

“Uncomfortable Ideas”

This is a book about uncomfortable ideas—the reasons we avoid them, the reasons we shouldn’t, and discussion of dozens of examples that might infuriate you, offend you, or at least make you uncomfortable.

Author:
Bo Bennett

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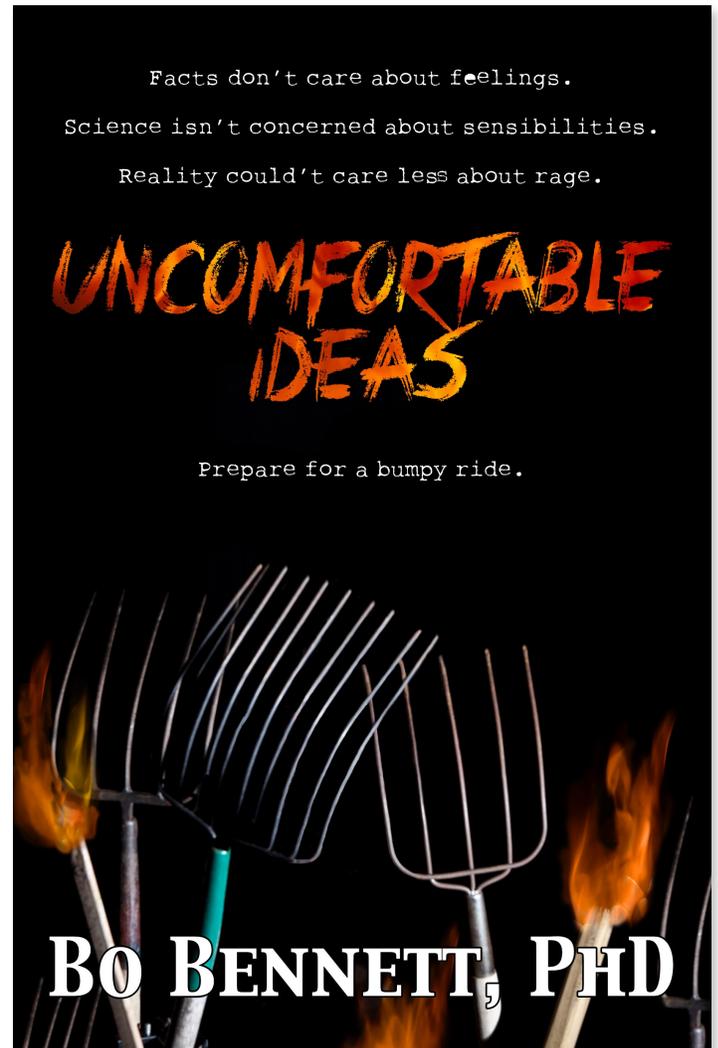
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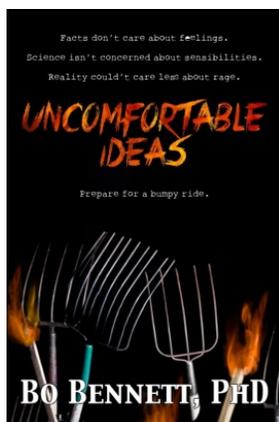
INTRODUCTION / EDITORIAL REVIEW

Many of our ideas about the world are based more on feelings than facts, sensibilities than science, and rage than reality. We gravitate toward ideas that make us feel comfortable in areas such as religion, politics, philosophy, social justice, love and sex, humanity, and morality. We avoid ideas that make us feel uncomfortable. This avoidance is a largely unconscious process that affects our judgment and gets in the way of our ability to reach rational and reasonable conclusions. By understanding how our mind works in this area, we can start embracing uncomfortable ideas and be better informed, be more understanding of others, and make better decisions in all areas of life.

Some uncomfortable ideas entertained in this book:

- Political correctness can be harmful
- Identity politics is a dangerous game
- Morality is functionally democratic
- Victims often do share some of the responsibility
- God is a far more horrifying character than Satan
- There is no such thing as freewill
- Americans are manipulated into being pro-war
- Non-whites can be racist, and women can be sexist
- Some people do "choose to be gay"
- Stereotypes are sometimes supported by the data and reflections of reality.
- Obese people are not perfect the way they are
- It's okay to find inappropriate jokes funny





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REQUIRED READING FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

As a college professor, Dr. Bennett has written this book primarily with college students in mind. In college environments, groupthink and other group biases might be stronger than in the general population due to the impressionability of the adolescent brain, increasingly less diverse thinking among students, and the tendency to form ideology-based in-groups. Students need to examine their own thinking to understand why they might be so hostile to uncomfortable ideas. This book does the trick. It includes over 150 “uncomfortable” questions that make great discussion questions.

