

Don't Tell Me it Can't be Done

262nd ACS National Meeting &
Exposition, Atlanta GA

Aug 22, 2021 - Aug 26, 2021

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August 22nd, 2021

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When it comes to getting things done, who you listen to matters.

Trying to implement changes that improve the safety of the department, a laboratory, or even an experiment, will often meet with resistance.

- “There is no money for that”,
- “The administration won’t go for it”,
- “I don’t have time for that, and the most popular one,
- “It can’t be done”.



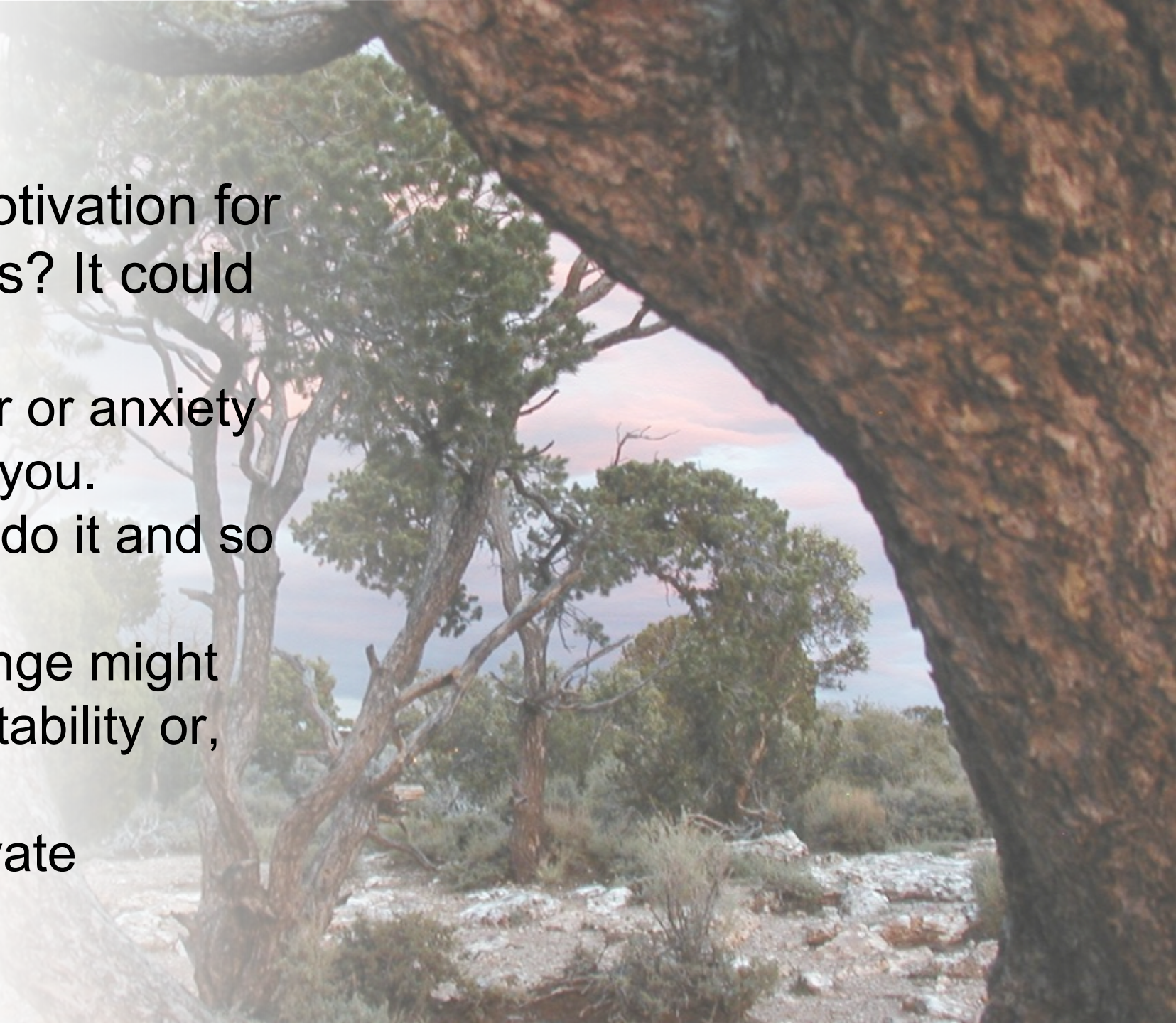
“It Can’t be Done”

When I am on the receiving end of this response, I have been known to react by tucking my tail between my legs and sulking off, but more often than not, I think to myself, “Just watch me”.

