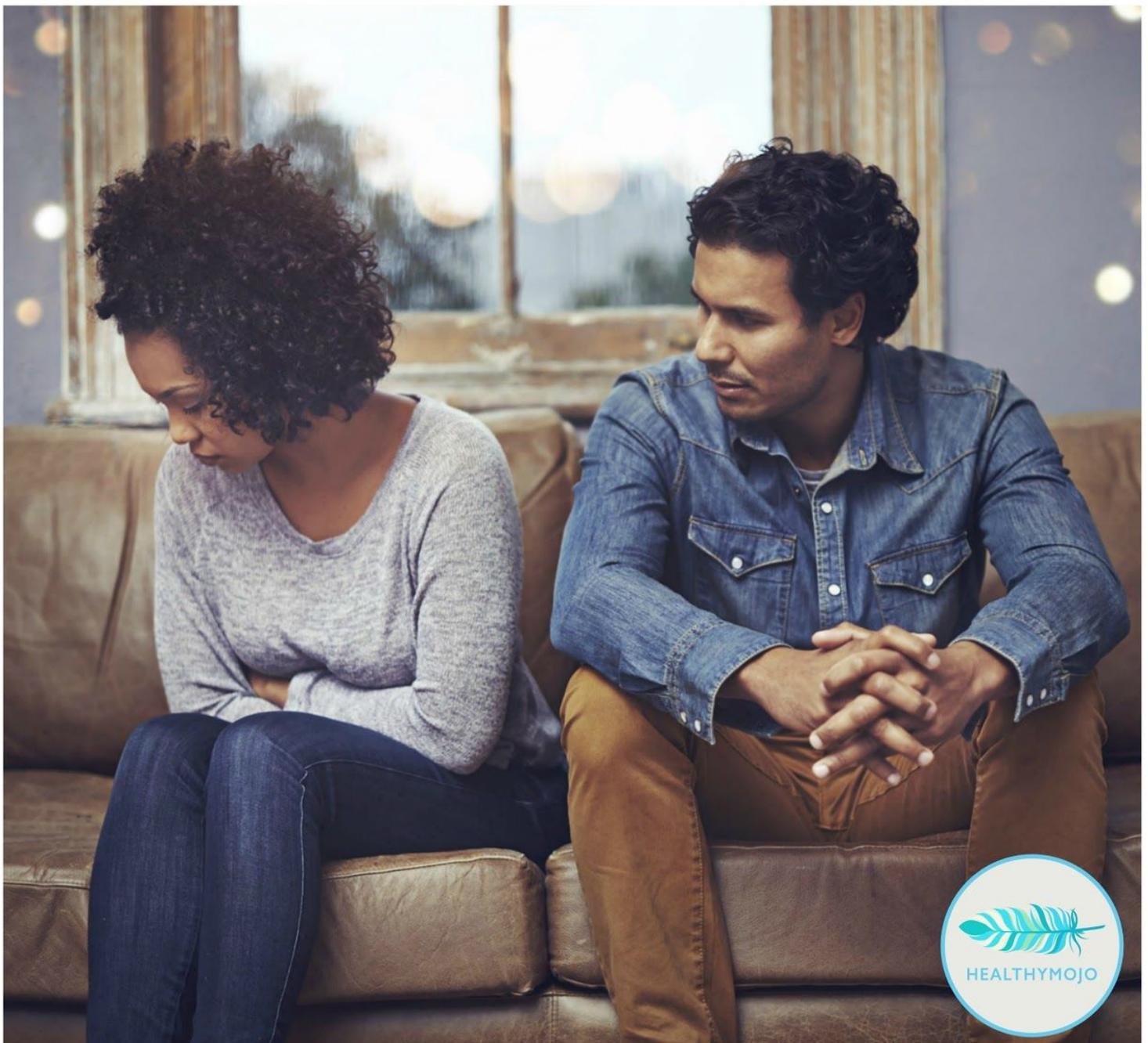


# How People Change Their Minds about Religion: Do's and Don'ts

Dr. Money & HMJFoundation.org



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## HMJ Foundation Preface

All of the stories in this booklet were compiled with permission from real people who were gracious to share their experiences--some quite recent and raw--about what they said to their loved ones, how their loved ones reacted, and what was most helpful for the relationship. You will hear stories from active believing loved ones, as well as those who have had a faith crisis/awakening. Everyone is deserving of unconditional love and support: both the one who questions or leaves, and those who choose to stay and remain active in the church. It goes both ways--there is no place for judgment of either side in a healthy relationship.