DR. BENNETT’S IN-PERSON TALK

Dr. Bennett is available to give a talk on this book at your location. Contact him for more information.

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Dr. Bennett is available for print, radio, podcast, and TV interviews. The following is a suggested list of topics and potential questions, although not comprehensive.

What Are Cognitive Biases And Why Are They Are Problem?

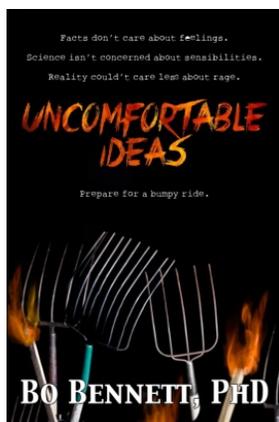
A cognitive bias is like an illusion for the mind. It is a deviation from rationality in judgment. Our brain did not evolve with rationality and reason as a goal; the only goals are reproduction and survival. Rationality is only needed to the extent that it supports one or both of those goals. Here’s the big problem: evolution works over tens of thousands of years, and we have made dramatic changes to our social environment in the last several hundred years. Evolution hasn’t had time to catch up. An example to which most us can relate, unfortunately, is overeating. We have a desire to overeat because food was scarce in our ancestral environment and the cost of starving was far greater than the cost of eating too much. Today, for most of us, there is no shortage of food, and we have a serious problem with obesity. The evolutionary trait that once aided in our survival is now killing us. Like the behavior of overeating, most cognitive biases are also relics of our ancestral environment that once helped us survive, but now, in the age of reason, are problematic.

Are Intelligent People Immune To Cognitive Biases?

Intelligent people are not immune to biases. Social scientist Keith Stanovich has done extensive research in the area of reasoning and proposed that one’s ability to reason effectively, that is to recognize and avoid biases largely responsible for our avoidance of uncomfortable ideas, is a separate intelligence just like emotional intelligence differs from general intelligence. Rational intelligence is an intelligence that is learnable.

What Is Political Correctness Exactly?

Political correctness is defined as “the avoidance, often considered as taken to extremes, of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude, marginalize, or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against.” Think of social behavior on a continuum. At one end, we have overtly racist, sexist, and mean-spirited forms of expression or action directed towards those who are incapable of defending themselves due to lack of power. On the other end of the continuum, we have any form of expression or action



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that is interpreted as overtly racist, sexist, and mean-spirited. Political correctness exists between the two extremes.

What Is An Uncomfortable Idea?

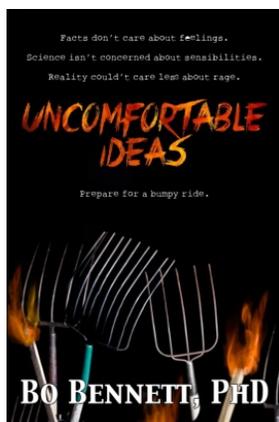
Simply defined, an uncomfortable idea is an idea that makes you uncomfortable. This is a subjective concept meaning that any given idea can be uncomfortable to you but not to another person or vice versa. More specifically, an uncomfortable idea is a thought that is difficult to entertain due to real or anticipated psychological pain or social consequences that result from entertaining the thought.

How Do We Avoid Uncomfortable Ideas?

We avoid uncomfortable ideas in three main ways: we avoid entertaining them, avoid accepting them, and avoid expressing them. These processes can be deliberate or done subconsciously or have components of both. Many of the same reasons we avoid entertaining uncomfortable ideas apply to why we avoid accepting and expressing these ideas. Refusing to entertain an uncomfortable idea is a conscious decision not to think about, investigate, or consider evidence for the idea. There are dozens of reasons why we do this. Many times there are multiple reasons combined that cannot be articulated, but we just “know” that an idea is not up for debate or consideration. The problem is, virtually all of these reasons are irrational; based on biases, cognitive effects, heuristics, fallacies; or other obstacles in reason.

Why Is It Important To Entertain Uncomfortable Ideas And Accept Uncomfortable Facts And Truths?

