

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR *THE COGJAM EFFECT*

INTRODUCTION

About the Questions

When it comes to opinions, there is no one right answer. All any of us do is choose our beliefs according to what is most probable—given the available data, solid logic, and common sense.

These discussion questions are designed to help you find your own answers, as well as try out new ideas that may help lessen the impact of socio-political stress. By digging deeper you will learn answers to questions such as:

- What is your view of cogjam, and how it has changed lives?
- How has your “inner lizard” served you as a help or a hindrance?
- How do you choose and support your beliefs?
- What strategies might help you cope with and heal the impact of cogjam, as it affects you personally?

You can go over these questions by yourself, or in supportive group settings for practice discussing controversial topics. Relevant to the times, there are also useful questions for exploring stress and confusion related to COVID-19.

There are a lot of questions. Feel free to use the ones that suit your purposes. You can go through all of them sequentially, pick and choose as you go along, or perhaps your group can decide ahead of time which questions participants would like to address. Chances are, while exploring this material your group will come up with some new discussion topics.

Improving Critical Thinking in a Group Setting

You can certainly use this material as an individual exercise. But there are major advantages to group discussion:

- You get exposure to the opinions and perspectives of many.
- You can get feedback on your own ideas—remember, given our built-in subjectivity, we recognize each others’ reasoning pitfalls more easily than we can recognize our own.
- You may encounter perspectives that are more to your liking than the ones you started out with.
- Group discussion can open doors to interesting topics or angles for further investigation, and exploring new horizons.

Remember to set discussion group rules, the same as you would for any other group participation exercise:

- Listen to others
- Keep an open mind
- Show respect and seek understanding before responding
- Be kind and fair while expressing differing opinions

Consider closing your group with an opportunity to describe what you have learned, or what you're more aware of, as a result of having participated. This way, lessons learned will be less likely to be forgotten.

So many conversations turn into knee jerk reactions that center on dominating and winning, rather than understanding and collaborating. Model the change you wish to see in the world!

CHAPTER ONE

Storms Over the Horizon

1. What are you seeking from “The Cogjam Effect – and the Path to Healing Divisive Community and Fractured Science?” What attracted you to reading this book?
2. What does the phenomenon “cogjam” mean to you? When is it most likely to show up in your daily life?
3. Discuss various ways divisive politics have affected relationships in our society, or interfered with your community’s effectiveness and wellbeing. What are you seeing? Where does cogjam appear to have the most impact? What is your reaction to it?
4. The book proposes that people’s behavior, rather than their political stances, serves as the primary fuel behind current social-political distress. Do you agree, or disagree? Explain.
5. Describe a stressful incident where you’ve regretted giving in to a knee-jerk reaction. Or, describe incidents you’ve observed where someone else succumbed—did they in some manner show regret afterwards? How do you tell if people regret their actions?
6. Research has shown that lack of predictability and control are the two factors most likely to increase stress level during a crisis. Does this fit with your experiences? Discuss examples.
7. Currently we have a second disaster in the midst of cogjam: the COVID-19 pandemic. To what extent do you think how we’re handling the pandemic and cogjam intertwine? How about cogjam and weather disasters, such as the hurricanes in the Eastern US and the wildfires in the west? Or, do you think they have nothing to do with each other?
8. The author recognized the fear response’s role in socio-political distress because of her experience in disaster recovery. Now that we live with major global pandemic, all of us can see how people react during disaster.

Think about when you’ve seen others cope well, or cope poorly, with this pandemic. Based on the limited amount of information presented so far, can you see what the author means about the role played by the fear response? In what way?

9. Page 10 suggests that “confusion clears when underlying patterns become visible.” Why, or why not, do you think this holds a key position in today’s socio-political stress levels? Do you see any underlying patterns becoming increasingly more visible or distorted?

CHAPTER TWO

Enemies Within

1. What is meant by “the inner lizard?” Discuss examples of how inner lizard reactions have affected your reasoning, when the logical brain probably would have given better guidance.
2. Chapter Two offers multiple suggestions for why overstressed people were found to be less likely to vote during major elections, even though doing so would have increased control and perhaps even predictability.

What have you observed about hesitance to vote, that you think may tie in with the fear response? Based on your observations what might you say to those who refrain, that could help them feel more personally empowered?