If you are reading this because a loved one undergoing faith shift gave it to you, they took a big risk. They're sharing because they love you and want to preserve their relationship with you, and may be afraid of losing you. The last thing they want to do is hurt you. They are hoping to learn from the experiences of others who have gone through this before. They would not be giving this to you unless they were committed to *encouraging* your faith, because they know it brings you peace and happiness, and the *last* thing they want to do is have you go through something as painful as they did. All your loved one wants is to protect the relationship.

If you're reading this because a believing friend or family member gave this to you, and you're in the midst of a faith shift or you've left the church, please take this gesture as a good sign that they value their relationship with you and want to work on strengthening it together. Presenting this to you was neither an act of judgment, nor an indication they're disappointed, nor an expectation for you to change: they simply want to ensure your relationship will weather anything.

## Introduction

Conflicts over faith are among the most challenging and painful experiences families and religious communities can face. When individuals choose to leave or separate from the faith tradition or religious community of their parents, siblings, friends or a spouse, the experience can be disturbing and disrupting for all involved and, in the worst situations, can lead to severely damaged relationships. Within high-demand religious traditions that have deeply held beliefs and firmly-established devotional practices, separation can be even more traumatic, fraught with arguments and heated debates.

Can you single-handedly convince someone toward to your point of view on religion? Short answer: it happens, but it's not common. If it does happen, it's usually the result of many people respectfully being open about how they've reached different opinions and are living their truth without shame, compounded by a lot of independent research and soul-searching. I'm NOT saying people rarely change their minds about their religion of origin, they can and do, but the more forceful you are in your efforts to use logic and other emotionally-charged arguments to convince people, the opposite happens: the more likely they are to retrench into their already-held position. And I'm not talking about friendly, respectful discussions over the dinner table exploring different beliefs. I'm talking about confrontational, impassioned shouting matches that end up in tears and storming out of the room. This booklet will talk bluntly about confirmation bias, the backfire effect, and the mechanics of conversion will help everyone on both sides of the faith aisle understand the limits of what we can and cannot do to bring about a change of mind/heart, and how our behavior can either solidify and reinforce their current convictions...or soften them. In a nutshell: we are at our core social beings so it can be extremely difficult to change someone's mind about a belief that is tightly entwined with one's identity and tribe (like religion!). This doesn't mean there's no hope: there is, it's just not what people typically think of or do when they want their loved ones to understand their belief changes. We will discuss some of these strategies below.

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### Confirmation Bias

Social psychologists have well-documented a phenomenon called confirmation bias: basically, it's the human brain's tendency to search for and/or interpret information in a way that confirms what we already believed to be true or are expecting. Everyone does it, especially in terms of faith issues, from both sides of the aisle (believers and non-believers and everyone in between). This gets especially tricky in relationships though because we love our family/friends, and if we have heard stories that confirm our fears of what will happen when someone leaves the church, it's natural to want to share these cautionary tales with our loved ones. But they never work (see Part 2 on the Backfire effect). How do we handle confirmation bias? First, be **aware it's happening when you feel a pull to warn your loved one about the negative effects (from your point of view) of their life decisions**, based on multiple stories you've heard. Examples from both sides are as follows:

For those who have left, many have explained/warned believers that their kids will resent them for life for 'selling them a myth, or that they'll regret spending so much family time in meetings and cleaning buildings one day, etc. These aren't helpful assumptions to make of believing loved ones, and having this in the back of your mind whenever you approach a conversation with them will keep you defensive and you'll miss out on the good.

For believers, many have been tempted to share stories warning their non-believing loved ones of how they knew people who left the church and their kids ended up drug addicts, or that they were never happy, or their family had multiple hardships after leaving, that when so-and-so left they became an alcoholic, etc. Again, not helpful.

Here is what an active member experienced when her daughter confided in leaving, and you can see how she actively fought against confirmation bias (it's not easy!):

*My daughter and her husband came to our house before breakfast to tell us that they were sending in resignation letters. I can't say it was a great surprise, because they had been in our ward for over 5 years and we'd talked a lot about their struggles with culture and doctrine and obtaining appropriate accommodations for their two special needs children in Primary. They'd been "inactive" since January and were obviously on their way. Was I thrilled with their choice? Not particularly, but as my dear old Dad used to say, "They're big kids. They can make their own mistakes." And though I'm still a believer, I don't think that they made a mistake. Their family has been much happier and their situation is much better than when they were trying so hard to fit into the mold or to try to change the church locally. I love them. Whoever sits in what chair around the table in the Celestial Kingdom someday is far above my pay grade, I figure my concern is to make sure that there are no empty chairs around my table **here and now**. The Hereafter can take care of Itself.*

And with that awareness, you can take a step back from the initial, reactionary emotion to have all your assumptions confirmed, and evaluate: **will this prediction help my relationship with this person? In cases of confirmation bias, the answer is usually, "probably not,"** so now that you've taken a step back from the emotion rather than "running with it," you have options.