- **Credibility:** If you are arguing for one side of an issue and you fail to acknowledge valid points by your opponent, or worse, outright reject valid points, you will lose any credibility you do have with your opponent and you are likely to lose credibility with the audience, as well.
- **Expose Dangerous Thinking:** When we put restrictions on the expression of ideas, we make it more difficult to identify potentially dangerous people and their dangerous ideas.
- **Attempting to Solve the Wrong Problem:** If we don't entertain the alternative ideas, even if they go against our ideology, personal experience, or anecdotal evidence, we can be wasting our time on solving the wrong problem.
- **Treating Symptoms and Not the Disease:** When it comes to social issues, our desire to avoid uncomfortable ideas can cause us to focus on the symptoms while ignoring the disease.
- **Understanding Unintended Consequences:** When we get caught up in ideology and political correctness, we overlook the downside of our actions.
- **Understanding Reduces Animosity:** If we want to understand why someone holds the idea they do, we need to entertain the idea. What we often realize is that biological differences, different life experiences, or different values account for these different ideas.
- **Avoiding Manipulation:** The less aware we are of the flaws in alternative ideas, the easier it is to be manipulated by them.
- **The Importance of a Shared Reality:** Reality is founded on reason, logic, evidence, and experience. But this system breaks down when reason, logic, facts, and evidence are discarded, and experiences are interpreted in heavily biased ways.



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What Does It Mean To Embrace Uncomfortable Ideas?

There is a common misconception that we need to choose between happiness and some of the more “depressing” aspects of reality that are commonly seen as uncomfortable ideas. While I can think of a few cases where this might be the case, humanity is far more resilient than we give ourselves credit for. A landmark study published in 1978 demonstrated that lottery winners are no happier and paralyzed accident victims are no less happy a few months after their life-changing events. In addition, the lottery winners were often less happy than they were prior to winning the lottery because they took less pleasure in mundane events.¹ Unlike being paralyzed, accepting uncomfortable ideas can be relatively benign such as realizing you’re not as good looking as you think. Just because an idea is uncomfortable at first, does not mean it will remain uncomfortable.

If You Had To Give Just One Main Reason Why We Avoid Uncomfortable Ideas, What Would It Be?

We can sum up all the reasons why we avoid uncomfortable ideas with the phenomenon known as motivated reasoning. This describes how emotionally-charged ideas undergo a qualitatively distinct reasoning process that favors feelings over facts, which results in inaccurate conclusions and poor decisions.

How Should We Be Evaluating Evidence When Considering Ideas?

Remember ABC—awareness, believability, and comprehension. We need to be made aware of the evidence—not some inaccurate version of the evidence presented in such a way so any reasonable person would dismiss it, but the facts presented in an unbiased way. Believability in this context refers to knowing what level of trust one should have in the source as well as knowing what constitutes evidence and how to tell the difference between strong and weak evidence. As for comprehension, the more you generally understand, the better your conclusion.

Should Everyone Be Exposed To All Uncomfortable Ideas, Or Is It Best That Some Ideas Are Avoided No Matter How True They May Be?

Human behavior becomes increasingly difficult to predict the further we look in the future and the more variables we add in the equation. Without knowing how to think, maybe some people really are better off just being told what to think.

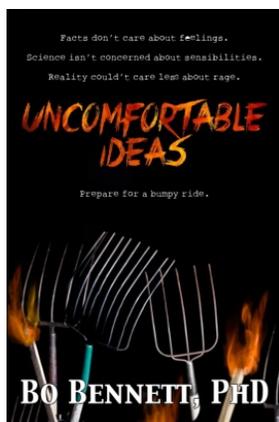
SOME UNCOMFORTABLE IDEAS

Interviews can be far more interesting if some of these uncomfortable ideas are discussed, along with the reasons why we avoid them. Here are some of the ideas from the book. Allow about 5 minutes for each idea.

Cognitive Dissonance

- The people you love to hate are most likely nowhere as evil as you think they are.
- God really doesn’t love all people, Hell doesn’t really exist, and/or God doesn’t exist.

¹ Brickman, P., Coates, D., & Janoff-Bulman, R. (1978). Lottery winners and accident victims: Is happiness relative? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36(8), 917–927. <http://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.36.8.917>



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Semmelweis Reflex

- We can't judge people morally for eating dogs as long as we are eating cows and other animals.
- Greatness, by definition, requires that we shed our desire for normalcy. If you're comfortable being normal, you're not motivated for greatness.

Overcompensation

- Name calling is often used as a way to overcompensate for the fact that the target of our verbal bashing has a valid point that we don't want to entertain.
- There are feminists who go beyond gender equality and advocate for female superiority and other highly controversial issues, giving many people good reason not to want to associate themselves with the “feminist” label.
- We are living in a simulated universe created by even more intelligent beings that could be considered gods.