3. Do you agree with the proposal that symptoms of cogjam have reached disaster proportions? Why or why not?
4. While working hard, many people refrain from taking breaks, even though skipping them impairs effectiveness and productivity. How do you see the inner lizard playing a role? If you felt compelled to keep working, even when you’re actually slowing your progress and perhaps that of others, what might you tell yourself?
5. Chapter Two describes many symptoms of exhaustion, especially as they relate to coping with cogjam stress and other disasters. What are you especially aware of in today’s political world that at times leaves you feeling run down?
6. What is meant by post-traumatic growth? (see page 23) Have you experienced it, or seen it happen with others after crisis or tragedy? Describe.

CHAPTER THREE

Oil for the Wheelhouse

1. The wars of words and conflicting information in politics at times lead to intellects feeling over-challenged, maybe even assaulted. How do you handle “intellectual overwhelm?” How is it working for you?
2. In Western culture, people are generally hesitant to talk about their intellect and critical thinking. In fact, the inner lizard might jump up and hiss “off limits!” at the very suggestion of putting the substance of our reasoning under a microscope. We might even start bolstering a challenged position with more questionable logic—which we may recognize we’re doing as it happens.

Why do you think this is so? What might promote better understanding that logic is a tool, rather than a personal attribute that needs defending?

3. Chapter Three explains what is meant by “science,” or scientific method. What have you seen in others’ statements, beliefs or judgments that hints of not clearly understanding what science is? Discuss how you’ve seen this happening in regard to the pandemic.
4. There are systems of information gathering other than the scientific method, such as intuition and spiritual enlightenment. When might these be more appropriate or effective than science when decision-making? When might they be least effective, or even problematic?
5. Most of the time we don’t actively assess which system of information gathering or decision-making we’re using; we select it automatically as we go about our daily lives. Step back and consider your own practices. What most influences how you decide what or whom to believe?
6. Scientific method consists of two main steps: gathering information, and drawing inferences from that information. How do you think confusing these two contributes to cogjammed thinking?
7. A century ago, a pioneer of modern scientific method claimed that “If it can’t be measured, it doesn’t exist.” What do you think?

CHAPTER FOUR

Erring is Human

1. What is your understanding of the term “rationalization?” Why do you think we so often settle for rationalizations, instead of applying the scientific method? Discuss whether doing so is inevitably problematic, or if at times, rationalization may be an appropriate choice.
2. Page 42 points out that “logical conclusions and factual reality are two different things.” What does this mean? Why do you think people so frequently confuse the two?
3. Conspiracy theories have been around forever, even though they are constructed from rationalizations rather than scientific observation. What do you think makes conspiracy thinking so seductive?
4. Page 44 says that sitting back and critiquing a past difficult situation can lead to better handling of future situations. Some believe that dredging it up again only makes coping with an unfortunate outcome more painful. What do you think?
5. Everyone occasionally makes use of denial. At times, it can actually serve as an adaptive reaction during a difficult circumstance. When do you think it works for us or against us? How have you seen it play out during this pandemic?
6. Chapter Four describes specific reasoning errors that all of us succumb to from time to time, and are especially good at creating and perpetuating cogjammed politics:
 - 1) single-factor thinking,
 - 2) black or white thinking,
 - 3) all or nothing thinking,
 - 4) fundamental attribution error, and
 - 5) confusing correlation with causation.

Discuss which of these stands out most to you about others’ reasoning these days, or how you believe you most typically succumb.

CHAPTER FIVE

Roaming with the Herd

1. Chapter Five explains the concept of “herd instinct.” What advantages and disadvantages does herd instinct bring to political goings on?
2. We all learn from examples modeled by others. What criteria do you think you use—consciously or subconsciously—to decide whether to copy another’s behavior or adopt their thinking? What ideas do you have about how you might improve upon your criteria?
3. During crisis, our bodies release adrenaline and oxytocin. Both chemically encourage bonding with those who have similar goals or beliefs. Does the physical presence of this neurochemistry mean groupthink is unavoidable? Explain.
4. Social support is important to coping with disaster. Containing a pandemic such as COVID-19, however, requires a lot of social distancing—the opposite of what herd instinct would have us do during scary times. What problems do you see as the two necessities come head to head, and what might we do to cope with the inner conflict created?
5. Can you think of times when you realize you’ve caved to the dictates of a groupthink mentality? What do you think motivated you to take that route, instead of thinking it through to the most logical answer?
6. What’s it like to try to discuss something with a person who is using denial alone to justify beliefs? How might compassion help?
7. Name-calling and other insulting comments have multiplied exponentially in politics over the last few years. What do you think got us to this point? List and discuss the many ways in which this negativity works against, rather than for, problem solving and decision-making.