“It Can’t be Done”

What is the possible motivation for someone telling you this? It could be:

- A projection of their fear or anxiety of something new onto you.
- That they don’t want to do it and so you shouldn’t either.
- That they think the change might affect their position of stability or, maybe
- They are trying to motivate you...??



Reactance Theory

The theory of psychological reactance was first described by Brehm & Brehm (1966).

“Reactance is an unpleasant motivational arousal that emerges when people experience a threat to or loss of their free behaviors. It serves as a motivator to restore one’s freedom.”

Steindl C, Jonas E, Sittenthaler S, Traut-Mattausch E, Greenberg J. Understanding Psychological Reactance: New Developments and Findings. *Z Psychol.* 2015;223(4):205-214. doi:10.1027/2151-2604/a000222





Reactance Theory

Reactance is an “unpleasant motivational” trigger because it conjures up the emotion of anger mixed with negative thoughts.

“Don’t tell me what I can and cannot do”

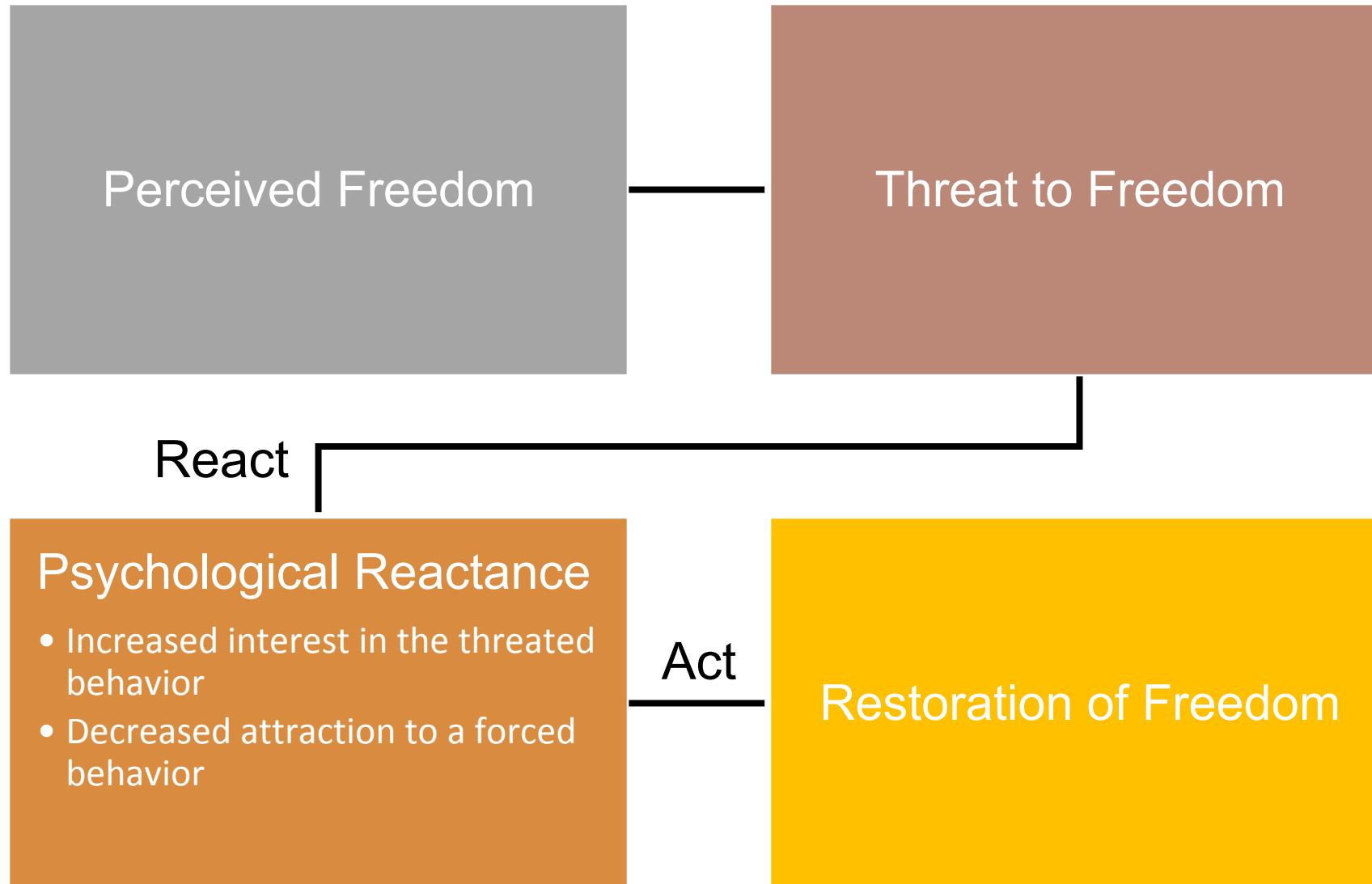


Reactance Theory

“According to this model, when people feel coerced into a certain behavior, they will react against the coercion, often by demonstrating an increased preference for the behavior that is restrained, and may perform the behavior opposite to that desired.”

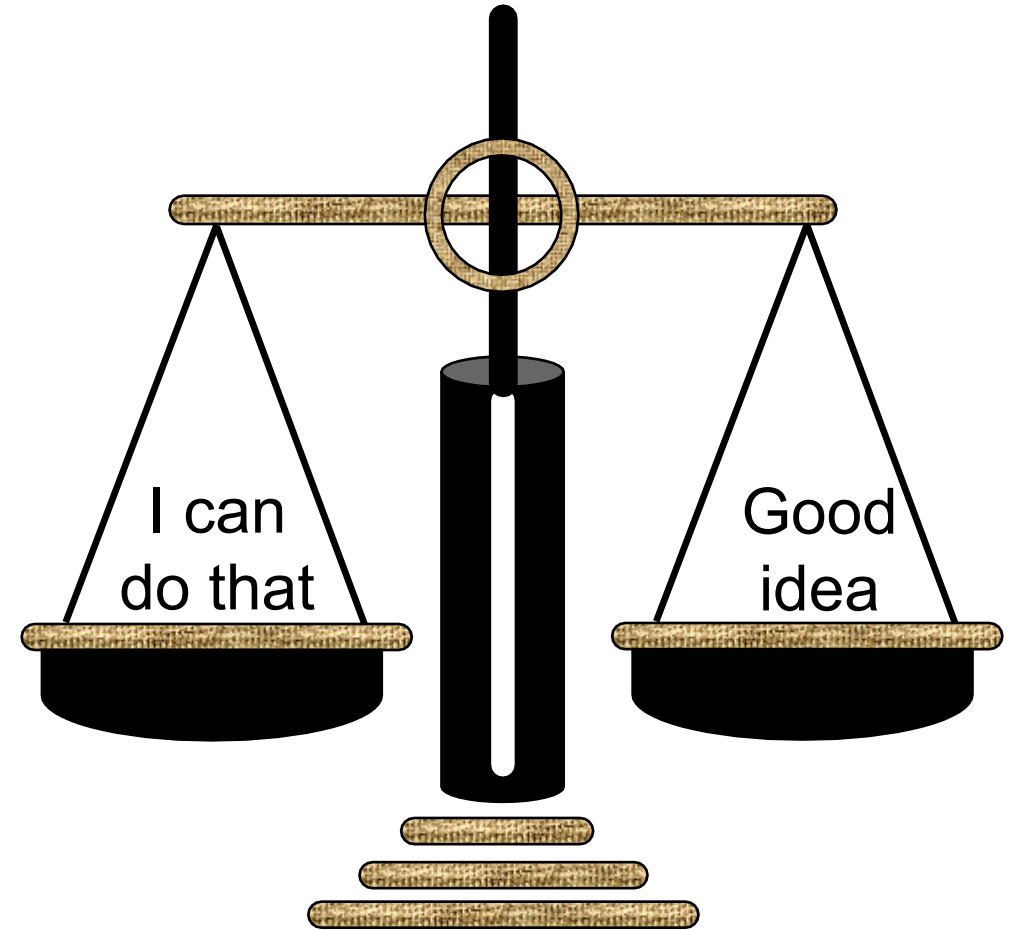
[APA Dictionary of Psychology](#)