Here are two examples of family who it appears suspended their confirmation bias and asked open-ended questions rather than assuming:

*When my brother left, I didn't really know quite what to say, but I thought about what I'd want him to do if I were in his shoes and remembered the quote, "seek first to understand, and then to be understood." So I thought I'd ask him why he left (while also setting the boundary that I had no intention of leaving so please no church bashing, I'd just like to hear your reasons). He said to me, "It means a lot to me that you would ask me why I decided to leave. No one else in the whole family has asked me that question and I think they assume that I just want to be a sinner. It hurts."*

*When I finally expressed all my concerns and doubts to my dad, he responded with the following: “I love you so much. Thank you for having the courage to share this with me. I don’t know if I completely understand your concerns, but since these topics are obviously so important to you, could you tell me more? Can you point me to books or articles to help me have a better foundation? Let’s keep the dialogue open and work on this together. Faith is a journey, and I’d love to accompany you on your journey, wherever that may lead.” Brings tears to my eyes thinking about it now.”*

## **Backfire, Worldview-Backfire, and Self-Affirmation Effects**

I’m going to introduce this concept with a real person’s story to illustrate, he recently told his family about his decision to take a step back from church:

*“When I came out to my family, they immediately responded with every reason I should stay in the church: The stability it provides. How it teaches great morals to me and my family. How it is a network of people to help teach my family. The opportunities for leadership the church provides for my children and me. **They gave, what they felt, were very compelling reasons not to leave the church.** Most significantly they felt that I will never find the same happiness outside of the church as I will inside the church. My older sister actually said she hoped I wasn’t happy in the future so I would be compelled to return to the church. Right now I don’t believe the church is the single plan for God’s children – I think there are many paths. **My wife and I don’t believe the church is best path for our family. So none of that really helped, and I know they meant well but it only made it worse.**” -Ryan*

Because Ryan had already changed his mind and has a firm belief that there are many paths to God, probably a belief that is very much integral to his value system now after carefully weighing the issue, his family’s efforts to change his mind *backfired*: only serving to strengthen his resolve that the church isn’t the best path for him or his children: As a bonus, see if you can spot the examples of confirmation bias in Ryan’s story.

In addition to confirmation bias, social psychologists also generally agree on this phenomenon, the Backfire Effect. It’s when your deepest beliefs or convictions get challenged by new and/or conflicting information, your convictions get *stronger*. In one study, when people were presented with evidence that alerted them to the possibility that their beliefs might be incorrect, they reacted with the same brain regions that would light up if they were responding to a physical threat like an armed home intruder. Your brain treats this new information as if it were a threat to your very existence, because the brain goes into fight-or-flight mode automatically. “Remember that the brain’s first and primary job is to protect ourselves,” explains Kaplan, who discovered the Backfire Effect. “The brain is basically a big, complicated, sophisticated machine for self-protection, and that extends beyond our physical self, to our psychological self. Once these things become part of our psychological self, I think they are then afforded all the same protections that the brain gives to the body.”

Researchers have seen this across multiple topics/issues, and the stronger the beliefs are tied to your identity (something like religion/spirituality), the more *resistant* they are to change (a particular, stronger form of this phenomenon called the Worldview-Backfire Effect). So any deliberate, impassioned efforts you or your loved ones make to try to change their opinion about religion, will 99.9% of the time backfire. If you take nothing else home from this booklet, I want it to be this: you won’t change a loved one’s mind by pushing arguments. That’s an important principle to accept, uncomfortable as it is, as early as possible in this process of relationship-building. Interestingly, the psychological research points out how, the Backfire Effect holds true across situations and topics, and there’s really nothing you can do, EXCEPT (and here’s the kicker) research studies have found that people become more receptive to what you’re trying to communicate when you pair your message with self-affirmations about them, known as the “Self-Affirmation Effect,” Examples of this would be boosting their self-worth and reminding your loved one of other times when they took pride in making hard decisions. And this positive effect works strongest for those for whom the issue was central to their self-worth (like one’s religious beliefs and tribal identity, i.e. Worldview Backfire Effect). Dozens of concrete example statements are at the end of this book for readers’ reference.

