in behavioral engineering or psychological theories. I (WFD) adopted from the field of electronics engineering to refer to the psychological equivalent of conditions that are less likely to elicit reactance and more likely—or more susceptible—to contribute to change. Cognitive, emotional, and social susceptibility are related to *suggestibility* (i.e., the degree to which a person will accept and act on suggestions by others). [4]

Whereas reactance refers to increasing resistance to a request, susceptance refers to decreasing resistance to a request. In other words, susceptance refers to factors that increase the chance of someone complying with a request. Whereas *giving a directive* to a person will often create reactance, a form of resistance, *asking for assistance* is more likely to contribute to *susceptance*–and compliance. Susceptance can be used when (1) making requests of others, and (2) responding to the requests of others.

### Making Requests of Others

Effective requests are often defined by how they are made. When making a request, consider requesting less than the other person is willing to give. When making a request, consider allowing more time than the other person will need.

### Responding to Requests of Others

When responding to another person's request, offering more than is expected will often decrease the other person's demands. When replying to another's request, consider responding better and sooner than the other person expects. In the words of St. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), "Patience attains all that it strives for."

### Showing Radical Generosity and Kindness

One example of using susceptance when responding to the requests of others would be offering to go the extra mile (i.e., "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles" Matthew 5:41; NIV). Found in the Sermon on the Mount, this teaching of Jesus of Nazareth was a specific response to the prevailing Roman law that allowed soldiers to compel citizens to carry their equipment and packs for one mile. [5] Jesus encouraged his followers to go beyond the required mile, demonstrating a radical form of kindness and generosity. In this sense "going the extra mile" was *supererogatory*, which refers to actions that are ethically good and go "beyond the call of duty." Supererogatory actions are morally good and praiseworthy actions that are not strictly required, obligatory or demanded by morality. [6]

### Creating and Managing Expectations

Insightful people who take an inventory of their resentments often discover that many resentments are based on their unspoken expectations that were not met by others. Unrealistic expectations typically can become premeditated disappointments or premeditated resentments. Once people learn to create realistic–often lower–expectations of others, they experience fewer disappointments and resentments.

Decreasing disappointments and reducing resentment in others is often correlated with creating and managing the expectations in others. When giving an estimate of a reasonable time to comply with a request, smart people give an estimate that is farther out than they need—and then they meet the deadline earlier than stated. In this way, they exceed expectations.

## Rolling With Resistance

In their landmark book *Motivational Interviewing*, psychologists William Miller and Stephen Rollnick introduce several methods of bypassing resistance. The term *rolling with resistance* refers to the idea of meeting resistance by rolling with it instead of opposing it (Miller and Rollnick (1991, p. 107). The paradoxical element in this type of response will often bring a person to the opposite—or at least a balanced—perspective. This approach can be particularly useful with people who present in a highly oppositional manner and who seem to reject every idea or suggestion. Here is an example of rolling with resistance when Person B responds to Person A:

**Person A:** "I know I'm often absent or late for work on Mondays, but can't stop partying. I'll lose all my friends."

**Person B:** "You may be right. You may decide that it's worth it to keep on partying. It may be too difficult to make a change. Whatever you decide is most important, working or partying, it is entirely your decision." [Rolling with Resistance]

## Simple and Amplified Reflections

As a general rule, it is usually better for a listener to understate or overstate the intensity of a speaker's expressed emotion when making simple reflections. As Miller and Rollnick (2013, p. 72) advise, "When reflecting emotion, err on the British side and understate." *Amplified reflection* involves reflecting a person's statements back to them in an amplified, exaggerated, or intensified manner. An amplified reflection essentially turns up the intensity of a reflective comment. An amplified reaction can have a paradoxical effect by siding with a person's defensiveness. By employing what Person A has said, Person B can encourage Person A to clarify their feelings and thoughts, which may lead them to express their own reasons for change.

Here is an example of an amplified reflection made when Person B responds to Person A:

**Person A:** "I'm fine."

**Person B:** "That's great, so maybe there is nothing you need to change." [Amplified Reflection]

or

**Person A:** "I can take care of myself. I don't need my mother checking on me."

**Person B:** "Perhaps you might be better off without a mother." [Amplified Reflection]

## Coming Alongside

*Coming alongside* is a special case of amplified reflection and involves siding with the negative side of a person's ambivalence (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). This approach takes into consideration reactance theory by using paradox. *Radical acceptance* involves a conscious effort to not only accept, but to actively welcome, any and all comments from the other person. This approach involves a radical acceptance of comments that are odd, disturbing, or blatantly provocative. Here is an example of Person B coming alongside Person A:

**Person A:** "I like smoking in bed. It's not a fire hazard and it's not a problem."

**Person B:** "It sounds like the pros of smoking in bed far outweigh the cons. It may be that you will decide smoking in bed is something you want to keep doing." [Coming Alongside]

Here is an example of Person B expressing radical acceptance of Person A:

**Person A:** "I don't even need any help. I'm here only because my boss forced me to come."

**Person B:** "Thank you for being so honest with me. Lots of people hate asking for help, and they sometimes just sit here and pretend to cooperate. I really appreciate your honesty in telling me exactly what you're thinking." [Radical Acceptance]

### Accurate Empathy

Accurate empathy involves an active interest—and an honest effort–in understanding the other person's internal perspective. Empathy involves the cognitive ability to take the perspective of others (perspective-taking) and the ability to mentally put ourselves in someone else's situation. Empathy also requires imagination, in which we strive to imagine how another person might feel in a situation. Empathic people often help, develop, and encourage others. Empathic people also listen to those who need listening to feel heard. To improve empathy, consider these options:

1. **Imagine yourself in the other person's place**, think of the other person's perspective, or "put yourself in the other person's shoes."
2. **Pay attention to body language of others**, including their vocal inflection, tone of voice, and how they position their head, arms, and legs, and
3. **Respond to the feelings of others in a positive manner**, by validating the other person's emotion and feelings (rather than demeaning, discounting, or dismissing their feelings).

### Validation and Empowerment

Most neurotypical individuals want to be seen, counted, known, and validated rather than being left unseen, discounted, unknown, and invalidated. When interacting with neurotypical individuals. Consider doing more validating than invalidating, more recognition than criticism, and more sharing than advice-giving. Consider more building up and less tearing down.

It is often a safe approach to assume a person is neurotypical unless proven or shown otherwise. Most people want to be encouraged and empowered rather than discouraged and hindered. If this assumption is correct, then consider doing more encouraging and empowering. Otherwise, learn and respect the other person's rules of engagement before proceeding.

Three skills comprise the trifecta of listening, validating, and empowering:

1. **Listening** (e.g., "Am I striving to understand the other's perspective, or am I advising, arguing, complaining, defending, or explaining?"),
2. **Validating** (i.e., "Am I validating the other's feelings rather than demeaning, discounting, or dismissing them?"), and
3. **Empowering** (e.g., "Would you like me to make a suggestion?", "Can I share some options that have worked for me?")

### Principle of Least Interest

The *principle of least interest* refers to the idea that the person or group that has the least amount of interest in continuing a relationship has the most power over it (Waller, 1938, 1951). The term was introduced in 1938 by the sociologist Willard Walter Waller, Ph.D. (1899–1945) in his book *The Family: A Dynamic Interpretation*. Throughout his research, Waller found that power in a dating couple is almost never equally distributed between the two participants (Eslinger, Clarke, & Dynes, 1972; Strong, DeVault, & Cohen, 2010).

For a variety of reasons, one person will have more power in the relationship and will use this power for personal advantage. If the relationship becomes too uneven in power, the person receives less has less incentive to continue the relationship and may eventually threaten to cut-off or end the relationship unless the other person conforms to the demands. In an emotional sense, it is how one person holds the other person hostage. This dynamic is often seen in clinical scenarios ranging from addiction and alcoholism to estrangement and reactance. For example, the alcoholic or the estranger seems to have more power in the relationship because he or she has less interest in the relationship.

One corollary to the principle of least interest is that the more invested we are in an outcome, the less invested the other person will be. Conversely, the less invested we are, the more invested the other party will be. Addiction counselors know that it is the client—not the therapist—who should be the one arguing for change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Finding healthy ways to emotionally detach can be adaptive.

**Express Appreciation and Gratitude**

Genuine expressions of appreciation go a long way in creating conditions conducive to positive change. Expressing gratitude is a way of increasing awareness of that which one already has. Practicing gratitude is one of the keys to abundant living. Sharing gratitude—with more than a perfunctory "thank you"–also contributes to having more favorable interactions in the future.

## Notes

**1.** Leon Festinger's (1954, 1957) cognitive dissonance theory predicts that choosing between two similarly appealing options creates cognitive dissonance, which is a feeling of mental discomfort from holding conflicting beliefs or values. To reduce this discomfort or dissonance, people unconsciously rationalize their choice by increasing their positive view of the chosen item and decreasing their positive view of the rejected item.

The *free-choice cognitive dissonance paradigm*, introduced in Jack Brehm's dissertation, is a research method used to study how making a choice between similarly-attractive options can lead to changes in how people evaluate those options, often attributed to the reduction of cognitive dissonance. In this paradigm, research participants initially rate their preference for a set of items. They are later asked to choose between two items they rated similarly. After making the choice, they re-evaluate the items. A "spreading of alternatives" is typically observed, in which the chosen item is rated more positively, and the rejected item is rated more negatively, even if the initial ratings were close.