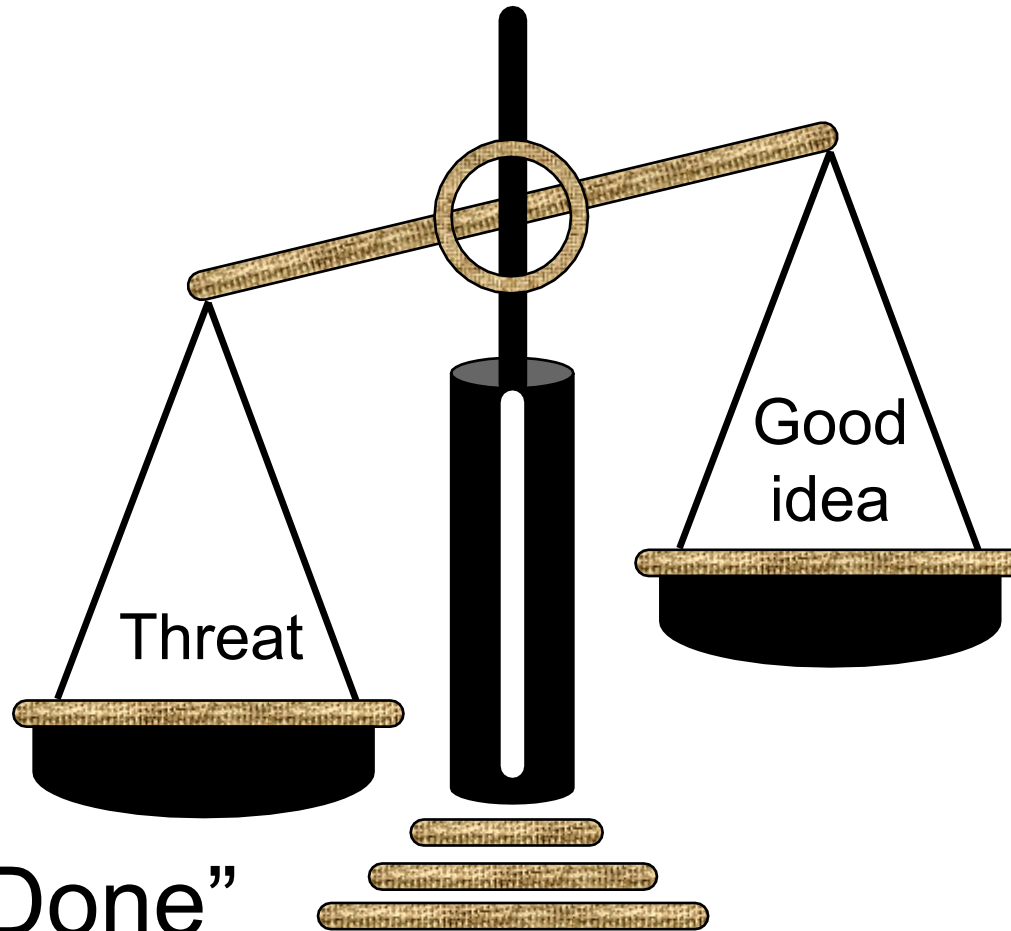




We all have an awareness of self
and what we are realistically able to
achieve.

This can be internalized as a
perceived freedom to accomplish
things.