This is wonderful, hopeful news for relationships in crisis over religion! Research showed--not that they changed their minds right away--but that they were less likely to dig in their heels further, and were more open-minded in later research testing. I find that incredible: that research holds up the importance of treating others with love, respect and kindness, and building them up. When done genuinely that is our only shot at future open-mindedness, and perhaps having a change of heart.

For example:

*When I told my family that my husband and I have decided to leave the church, as you can imagine I was feeling really anxious and worried. My mom and sister both told me that we have to make the choice that is right for us and that they love us no matter what. I'm thankful it went so well.*

Here's what you can do at the moment when you share information about your new path with a loved one with self-affirmations (boosting their self-esteem):

1. Genuinely expressing to the person how much you value them, and their reasoning ability, that they're smart, thoughtful, etc.
2. Validating their intellect and boosting their self-worth with 100% acceptance regardless of their opinions
3. Remind them of a time when they felt good after they acted on their values
4. Ask them to tell you about a situation they remembered when they had a dilemma and they worked through it by choosing to follow their inner voice/conscience, and it felt great afterwards

*More specific examples of the Self-Affirmation Effect are at the end of this workbook*

The Backfire Effect applies not just to just verbal arguments/attempts to persuade, but actions too. Sometimes families do things they normally wouldn't do when under pressure and worried about their loved one's future if they leave the church. They may have heard from someone else to try "tough love" to bring them to their sense and return to activity. This behavior is nowhere in Christ's (or Buddha's, or the Talmud, etc) teachings, its psychologically damaging, and it backfires every time, strengthening the person's convictions to leave. But many aren't aware of the Backfire Effect. Sometimes rumors spread about how so-and-so was rebuked with tough love and they came back to the church, and regardless it's tempting to try anything if your loved one's eternal future is at stake.

Tough love examples I've seen in my work as a psychologist include: not allowing them in one's home because it would hurt the spirit there, asserting that Satan has gotten a hold of them, restricting contact with their children or siblings (if still live in the home), writing them out of a will, threatening to take children away so they can be raised in a gospel home, encouraging them to repent, hypothesizing that perhaps bad things in their life (job loss, infertility, depression etc) are happening because they've left, excluding from family events/weddings (not even an invitation)/vacations, and expressing that they would rather have been told they were dead because at least they'd be together eternally. Tough love will never change their mind--any psychologist worth their salt will tell you this--and not only will it not work, but it will cause whatever arguments they believe about why they can't stay in the church to get stronger and even \*less\* likely to change. All tough love will do is cause pain, and pairing any of the above actions with the words "It's because we love you..." will ring hollow. If you're reading this booklet, you're probably already aware of this and wouldn't treat your loved one this way. Sadly, those who need to hear it most are least likely to read it. But perhaps you can respectfully re-direct Sunday School comments involving tough love with some info about the Backfire Effect and a personal story about how unconditional love helped your family. And luckily tough love scenarios are not common. As evidenced here:

*When I finally got up the courage to tell my mom about my faith crisis (we are close but I just didn't want to make her sad) she told me: 'oh sweetie, I trust you and I trust God. I know these questions can be hard so please know I am here to talk. I love you so much.'*

So to translate this practically to relationships: accept that your loved one won't change no matter what you share with them: the lds.org essays, books, ensign articles, blog posts, etc. One day these materials might make a difference, BUT they have to find out for themselves during their own inquiry (if they so choose). A simple google search takes them to

everything they would need to research for themselves the areas you generally bring up as the main reasons for you, without going into the weeds of all these issues (A Mormon example: you can simply mention in your explanation, “Joseph’s polygamy and keeping it from Emma, Fanny Alger, Helen Mar Kimball, seer stones, Book of Abraham, Kirtland Bank scandal, Mountain Meadows Massacre, etc). And chances are you are likely not the first person/source of them hearing unsavory info about the church. Though I will say, the fact that someone they care about has had a belief change will make an impact, whether or not they ever completely change their minds. It humanizes the stereotypes they’ve heard about all their lives and invites them to see things differently (because you can’t force it, only *invite* by living your truth). What you CAN do is make it clear to them you commit to not trying to change their mind, and instead truly validate their self-esteem, share how important they are to you, how you trust their reasoning abilities wherever it leads them, and you respect their beliefs.