Jack's first publication on reactance was an article in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. The article addressed a favor's potential to reduce helping. The article not only introduced reactance to the field, but also stands as the only empirical article in the history of the journal to include no references.

**2.** By whatever name it is called, behavioral reactance has similarities to other concepts such as opposition reflex, polarity reversal, polarity response, and thigmotaxis.

*Opposition reflex* is a term dog trainers use to refer to a dog's instinctive reaction to physical pressure. When being walked on a leash, a dog will pull or tug in the opposite direction. When gently pushed, a dog will push back. This reaction is also important in horse training (Gore, 2004). The concept originated with the Russian physiologist and 1904 Nobel Prize winner, Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936). Although Pavlov referred to it as the *freedom reflex*, it is not actually a reflex but an instinctive survival mechanism.

Technically, the opposition reaction is a type of *thigmotaxis* (from the Greek *thigma*, "touch," meaning contact with an object, and *taxis*, "arrangement, order," meaning reaction by movement). It is an organism's instinctive behavioral response to tactile stimuli, typically referring to an organism's movement in response to physical contact with objects, surfaces, or even liquids. *Negative thigmotaxis* occurs when an organism moves *away from* contact with surfaces or objects. It is observed in animals that need to navigate open spaces or avoid areas where tactile stimuli indicate danger or discomfort. The opposition reflex in dogs and horses is a specific form of negative thigmotaxis. *Positive thigmotaxis* occurs when an organism moves towards or remains in contact with a surface or object. It is seen in rodents and other animals seeking shelter or protection, because staying close to surfaces can reduce exposure to predators and environmental hazards.

*Polarity response* refers to a behavioral or verbal response that is the opposite of the response that was intended to be elicited by the other person. Also described as a *polarity reversal*, "Polarity Responses are the behavioral dynamic at work in most instances of therapeutic 'resistance.' They also govern behavior labeled rebellion, subversion, and various forms of conflict within and between people. They are the constant in most political activity. When polarity reversal patterns are identified they can be easily predicted" (Lankton, 1980, p. 84). In verbal communication, hypnosis, and neuro-linguistic programming, a *polarity responder* is someone who is constantly contrary, oppositional, stubborn, and tends to disagree with everything that is said. Polarity responders often do the opposite of what others ask them to do. Hypnotherapists and NLP practitioners often use a person's polarity response to induce movement in a desired direction.

**3.** O.C.G.A. § 40-6-184(a) does not apply when the driver is being overtaken by another vehicle that is exceeding the maximum speed limit since in such a context the other vehicle is not overtaking the driver because the latter is impeding the flow of traffic by traveling unreasonably slow, but rather because the other vehicle is traveling unreasonably fast in violation of the traffic laws; the legislative intent behind the statute was to prevent unsafe slow driving, not to punish drivers for failing to yield the lane to speeders. State v. Parke, 304 Ga. App. 124, 695 S.E.2d 413, 2010 Ga. App. LEXIS 463 (2010).

**4.** Cognitive susceptibility refers to the tendency of a person to be influenced by persuasive information or misinformation. Emotional susceptibility refers to how readily a person's emotions can be influenced or triggered. Social susceptibility refers to an individual or group's openness to social conformity, group norms, or peer pressure.

**5.** A Roman mile, or *mille passus*, was defined as 1,000 paces, with each pace being the distance of one complete stride of the left foot hitting the ground (left foot, right foot). Because Roman surveyors standardized the length of a pace to be about five Roman feet, the *mille passus* was equivalent to approximately 5,000 Roman *pedes* (literally, "feet"). Because the average Roman man's foot was slightly shorter than a modern foot, the Roman mile was roughly 4,855 modern feet, in contrast to the modern mile of 5,280 feet (or 1,760 yards). The modern statute mile originated in England under Queen Elizabeth I in 1592 to standardize various measurement systems and to align with land division calculations. The statute mile was made equivalent to 8 furlongs or 5,280 feet.

**6.** In his controversial and thought-provoking 1969 essay, *The Power Tactics of Jesus Christ*, strategic psychotherapist Jay Haley (1923–2007) states that Jesus's actions were strategic maneuvers to build a movement and challenge existing power structures. Haley argues that Jesus's actions were not only motivated by altruism or love, but that he possessed a calculated understanding of human psychology and social dynamics. These actions were a way to indirectly and subtly challenge existing power dynamics by demonstrating a willingness to go above and beyond established norms. According to Haley, the "extra mile" tactic can be viewed as a way of disarming potential opponents, creating

a positive public image, and establishing a reputation for generosity and selflessness. Similar strategies have been used by other leaders of non-violent social and political movements.