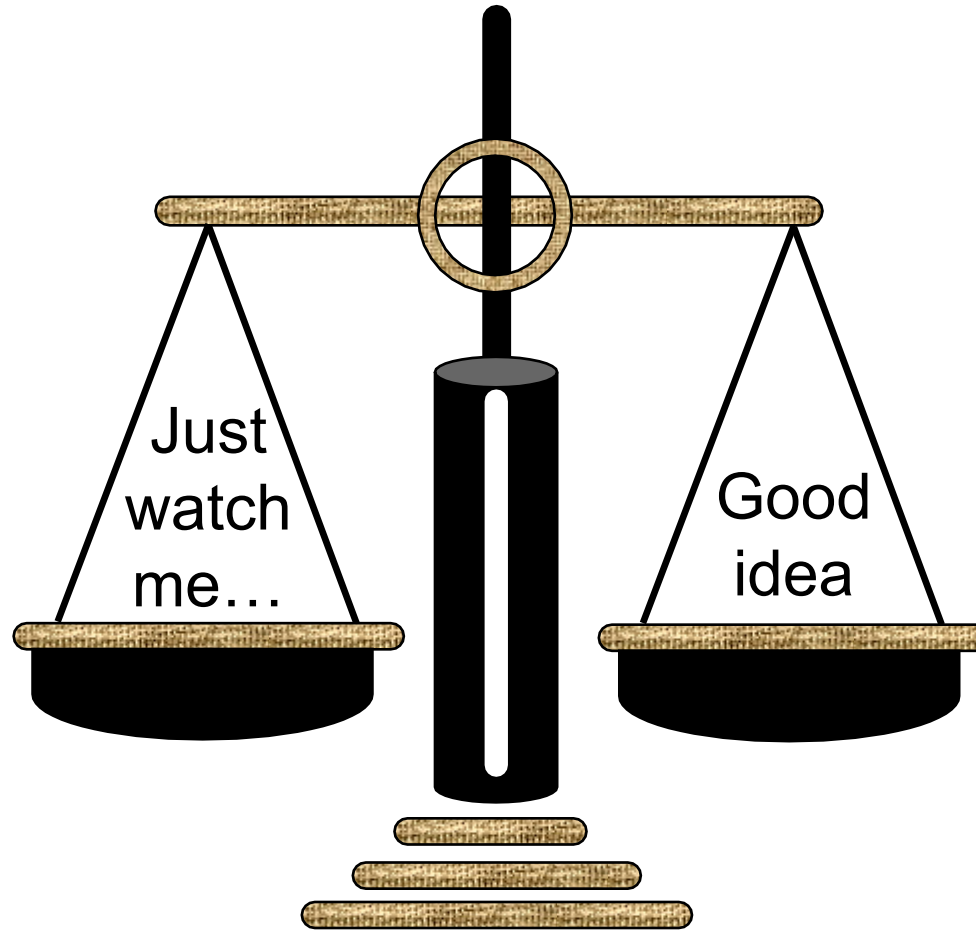
“It Can’t be Done”

Perception of
loss of freedom
and a reduction
of my self worth