Here are two real-life positive textbook examples of this, from both sides:

*The best reaction was something my sister told me: you are an intelligent, thoughtful person. If you make a decision, I can be sure you’ve thought, prayed, and agonized over it. You can be trusted to make good decisions that are right for you. I love you whatever you believe!*

*My brother wrote an amazing letter to us siblings saying he no longer believes but respects that we do. He clearly stated that he had no desire to hurt anyone else's faith and encouraged us stay active in the faith according to the dictates of our own conscience*

### **Framing**

Besides self-affirmation, framing is another way to give your point of view a chance at consideration: basically you *frame*/present the information in a way that’s not as threatening to their worldview. Examples for faith journeys include:

1. Citing your sources from the church’s official material/website (examples: lds.org essays, direct quotes from leaders, church handbook) for believing members. If you as the believer send these to non-believing members, it will backfire because your loved ones no longer see these as sources of authority.
2. If your non-believing family member has mentioned their new belief system (Buddhism, Protestantism, etc), or a leader they admire (Dalai Llama, MLK Jr, Martin Luther, etc) frame your message by quoting leaders or articles of belief from their new belief system that support your message.
3. Framing the ways you made up your mind about the church as personal revelation just for you, no intention of preaching or testifying, you just wanted them to hear about your change - straight from you - rather than through the grapevine. That you respect them too much to try to hide your journey from them.
4. Explain that you were prompted/the spirit confirmed to you to take a different path (if that wording feels authentic to you), or that you prayed about it and got a different answer, and/or you feel this is where God wants you to be. They may say, well that’s Satan’s voice not the Holy Ghost, and at that point that’s your signal that they’re not going to listen right now, and move on. (TLDR: authentic language about the Spirit, Holy Ghost, Promptings, Prayer, feeling God’s approval, etc)
5. James 1:5 for more framing
6. Don’t disparage anyone’s motives or character, people immediately tune out
7. Don’t use the words, “I know,” or “I’m certain,” or other absolutes. Instead frame your message in terms of how it’s possible you could be wrong, or probabilities, and express caution/humility in explaining your conclusions.
8. Never express being on a higher level of understanding, instead you can say, “I’m not more enlightened than you, I simply have a different point of view now.”

### **Conversion**

Building off of confirmation bias and the backfire effect, it’s critical in mixed faith relationships to look at conversion. When we convert to the church or were born into it but remember the moment when we got our testimony: it was deeply emotional/spiritual. If logic plays a role, it’s usually a secondary role (i.e. after the conversion, thinking, “yes, this makes sense!”) When someone leaves the fold, it is similarly an emotional--and in some cases spiritual--experience just like a conversion, only the other way. Just like before, logic can play a role but it’s often a supportive role rather than primary. Perhaps something about the history made them uncomfortable, for example. Or they had a random experience with a

leader that felt quite upsetting and their shelf of questions they were going to save for the next life started to crack. That triggers the journey but (and this is important) it cannot be \*deliberately\* induced by someone else. What I mean is, perhaps you're a believer and you want to make the case logically for why the person needs to doubt their doubts: the church is a great place to raise children, look at all the good it's done in your life, how could an uneducated farm boy write the Book of Mormon? However, none of those arguments will work on your loved one because they've already had a deep/personal realization and confirmation based on a lot of soul-searching that they need to take another direction in their lives.

Similarly, if someone's left the church, attempts to present their logic to active members for why the church isn't true will simply not work because they've been emotionally converted to the gospel/message, and as discussed in part 2 (and illustrated by Ryan's story) it will backfire and only strengthen their convictions. And let me repeat: conversion can't be manufactured or manipulated--at least, not long-term, the human spirit is pretty resilient and in tune with intrinsic needs which will vary from person to person (which is why statistically converts to a religion are less likely to stay in it than those raised in/born into that religion, again, hearkening back to the power of tribal belonging)--so I'm advising everyone reading on both sides of the faith aisle and everywhere in between to not try to create such a moment in their family/loved ones life. These moments of conversion (either toward or away from the Church) are deeply personal, random, and there's no predicting or forcing it. What worked for one person won't necessarily work for another: there are too many factors at play, like childhood experiences, what was taught to them in Sunday School, personality factors, relationships, interactions with leaders, and all of these factors vary so widely from individual to individual. Humans are so deeply complex and your best bet at a good relationship is to live and let live: or in other words, to let go of the idea you can make someone else "see the light" either way with logic. Accept them, trust them, love them.