Reaction Formation

- A number of the most vocal proponents of minority activist groups who are not part of the minority the group represents, are motivated by guilt of their own prejudice.
- People who are extremely vocal against homosexuality might just be that way because they are masking their own homosexual impulses.

Intolerance Of Nuance And Ambiguity

- Our morality isn't a reflection of God's; our idea of God is a reflection of our own morality.
- Divine Command Theory is functionally the same as everyone having their own moral standard with groups of general agreement, and everyone insisting they are right.
- Secular moral theories have several of the same problems as Divine Command Theory, and like Divine Command Theory, cannot provide a reasonable way to **objectively** claim that one knows that something is morally right or wrong.
- Morality is functionally democratic. Things are “wrong” because we generally agree they are wrong.

Feeling Over Fact

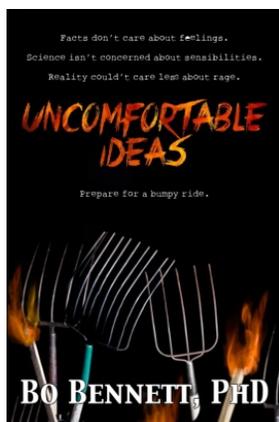
- Whenever you give money to a panhandler, you are most likely doing it to relieve your own guilt or doing it because of social pressure.
- We are easily manipulated by emotionally-charged terms that have a significant effect on how we see the world.

Uncomfortable And Unfalsifiable

- We are most likely a byproduct of the universe and not the reason for it.
- Not only are we not alone in the universe, but our universe is not alone in the cosmos. This makes the notion that we are the reason for the universe extremely unlikely.

Protecting Sacred Beliefs

- “Biblical marriage” has been described and condoned by God in many ways beyond one man and one woman. Suggesting otherwise is cherry-picking.
- “Traditional marriage” in the United States included polygamy and did not allow for interracial marriage.
- People can romantically love more than one person at a time.



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- Thinking your country is superior to all others is like thinking your race is superior to all others.

Fear Of The Slippery Slope

- Religious toleration is not always a good idea, especially when the religious beliefs result in actions that are harmful.

Fear For Society

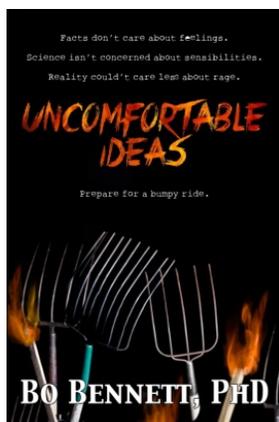
- Freewill is just an illusion, and every choice and decision we make is a result of deterministic or random environmental and biological factors.
- As much as you like to think you are in complete control over your decisions, behavior, and actions, you're not. We are social beings, and we all influence each other—none of us live in a social vacuum.
- Societies will not erupt in chaos if people don't believe in eternal punishment or reward.
- The American people are being manipulated to be more pro-military, to hate the enemy, and to want to kill. But this manipulation is necessary for national security.

We Don't Want To Be Seen As “Unpatriotic”

- The Constitution is not perfect.
- The Founding Fathers were not perfect, and we would not want them running our country today. Disagreeing with them doesn't make you unpatriotic nor does it make you wrong.
- The phrase “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance 62 years after being recited without it. It should be removed because it links patriotism to belief in a monotheistic God, which a growing number of Americans don't have.
- Reciting the Pledge conditions citizens to be obedient and loyal to their country. It is another example of prosocial manipulation.
- America might be great, but it is not the greatest country in the world.
- America needs leaders who care enough about the country to make it better, not leaders who make inaccurate claims about its greatness to appear patriotic.
- “God bless America” is a stupid thing to say even for American theists.

The Desire To Hold Popular Views Or The Fear Of Social Response

- Our beliefs and opinions are formed largely by the response of others through punishment and rewards such as hostile responses and social bonding through agreement, respectively.
- Your perception of racist cops and justified shootings by police is strongly influenced by your politics and how you get your “news.”
- Men and women are different biologically, which means there are differences in emotions, drives, cognition, and behavior.
- Race may be a social construct but biological differences in races do exist.
- Underprivileged folks, if you frame the privilege in such a way that puts blame on the privileged group or threatens to take away the alleged privileges, it is likely to be met with hostility and resistance. This is a common and expected response. Be prepared for it, and get used to it.
- Privileged folks, sometimes you will experience personal losses when injustice is addressed. Get over it. It's for the greater good.
- Acknowledge your privilege and show empathy to those who don't enjoy the same privilege. Instead of tearing yourself down with guilt, shame, and self-



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loathing, bring others up by helping them get the fair treatment they deserve.