CHAPTER SIX

Coping Gifts Differing

1. Resilience is often defined as “the ability to ‘bounce back’ from adversity” (page 67). What do you think has most contributed to your own sense of resilience?
2. Discuss why resilience is better viewed as a skill set, rather than a personality trait. How is recognizing this valuable, for both personal wellbeing and interpersonal relationships?
3. Why do you think the gut brain has so little to offer when it comes to building resilience?
4. “People can’t help being who they are” is a saying sometimes used when people we know act in ways we would have predicted of them. Do you agree with this saying? Why or why not?
5. Chapter Six describes challenges experienced by those with brain injuries or abnormalities, and those who have autism spectrum conditions. What do these passages say to you, especially in regard to handling interpersonal relationships?
6. Discuss the impact of parenting on resilience building during childhood (see page 75). What do you think is most important for healthy resilience development? What factors do you think lead to parents at times succeeding or failing to support it?
7. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is one possible consequence of prolonged adverse experiences. What are your thoughts about whether ongoing cogjam stress, or even pandemic stress, might cause PTSD for some? What implications do you see regarding this possibility?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cradle Beginnings

1. Generally speaking, are people who make ill-advised choices purposely trying to be dysfunctional? How might recognizing this tendency affect how we react to cogjammed reasoning errors or behaviors, both others' and our own?
2. As new reasoning skills were introduced to our cognitive toolboxes, we typically weren't consciously aware of it. We merely discovered their presence when a need arose. Chapter Seven suggests taking a stroll down memory lane and recalling incidents that may be evidence of your own experiences with developmentally related reasoning processes—the good, the bad, or the ugly.

Can you think of an episode during your first two decades of life when a light bulb lit up your reasoning horizon? Do you recall situations back then where you now realize you'd used more advanced/mature reasoning or decision-making than in years past?

3. Culture plays a huge role in childrearing. What cultural practices or beliefs do you think have the potential to work for or against developing healthy resilience?
4. The practice of thinking before reacting is learned. However, given the many factors of nature and nurture, some may not fully understand its importance until well into adulthood—if ever.

When did you first become aware that thinking something through was critical to success, even during (or especially because of) an emotionally loaded situation?

5. Page 82 suggests that our true nature is to try to be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem. What do you think?
6. Chapter Seven explains how we're born with a sense of "here and now," which is slowly hidden or intruded upon by newly emerging thought processes. Yet we can rediscover that sense of immediate presence, if we look for it.

When do you find you are most able to be fully present in the moment? What are you usually doing at those times?

7. Skills and decision-making that guide joining in with the herd develop in sophistication throughout our lives. Copying in order to fit in is especially common during childhood. What's your earliest memory of trying something you saw someone else do—ill-advised, for the better, or neutral—because it felt like fitting in?
8. What have you seen in a child's behavior that suggested he/she was experiencing compassion? Do you believe it was learned, or came built-in? Explain.

CHAPTER EIGHT

On Stuckness

1. Chapter Eight opens with the quote that insanity is “doing something the same way over and over, and expecting a different result.” What are your thoughts about this, and how it might be relevant to effectively coping with cogjam?
2. Page 95 proposes that we “embrace change and suffering when it finds us during our journey’s natural flow” as a means of better coping. Do you agree or disagree with this philosophy? Why?
3. Page 96 mentions that those who have an especially well-fortified gut brain will be more likely to avoid change, and also may be more likely to hold conservative views. How do you see this playing out in the differing ways people approach living with pandemic?
4. How might the natural neuroplasticity of the brain serve both an asset and a detriment to effective coping with political or pandemic stress? (see page 97)
5. Take a look at advantages and disadvantages of changing old habits listed on pages 98-99. What about your own desire to change? Which arguments on either side stand out to you?
6. We all see others cope by using hostile dependence, though it’s often so subtle we may not realize it as it happens. Based on the “stuck” thinking styles described on page 102, what behaviors might you expect to see of those experiencing hostile dependence during cogjam or pandemic stress?
7. Pages 102-103 list steps for getting ourselves unstuck:
 - Decide you want to be unstuck
 - Forgive yourself for getting stuck
 - Consider initial motivation to explore change
 - Be willing to face fears or concerns regarding change
 - Keep your eyes on the goal

Consider a “stuck” thought or behavior of your own. How would you apply these steps?