An active LDS father shares his experience of when his daughter left, with some advice to journeyers about how she handled it well:

*The first kid to leave was the hardest. It wasn't something I saw coming, and it was a shock. She told me she wanted to talk about it, and we arranged to do something we both enjoyed, hiking together. That itself signaled something important, that she wanted to take time, one on one, to explain it to me, in a good situation and context. I think that show of concern really helped me. What also helped was her obvious desire to not hurt me, or us, with her decision, that it was something she had to do, but that she did not want it to hurt us. And she thought it through out loud with me, and explained it. For me a key thing has always been understanding why someone was making a decision, so I could understand her emotions and reasons. It also helped my understanding when she just told me simply that she had never had a testimony as strong as mine, to help me see it more clearly. That sort of hurt at the time, but it actually helped in the long run. I think if you have been talking really candidly about your church experience with your family and friends, they probably won't be that surprised about your leaving. -Joe*

Many adult children worry that telling their older parents how they feel is worse than waiting until they have passed on to leave the church. For some that might be right, but as this man's story below shows that is not always the case:

*Yesterday my active LDS 88 year old mom invited me over. She didn't ask condemning questions or preach to me. She just told me that she and I had always been able to share everything except what was happening right now and she didn't want to go to her grave without understanding what was happening in my life and to hear it directly from me. I tried all the "I don't want to hurt you" and "I don't want to offend your faith or beliefs" and she kindly refused to take no for an answer. And so I did the unthinkable. I told her my truth. I tried a little bit at a time and I felt acceptance and love and she just kept asking polite but pointed questions. She listened carefully to the answers most often without comment of any sort. Five hours later, I had shared more with my mom than I ever dreamed I could or would. We both shed lots of tears. She kept saying to me, "I feel so bad that you were struggling and I couldn't help. We've always been there for each other." My mom is remarkably intelligent. She made me get quite specific with doctrinal issues and issues the essays had*

*opened up to me that she knew little about. She hugged me and held me tight. She said, "I knew you were not someone who would make such a big decision without weighing all the issues carefully and trying to do the right thing." She then did something almost unthinkable. She apologized to me for not being better informed so that she could have taught me the complete truth. She told me she had raised me with the best knowledge she had and was so sorry that she didn't know more. I explained that there was no way for her to know back then (I'm in my 60s) and that I felt she'd taught me the most important lessons in life that had and will always sustain me. It hurt a bit for her to hear the truth and I apologized many times for needing to be very specific but I explained that I had to be or nothing I was doing or saying would really make any sense. She dismissed my apologies and said, "I want to know everything.". She told me that she had a strong belief in God and a love for her Savior and a love for her Church but she told me that there were many things that her leaders had taught that she didn't always feel were right. I think some of these statements were more her attempt to find common ground with me and show empathy but that speaks volumes about who she is. She told me that she felt the Church was likely wrong about my gay son. She acknowledged that he came to us just as he was and she felt badly to know that Church participation had been hurtful to him and that she was happy to know he was at peace even if that was outside the Church. She has been the most faithful LDS member I have ever known. When we were done, she thanked me for my honesty and told me that while what I'd told her made her sad, she had great respect for how hard the road had been for me and that she respected my decision and knew that I'd find new ways, outside the Church if necessary, to bless lives. She was glad I was now at peace with my decision and told me she respected it. She finished by saying, that while she "believed" much she "knew" very little about what awaits us on the other side. She told me that God will respect my journey and know the honesty of my effort. She told me she would not delve into the issues I'd raised as at her age, it would not give her comfort or help her with her hope that she might really see her husband (my father) again and be with all of us. She bore witness to me that God will not punish such an honest pursuit of truth and told me of her belief that she felt God was likely at work in every religion trying to help His children in any way He could. For her, she said the religion she'd been raised in was Mormonism and she felt it did good things for her family and thus she'd tried to live it and teach it the very best she could. She kindly made it clear that she hoped that there might be something that would reunite me with the Church and asked me to remain open to the possibility that, in time, I might feel different. She asked me to respect that for her, the LDS faith was all she knew and that she needed to hold onto it as she contemplates the end of her life which may not be too far off. She reassured me that no loving God would keep us apart and told me she could go to her grave so much happier knowing the truth of what I'd gone through." -Matt*

## **Part 6: Practice Self-Affirming Statements**

As stated in the above sections, we know from the research that the best chance you have at people understanding your perspective, and at the very least softening their harsh opinions (either against the church or against those who leave it), is affirming your loved one's sense of self. This isn't manipulation: it's simply giving your words the best chance at surviving the negative consequences of the backfire effect and confirmation bias.