Reactance is
activated

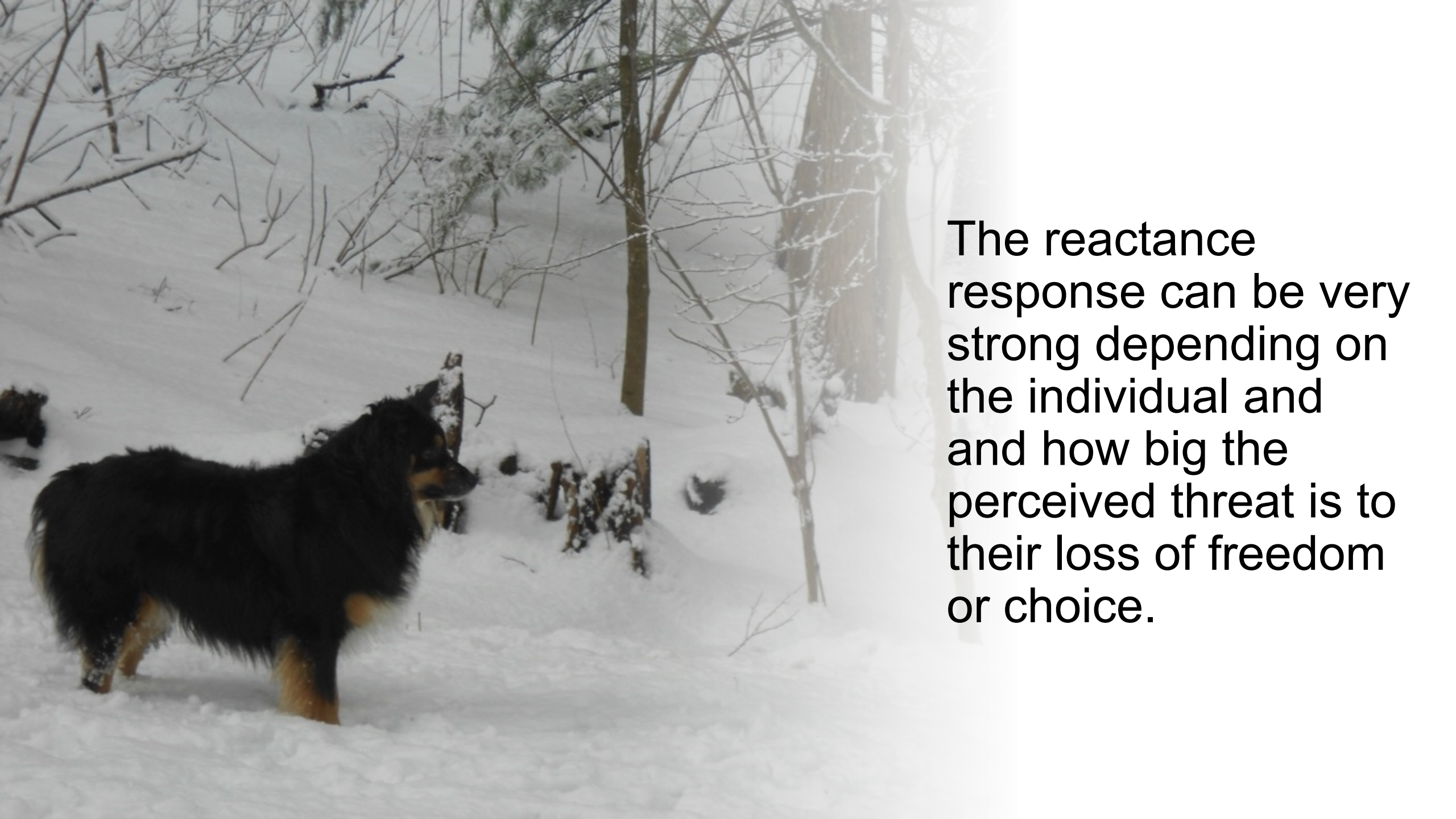
You are
motivated
to action to
reduce or
remove
reactance