- Transgendered women with beards should stay out of women’s bathrooms.
- Non-whites can be racist, and women can be sexist.
- Trauma can become a self-fulfilling prophecy when negative life events are treated as traumatic events, and sympathy and attention positively reinforcement beliefs that one should be emotionally devastated.
- Non-bigoted and non-homophobic parents don’t want their sons to be gay.
- Normalizing homosexuality is likely to result in more people identifying as gay as well as more people having gay sex.
- Some people do “choose to be gay.”
- We cannot rule out the possibility that environmental factors can result in same-sex attraction.
- Just because male homosexual sex is riskier, does not make it morally wrong, just like riding a motorcycle is no more morally wrong than driving a car.
- Gay conversion therapy can make gays no longer identify as gay and make them not want to engage in same-sex behavior.

Fantasy Is Sometimes Better Than Reality

- Not everyone gets to be an astronaut.
- The world is not just. Sometimes the bad guys win, and sometimes the good guys lose.
- Poor people are rarely to blame for being poor, and rich people get far too much credit for being rich.
- Obese people are not perfect the way they are. Improved health and well-being might have to come at the expense of protecting obese people’s sensibilities.

The Work Of Satan

- God is a far more horrifying character than Satan.

Fear Of Entertaining Evil, Sick, Or Immoral Thoughts

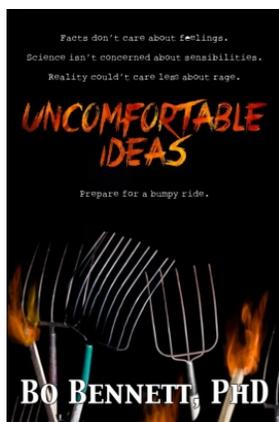
- Sometimes, some really disturbing ideas are difficult if not impossible to justify as morally wrong.
- Finding a sexually-mature teenager attractive doesn’t make you perverted, sick, gross, in need of counseling, or a pedophile.
- It’s okay not to care about everything and everyone, as long as you care about something and someone.

Fear Of Questioning / Refusal To Question Authority

- Getting killed for not believing in Allah or believing that you will be tortured for eternity for not accepting Jesus as your lord and savior are extremely strong motivators for avoiding arguments against your belief system.
- Choosing to be obedient over considering the short- and long-term consequences of your actions and how they affect people is a moral cop out.

Fear Of Confusing Support For Personal Desire

- One can truly love their spouse and still cheat on them.
- Recreational drugs should be made legal.
- Prostitution should be made legal.



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Fear Of Exposing Our Own Demons

- Being disgusted by watching two people of the same sex passionately kiss does not make you homophobic.
- It's not a moral failing to be attracted to people who aren't your significant other.
- It's okay to find inappropriate jokes funny.

SOME MORE UNCOMFORTABLE IDEAS

These are some of the ideas that Dr. Bennett supports and can argue in detail. Any one of these ideas can take up an entire interview, but discussions can be limited.

- The Self-Fulfilling Nature of Social Injustice
- Love Isn't Always Beautiful, and You Don't Love Everyone
- People Are Much More Selfish Than You Think
- “Microaggressions” Are Less Common and Less Problematic Than People Think
- Religious Ideas Are Protected By Motivated Reasoning More Than Any Other Class of Ideas
- Being an Atheist Doesn't Make You Smarter and Certainly Not Better at Critical Thinking
- You Should Give President Trump or President Clinton Your Support (written pre 2016 election)
- If You're Offended, You're Part of the Problem
- It is Okay to Change Your Mind

OTHER BOOKS PUBLISHED

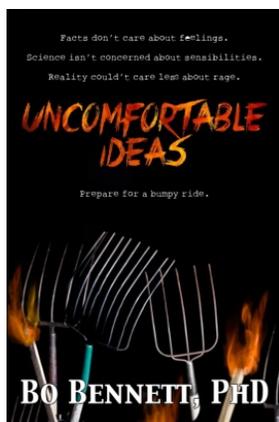
Dr. Bennett has published several books. See the complete list, including this book, with descriptions, images, and purchase links at <https://www.archieboy.com/tools/lp/Bo/Archieboy/6/Bo-s-Published-Books>

ONLINE COURSES

Dr. Bennett has created several online courses for adult students. The details of these courses can be found at <https://www.archieboy.com/tools/lp/Bo/Archieboy/7/Online-Courses-Taught-By-Bo>

PODCASTS

Dr. Bennett hosts several podcasts which can be found at <https://www.archieboy.com/tools/lp/Bo/Archieboy/9/Podcasts-Hosted-by-Bo>



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bo is currently the founder and CEO of eBookIt.com, a company that formats and distributes eBooks, print on demand, and digital audio books, as well as president of Archieboy Holdings, a holding company for several business ventures.