So on a practical level how do you get your ideas across to someone else you care about, and you want them to understand you? The research-proven way is to emphasize how you trust *their* judgment to know what's best for *them*, make it clear that you won't try to convert or de-convert them, that you simply want to be understood. After you do that, the choice is yours, and very dependent on the relationship. If this is a close loved one, the less you say or write (after giving a general summary of the reasons you now believe the way you do), the better. Their own journey is more likely to stick if they do the investigating themselves, when they are ready. Interestingly, if you want to get the most mileage out of your general summary of reasons: research shows graphs and pictures work better than verbally or through writing it all out. So if you have a chance to explain why your beliefs changed (perhaps they directly ask you, which is ideal. Or, if this is the first time you're telling people about the change), it's

better to do it with new information presented visually, if you can. And I don't mean interpretive dance. :) A picture, charts about statistics, or bullet points, infographics, etc are all examples of this.

If they ever express doubts, big or small, validate them, and never, ever let these words escape your lips: "See, I told you so," or "Now you see I was right about XXX." Offer to just hold them or sit with them, let them cry it out, listen without inserting *any* commentary about how you already knew something.

#### **Examples of self-affirming statements to believers:**

1. "I've had a change of beliefs in the church due to XXXXX. But that's just my personal journey, and I trust in your own journey too even though it's different than mine. I respect how you worship according to the dictates of your own conscience."
2. "I'm really grateful how as a parent you modeled for me how to act in accordance with your values, to do what is right let the consequence follow, remember the time that you? \_\_\_\_\_ (example from their/your life when they did that). It's *because* you taught me so well that I feel I need to follow my heart again now, and it's telling me (XXXXX belief) is an issue with the church that doesn't feel right for me."
3. "I remember how when we were kids you (example of how they did what they felt was right even though it was hard). Talking to you about my change of beliefs in XXXXX, XXXX is the hardest thing I've ever done, but I feel it's the right path for me and I didn't want you to hear it from anyone else."
4. "XXXX, XXXX, and XXXXX are issues about the church that I haven't been able to reconcile, even after hundreds of hours of prayer and study. But I'm willing to admit that I may be wrong, and regardless I really respect how you live out your values in your own life and I want you to know I support you in your worship."
5. Even though my beliefs have changed because of XXXX and XXXX, you and I still have the same values. Like family, and integrity. It's my integrity that leads me down this path, just like, remember the time that..." (and recall a time they made a decision that highlighted how important integrity was to them).
6. "The church no longer aligns with my personal values because of XXXX, XXXX, and XXXX. I respect how you live your life in alignment of your personal values too. I know it's hard to relate to what I'm going through, so in the spirit of communication and understanding, can you tell me about a time you remember you had to make a decision and chose based on what most aligned with your own values?"
7. "I've been watching you over the years and I admire so much how you live your personal values about putting family first. I share that value, which is why for me personally because of the church's stances on XXXX and XXXX (moral issues) I need to take a step back for now from activity."
8. (After being open about your faith journey) "I can see we're probably not going to agree, and that's ok. We can still be friends/family even when we disagree. In the spirit of understanding one another, how about we shift gears a bit, I want to ask you, is there a time you remember when you had to move in a direction that wasn't popular, that a lot of people were going to disagree with, but it was the right choice for you?" (and then let them tell their story, and truly listen).
9. "I can tell that this is hard for you to hear, and I'm sorry that you're hurting, and my reasons for leaving might not make sense to you, which is alright, we don't have to see eye to eye. Let's take a mental health break if that's alright and I'd love to ask you, can you remember a time you made a decision that you knew was right for you,

and what that was like, how it went?” (Listen to and sincerely validate their story). Can possibly end with, “My feelings right now very much mirror how you told me you felt when you went through that.”

10. “This is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do in my life, but I’m following my conscience. Do you remember a time when you had to do something hard, but you did it because your conscience wouldn’t let you do anything else?”