~~“It Can’t be Done”~~

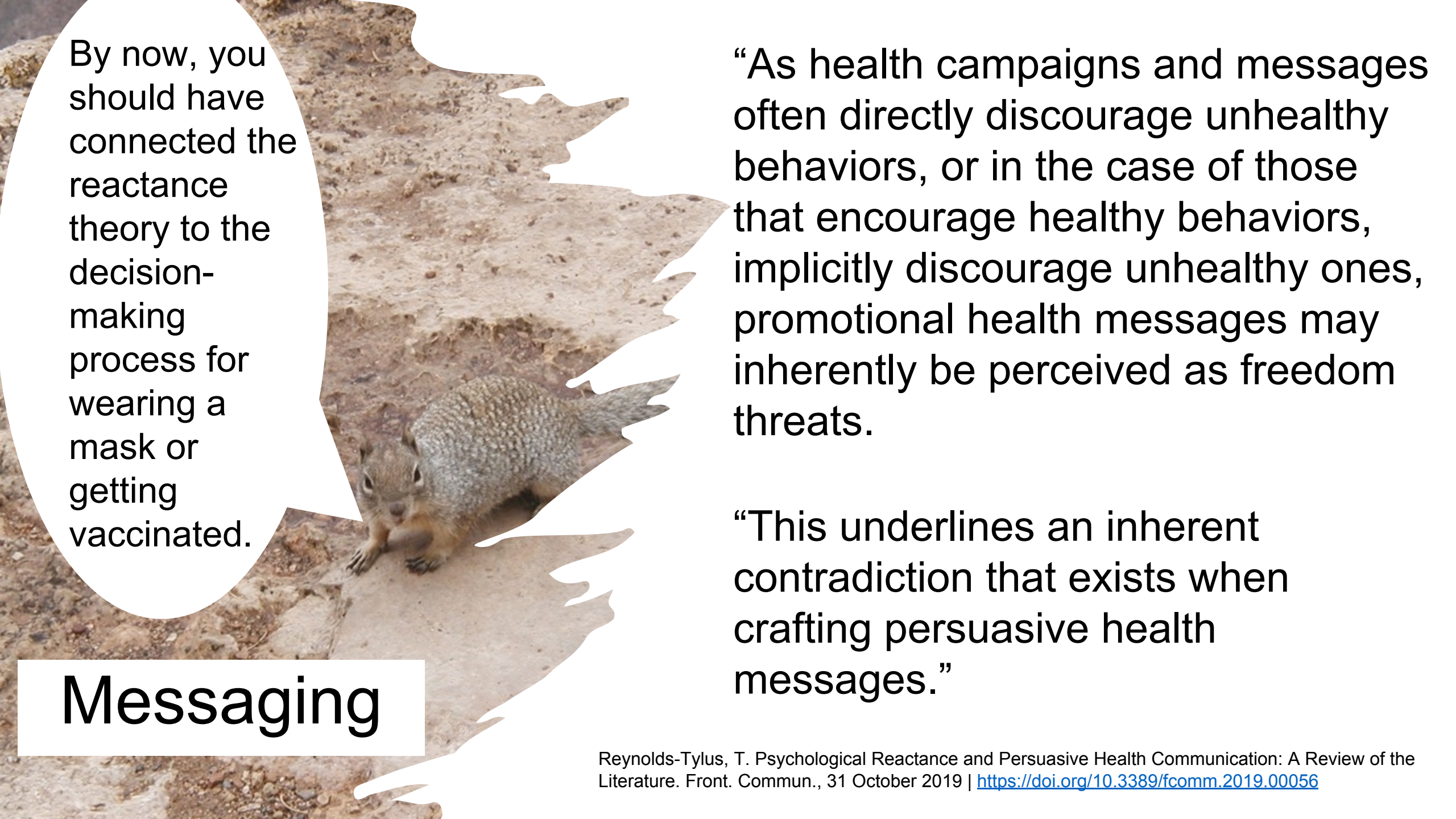


I did it!

Self
validation
and my
behavior
rewarded



The reactance response can be very strong depending on the individual and how big the perceived threat is to their loss of freedom or choice.

A squirrel is positioned on a light-colored, textured rock surface. A large, white, irregular speech bubble shape is on the left side of the image, containing text. Below the speech bubble, there is a white rectangular box with the word 'Messaging' in bold black font. On the right side of the image, there are two paragraphs of text in black font. The background is a close-up of the rock surface.

By now, you should have connected the reactance theory to the decision-making process for wearing a mask or getting vaccinated.

Messaging

“As health campaigns and messages often directly discourage unhealthy behaviors, or in the case of those that encourage healthy behaviors, implicitly discourage unhealthy ones, promotional health messages may inherently be perceived as freedom threats.

“This underlines an inherent contradiction that exists when crafting persuasive health messages.”

Messaging

When you are trying to persuade people to do things, you should try to avoid triggering the reactance response – unless you think it might motivate to someone into action.



Using Messaging to Reduce Reactance

“You are going to have to reduce the number of chemical containers in this laboratory space by 50% before work can continue.”



To what degree does this message make you feel:

- a) Angry
- b) Irritated
- c) Annoyed
- d) Aggravated

Using Messaging to Reduce Reactance

“Can we schedule at time to look through a printout of your inventory and see what chemicals you no longer use?”

Maybe we can remove some unused chemicals and create a safer working environment?



To what degree does this message make you feel:

- a) Angry
- b) Irritated
- c) Annoyed
- d) Aggravated

Help People Understand

- Reactance is one reason why rules are so hard to enforce.
- Implementing any rule reduces autonomy and choices.
- Don't make rules that you are not prepared to enforce or that are unenforceable.
- Use communications that minimize choice limitation.





The Hardest of Most Jobs is Getting Started

What I have come to understand is that if you never start – then it can't be done.

Don't let anyone keep you from starting...



Don't Tell Me
That the
Stockroom
Will Never be
Renovated

Don't Tell Me We Can't Shift the Safety Paradigm by...

- teaching safety education
- training with risk-based models, and
- giving people more choice in their safety management system (within the limits of the law)



Don't Tell Me
That We Can't
Help Prevent
More Injuries in
High Schools

Playing with Fire: Chemical *Safety* Expertise Required

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✓ **Cite this:** *J. Chem. Educ.* 2018, 95, 10, 1736–1746

Publication Date: July 13, 2018 ✓

<https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.jchemed.8b00152>

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“The person who
says it cannot be
done should not
interrupt the person
who is doing it”
– Chinese Proverb



A serene sunset scene with the sun low on the horizon, partially obscured by the silhouettes of tall, feathery grasses. The sky is a mix of soft pinks, oranges, and purples, with wispy clouds catching the low light. The overall mood is peaceful and reflective.

Thank you!