CHAPTER NINE

Self-Compassion

1. Describe your earliest memory of feeling or showing compassion toward someone.
2. What is your clearest or most recent memory of practicing self-compassion during a difficult time?
3. Self-compassion is fueled by three underlying elements: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Which of these seems most foreign to or missing in today's society? What do you think gets in the way?
4. Brain science research shows that the neurochemistry behind compassion blocks fight or flight neurochemistry; both cannot take control at the same time. How might knowing this help when dealing with cogjam moments?
5. Both political polarizing and the COVID-19 pandemic present opportunities to step in and examine our compassion practices. Discuss how compassion and self-compassion might serve as assets for your coping with these circumstances.
6. Which benefits of practicing self-compassion do you find most appealing, or most likely to motivate you to pursue change? (see pages 108-110)
7. Chapter Nine suggests that self-compassion is a choice we make, rather than something built into our personalities. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

CHAPTER TEN

Soothing the Inner Lizard

1. Discuss how slowing down can help us cope with cogjam. Have you tried it during fiery moments? Are there specific times when remembering to slow down would be useful for you?
2. Page 121 points out that many of the benefits found in practicing mindfulness are the same as those for practicing self-compassion. Why do you think this is so?
3. Pages 122-123 look at the biological consequences constant high stress has on future generations. The passage suggests that to protect them, we all share the responsibility of trying to manage our joint community stress. Do you agree or disagree with this premise? Explain.
4. Chapter Ten describes numerous practices for increasing mindfulness in our lives. If you were looking for a way to increase your own mindful thinking, which do you think would best fit your lifestyle?
5. Have a group member walk your discussion group through the mindful eating practice described on page 132. Afterwards, what feels different?
6. Try out the diaphragmatic breathing exercise on page 134. What do you notice?
7. Chapter Ten closes with a list of guidelines for building resilience. How have any of these strategies helped you when coping with difficult circumstances?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Recalibrating – Healing Fractured Science

1. Page 140 describes the difference between being spontaneous and being impulsive. Why is this important to remember when trying to corral cogjam? Or, do you think it is not that relevant? Explain.
2. Page 141 mentions how we more easily recognize others' reasoning missteps than our own. Does this jibe with your own experiences?
3. Page 142 lists potential avenues to explore when seeking a path out of cogjam. Can you identify one that you would like to pursue?
4. Page 143 elaborates on four guidelines that help reach logical conclusions, as opposed to accepting hypotheses prematurely:
 - 1) consider the source,
 - 2) rely on more than one source of information,
 - 3) look for any disconfirming data, and
 - 4) practice healthy skepticism.

Which of these do you think your approach to reasoning could make more use of when making important judgments or decisions? Or, which of these do you think might be easiest to improve upon?

5. Think back to an incident where you felt drawn to herd direction, but chose your own way regardless. What was it like for your gut feelings? How did you feel afterwards, as you thought over your choice? What do your discussion group's joint experiences suggest about plusses and minuses of gut instinct?
6. Page 149 lists several common values. There are, of course, many others. Which of your values most compel you to try to do something about cogjam, handling pandemic, or some other social issue that is particularly important to you?
7. Pages 149-152 describe common cognitive distortions, and what we can do to overcome them when we find them getting in our way. What barriers do you see for using such a strategy to deal with beliefs or thoughts you hold? What might you do to overcome barriers?
8. Review the list of revised expectations that can help lessen the sting of cogjam (see pages 154-155). What stands out most to you?
9. The problem solving strategy at the end of Chapter Eleven can be performed as a group exercise. Choose a real or fictional problem and apply the steps described. What stumbling blocks do you encounter? How might you address them? What do you think of the results?

CHAPTER TWELVE

Breaking Counterproductive Patterns

1. Breaking patterns of behavior is key to reducing cogjam. What would you like to change about how you typically interact with others? What behavioral choices at times cause problems for you? Or, what would you like to do more or less of?
2. “But that isn’t me. I don’t act like that. It’s being phony.” Page 162 suggests that doing something differently is not being phony; it’s just a piece of yourself you haven’t tried out yet. What do you think? If we act in ways uncharacteristic of how we’ve behaved in the past, or is not consistent with what our guts want us to do, is that being phony? Explain.
3. We all have our “hot buttons”—those controversial topics that are especially good at setting loose our inner lizards. Where do your hot buttons lie? When they get punched, how might you head off your inner lizard at the pass?
4. “Weapon focus” is when eyewitnesses in threatening situations so tightly focus on the weapon involved that they recall little else, such as the people present, the setting, etc. Page 164 suggests that we similarly narrow our focus during political back and forth, which is counterproductive. How have you seen this concept play out when watching people in heated discussion?
5. Chapter Twelve offers game plans for active listening, disarming your opponent, and caring confrontation. Think up a fictional situation for practicing any of these strategies. Take turns pairing up and giving it a shot. Consider using a topic concerning how to deal with pandemic.