**Examples of self-affirming statements to non-believers (to preserve relationship and soften their anger toward the church):**

1. “You’ve always been an example to me of following your values even if they lead to tough decisions. You *still are* an example to me, even though we may have different opinions. Thank you for confiding in me.”
2. “This makes me sad, but I can see that you’re following the dictates of your own conscience. My conscience leads me to stay in the church for my personal journey. I will always respect you, nothing will change that. I remember that one time like this when you...” (...and retell an earlier example of when your loved one stood up to peer pressure/followed their conscience that stood out to you).
3. “Thank you for telling me, I’m glad you did because my testimony is strong and you don’t have to worry about shaking it. I respect that you are making these changes based on your values. I’ve had to make hard decisions too, and so I know it didn’t come lightly for you. (share a story from your life when you made a hard decision). For the sake of ongoing communication, I’d love to hear about another time you had to make decision to stay true to your values, that you felt good about afterward.”
4. “I trust your journey, even though it’s different than mine. I can remember all the times in your life when you’ve deliberated long and hard about making the best decision that’s right for you, and I trust that you’ll do so now too.”
5. “You’re very brave to tell me about this, I know this must have been so hard for you to go through, I know how strong you are in following your conscience so I have faith to trust in your journey, wherever it leads you. Your conscience has never led you astray before, I admire how you always put your values first.”

*NOTE: These statements are NOT to be copied/pasted. They are merely examples to get the creative juices flowing as you think about self-affirming statements to your loved ones that are unique to your relationship and are genuine.*

**Practice Exercise:**

Write out at least 2 self-affirming statements you can make right now to a loved one you wish to strengthen your relationship with:

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## Religious Leaders and Self-Affirmation

If there's a religious leader that may be doing harm, continually bring it back to that leader's behavior and contrast it to what this leader claims is their values. Reflecting your loved one's own words and feelings is key, rather than moralizing, making generalizations about the church, demonizing people, or begging them to see the big picture or the gaps in logic. The more you reflect, the less defensive they will be in the moment with you, and the more likely they are to let their guard down. That vulnerability is the holy grail for preserving relationships. In short:

REFLECT what they're saying/expressing without judgment

RESPECT their beliefs while at the same time (if you can) laying out the tension point (without drawing any conclusions yourself. Let them do it!)

BUILD UP their confidence in themselves

Some examples: "OK, so I'm hearing that your leaders are telling you to accept this calling even though it's not the best thing for your anxiety. Which is interesting, because from what I understand that you've told me, personal agency is a really important value in your belief system, right? What do *you* think you should do? Maybe it'll help right now to talk about a time that you were in a situation like this and you felt good about how you handled it because you stuck to your values, to refresh your memory and get some tips from your past."

"It sounds like you're upset that Sunday School teacher questioned your worthiness just because you expressed a different opinion about those who doubt or leave. I know how important your faith is, and respect you for doing what you feel is right. And that meant so much to me that you would stand up for me like that. I'm sure there were others in that room who felt the same way you did but were afraid to speak up, and I bet they admire you all the more because you voiced what they were thinking. I'm so proud of you, hun."

"I can see how guilty it's making you feel hearing from (XXXX leader) that only the righteous are truly happy. I can see how a lot of people, not just you like you just said, would hear that and think, "well, I must not be trying hard enough, or be righteous enough, because I get depressed sometimes." I don't think there's anything wrong with you, I admire and respect you so much, and your ability to know what's right for you, and if that statement feels a little 'off' to you, that tells me a lot about its lack of merit. Because you're brilliant, capable, and worthy of every good thing. Depression just happens, and I for one don't think it has anything to do with worthiness or righteousness. I'm glad you're listening to your own inner compass."

"I can see how (XXXX early church leader)'s behavior is upsetting to you. You're not alone. You and I might come to different conclusions about why it happened the way it did, just know that I'm here for you and I won't try to lead you down a particular path, because so many different smart people can come away from thinking about it with different opinions, and that's ok. Whatever you eventually decide to come to conclusions about what happened, I trust you didn't arrive at it carelessly. I know you, and how careful, smart, and thoughtful you are. Remember the time you..."

### Thought Exercise on Leadership:

Think back to a time when you thought someone you looked up to, perhaps a leader in your community or a personal role model, could do no wrong. You'd only had positive experiences with them. And perhaps they even saved your life in one way or another, or gave you hope during a particularly dark time. Name them in your mind or here before continuing to read: \_\_\_\_\_

Now imagine what would have happened if, during the height of your admiration and “honeymoon phase” for this leader, someone had tried to argue with you about how they were a horrible person, with ad hominem attacks, and begging you to read from some clearly hostile sources all the “dirt” on this person. Do you think it would go well? Now imagine that instead of arguing with you, that person were to simply give you the heads up on information they learned about that leader, asked you first if you wanted to know, but were explicit it was up to you to come to your own conclusions about it, and that they trusted your judgment and intelligence. Would you be more, or less likely to open up your friend about your concerns about that leader if you ever started having some?

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