Bo's interest in psychology began as an undergraduate studying marketing, specifically, consumer behavior. After many years immersed in the business world, Bo returned to school and received his master's degree in general psychology. He continued to the PhD program in social psychology, focusing on social, cognitive, and positive psychology.

Bo's personal motto is "Expose an irrational belief, keep a person rational for a day. Expose irrational thinking, keep a person rational for a lifetime." Much of his charitable work is in the area of education—not teaching people what to think, but how to think. His secular (humanistic) philosophy is detailed at PositiveHumanism.com.

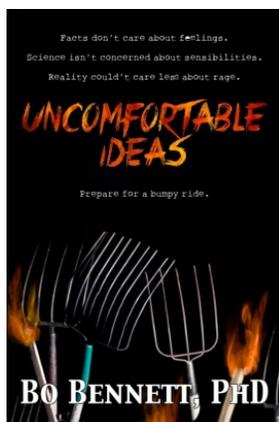
Bo has developed several online courses and the learning platform on which they run—as well as teaches those courses. These courses can be found in the "online courses" link on the main menu. Bo is currently an adjunct professor at Lasell College teaching social psychology.

From March of 2014 until February of 2016, Bo was the producer and host of The Humanist Hour, the official broadcast of the American Humanist Association, where he could be heard weekly discussing a variety of humanistic issues, mostly related to science, psychology, philosophy, and critical thinking. Today, Bo is the host of The Dr. Bo Show.

Bo is an active member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and American Psychological Association.

For Bo's complete bio, visit <http://www.BoBennett.com>.





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PRESS RELEASE

Psychology Professor Writes Book Challenging Us To Entertain Uncomfortable Ideas

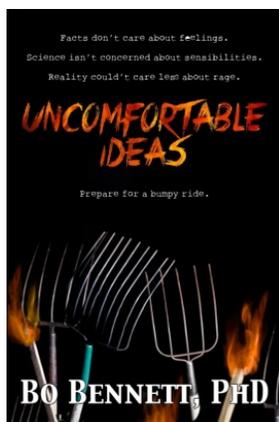
Dr. Bennett’s new book is a book about uncomfortable ideas—the reasons we avoid them, the reasons we shouldn’t, and discussion of dozens of examples that might infuriate you, offend you, or at least make you uncomfortable.

Boston, November 5, 2016 – Dr. Bo Bennett’s latest book, "Uncomfortable Ideas," has been released in ebook, paperback, and audio formats—published by eBookIt.com. Like Dr. Bennett’s other books, this book stresses the importance of critical thinking, but specifically addresses the problem of how our strong desire to avoid uncomfortable ideas keeps us ignorant and intolerant.

“Many of our ideas about the world are based more on feelings than facts, sensibilities than science, and rage than reality,” said Dr. Bennett. “We gravitate toward ideas that make us feel comfortable in areas such as religion, politics, philosophy, social justice, love and sex, humanity, and morality. We avoid ideas that make us feel uncomfortable. This avoidance is a largely unconscious process that affects our judgment and gets in the way of our ability to reach rational and reasonable conclusions.” Dr. Bennett explains that by understanding how our mind works in this area, we can start embracing uncomfortable ideas and be better informed, be more understanding of others, and make better decisions in all areas of life.

Dr. Bennett dissects dozens of our cultural norms and modern-day narratives while offering contrarian perspectives based on science and reason, that won’t sit very well with most people. Here are some examples:

- Political correctness can be harmful
- Identity politics is a dangerous game
- Morality is functionally democratic
- Victims often do share some of the responsibility
- God is a far more horrifying character than Satan
- There is no such thing as freewill
- Americans are manipulated into being pro-war
- Non-whites can be racist, and women can be sexist
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- It's okay to find inappropriate jokes funny

“My goal,” said Dr. Bennett, “is not necessarily to get people to accept the uncomfortable ideas that I argue for in this book, but to entertain them. And most importantly, entertain all uncomfortable ideas moving forward. A strong society requires well-informed citizens who are capable of making good decisions.”

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