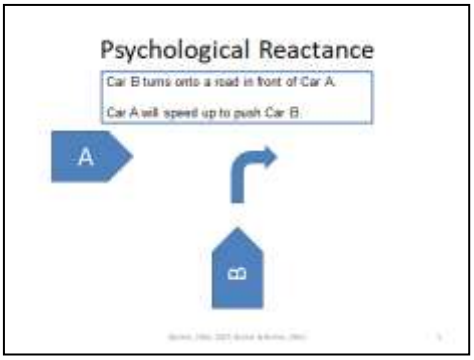
It would be unconventional to think of Jesus of Nazareth as having any understanding of Brehm's Reactance Principle. However, there are several stories in the Gospels that clearly indicate how well Jesus was able to teach applied reactance principles. The following account is from Luke 14: 1, 7-11 (New International Version):

[1] One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched.
[7] When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: [8] "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. [9] If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this person your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. [10] But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. [11] For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

# Figures

**Figure 1**

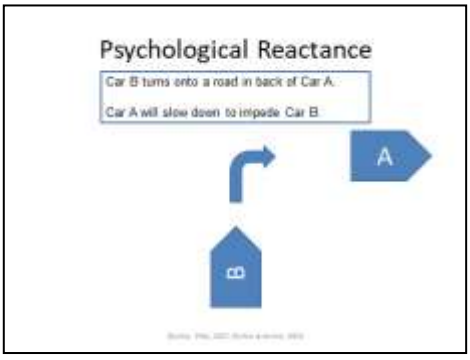
*Reactance When in Front of Another Car*




*Note.* Adapted from Doverspike (2011)

**Figure 2**

*Reactance When in Back of Another Car*




*Note.* Adapted from Doverspike (2011)

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When an original publication date and a last updated date are provided, APA Style uses the last updated date. If the more current date is "last reviewed" instead of "last updated," APA Style uses the original publication date (since the review may not have changed the content).

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George Edward Pelham Box (1919-2013) earned a doctorate in Mathematics at the University of London in 1953. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS) and a British statistician who worked in the areas of quality control, time-series analysis, design of experiments, and Bayesian inference. He has been called one of the great statistical minds of the 20th century.

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Sharon Stephens Brehm, Ph.D. (1945–2018) was a professor of psychology at the University of Kansas. She also served as president of the American Psychological Association. She met Jack Brehm, Ph.D. when she went to work for him as a graduate assistant. They were married in 1968 and they divorced several years later. They continued to work together and they even co-authored a book. Jack constructed the theory of reactance, and Sharon adapted it to the clinical psychology setting.

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Document properties identify the author as MTD and the title as "Traffic Safety Culture Pooled Fund (TSC-TPF) Guidance on Messaging to Avoid Psychological Reactance and Address Moral Disengagement Ways to Address Aggressive Driving Information Sheet - July 2021." Document was created at 3:08:41 PM on 07-27-201 modified at 2:46:20 PM on 07-28-2021.

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Rick Gore is a horseman from Sanger, Texas, whose website contains hundreds of articles and 2,000 videos in which he discusses horse and herd behavior, horsemanship, and other horse topics and wisdom. See his website located at this link: https://www.thinklikeahorse.org/

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Tony R. Kuphaldt is a Senior Instructor, Electronics Engineering Technology faculty-on-loan from Schweitzer Engineering Laboratories (SEL) to Lewis-Clark State College Schweitzer Career & Technical Education (CTE) Center in Lewison, Idaho. In April 2019, SEL offered Tony the role of instructor on loan at the CTE. Tony is the author and publisher of the *Modular Electronics Learning Project*, an open-source collection of tutorials and problem sets designed to facilitate inverted instruction of electronics at the two-year college level. He is the founding author of *Lessons in Electric Circuits*, an early open-source textbook on the same topics.

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Anyi Ma, Simone Tang, and Aaron C. Kay investigated whether efforts targeted at controlling what people think, rather than how they behave, will be met with differing levels of psychological reactance. Across four studies, the authors found that people experience greater psychological reactance towards efforts to control their thoughts compared to efforts to control their behaviors. Compared to behavioral control, efforts at thought control led people to experience greater anger and negativity, and to report lowered motivation to engage in requested behaviors. These effects occur, at least in part, because people perceived that those who try to control their thoughts are likely to try to control their behaviors too, but not vice versa. As a result, thought control elicited greater reactance than behavioral control because thought control was perceived as more restrictive than behavioral control.

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