Or, choose some other red versus blue topic, assigning one person to be the angry/offended one, and have pairs see how they might apply these strategies to aid discussion. What bumpy areas do you find? In what ways do these approaches feel comfortable or attractive to you?

6. As with any factor needing a change in strategy, awareness comes first. Simply being aware of others’ vulnerabilities changes how we react to them. Once vulnerabilities are identified, how might enlisting compassion help handle conflict with vulnerable others? Can you think of times you did this during a difficult situation?
7. Breaking dysfunctional interpersonal patterns can be boiled down into five careful choices:
 - Choose your battles carefully.
 - Choose carefully with whom you will or will not freely speak your mind.
 - Choose your words carefully.
 - Choose to keep your mouth shut.
 - Choose to walk away.

Which seem the most challenging to put into practice? Which appear to be relatively easier? Explain.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Healing the Herd

1. As human maladies go, cogjam is unique in its impact on mental health. It not only deeply affects individual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, but also results in pervasive disruption of community. There are many tried and true options for individual healing. However given the breadth and complexities, placing a healing hand on a community is much more difficult. Yet everyone can play a part in putting dents into cogjammed society. No dent is insignificant.

Having read Chapter Thirteen, which community ailment would you most like to do something about? You may not yet know exactly how to address it. But identifying it at least puts you on the conscious or subconscious lookout for ways you might step in.

2. Readers of varying generations have differing experiences regarding gender and culture. In your lifetime, what myths about gender and social roles have you seen debunked? What impact has this had on your life?
3. The rigid gender role expectations of past generations once provided feelings of certainty and security for a traumatized society. However they at times resulted in feelings of entitlement, which do not necessarily get satisfied in a constantly evolving society and economy.

What gender role expectations did you develop during adolescence and young adulthood that you later found needing adjustment? To what factors do you attribute the need to adjust?

4. Mainstream media news viewing can increase or lessen the impact of cogjam, based on how we go about it. Is the news constantly turned on? Do we listen only to sources biased in a certain direction? Do we process or react to new information with the gut brain, or listen with the more analytical scientist brain?

Describe how your news viewing habits changed because of today's charged socio-political world. Did additional changes take place with the introduction of the pandemic?

5. What concerns do you have about increased dependence on interacting with screens (phones, computers, etc.) and participation in social media, and their impact on overall social adjustment? Or do you think their impact on what we think of as socially acceptable is so limited, or has become so ingrained, it is not a significant concern? Explain.
6. Emotional intelligence is the ability to observe and understand your emotions, read the emotions of others, correctly tell the difference between emotions, and effectively use emotional information to guide your thinking and behavior, as well as adaptively influence others' thinking and behavior. Early studies suggest that extensive use of online activity impairs development of emotional intelligence. Do you agree, or disagree with this conclusion? Explain.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

What Now?

1. The chapter opening points out that healing cogjam is achieved mainly by addressing process, rather than content. What is your understanding of this concept? Is this different from how you viewed political polarizing before reading this book? In what way(s)?
2. Those who do not know history are destined to repeat it, as the saying goes. What do you see happening in today's society that hints of not having learned lessons of the past?
3. "No act of kindness is too small," yet "no good deed goes unpunished." How can we reconcile these two adages during times of cogjam, especially when trying so hard to move beyond it?
4. Anger can be used to fuel productive pursuits. As you observe socio-political divisiveness and its impact, what specifically raises your ire? How might you direct your anger's energy and passion into a productive solution?
5. The US Declaration of Independence emphasizes the rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." However at times, such as during this pandemic, practicing such rights results in conflict between individual rights and societal good. For example, enforcing mandates to wear protective masks and practice social distancing is critical to protecting everybody's right to life. Yet telling people what to do can interfere with liberty and pursuit of happiness.

How do we best set our priorities to fit our forefathers' original intent?

6. Based on your particular circumstance, in what ways might you, others, or your community actually grow and become stronger as a result of today's unfortunate political discord or the COVID-19 pandemic? In other words, how might we all help encourage posttraumatic growth, and not contribute to levels of posttraumatic stress?
7. Every generation learns lessons that have benefit for the next. Even our most esteemed civic leaders, scientists, and other torchbearers stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before them. Our experiences and knowledge gained from them all help weave the ongoing fabric of common humanity.

How might you help younger generations find their answers to promoting a just and well-functioning society, without telling them what their answers should be?