

Recently my wife accused me of poisoning her with heavy metals. Before you call the police, please allow me to explain. And I did ask her permission to write this accusation in my column, without legal advice.

She has been experiencing a new sensation - occasionally the soles of her feet would get very warm. This is quite new as Jennifer has had LONG history of putting her ice-cold feet on me nearly every night during the winter months. Trust me, it's not pleasant nor relaxing to have a foot-shaped icicle rubbed on your leg while you are trying to drift off. But recently things have changed.

Her feet would get warm on their own, not all the time, just mainly at night. So she turned to Dr. Internet, whom I don't think is board-certified, to discover why the phenomenon was occurring.

Out of the blue one evening came this statement, "Brian, I think you are trying to poison me with heavy metals."

"What!?!"

"Yes, I was looking up why my feet get hot sometimes and it says there are fifteen possible causes. Looking at the list I think the most likely cause is that you are secretly feeding me heavy metals," she replied.

"Ok, what's number one on that list, hun?"

"It's pregnancy, but I'm not pregnant," Jen said.

"Sure," I agreed. "And number two?"

"Menopause," she said quickly, "but it can't be that."

"I see." Rolling my eyes and with a surly tone I asked, "Changing the subject from spousal murder plots Jen, have you thought about what you want for your big 50th birthday coming up in a few months?"

Context is really important in life. The ability to see lots of data, not just what you want to see, and weigh the evidence is part of critical thinking, one of the general education outcomes we teach at NCCC.

Confirmation Bias, on the other hand, is just the opposite. It's part of human nature to reject data that conflicts with our world view, or makes us confront uncomfortable truths, and instead search only for data that confirms what we already choose to think. Jen does not like the idea that she may be getting a bit older, so she (playfully) rejects that notion in favor of accusing me of attempted murder.

This notion happens with other uncomfortable or inconvenient truths for all of us. It goes beyond just "wishful thinking" and instead allows us to reject facts, skew logic, and come to whatever conclusion we most want to believe, no matter how implausible. Confirmation bias is human nature, but it can be overcome by being honest with ourselves and looking at things in context.

One of the confirmation biases that I have is that community college is affordable for everyone. I like to think that we have kept our prices low enough that, when combined with the Pell Grant and other Title IV funds, everyone who wants to go to college can. That's what I like to think, but it's not true.

There are those who fall through the cracks of the Pell Grant system, whose families make too much to qualify for Pell but too little to pay for college and all the related expenses for their student. The evidence is there for me to see if I choose too.

Every year the Board of Trustees has to “write off” tens of thousands of dollars of unpaid bills from students who were unable to pay. Those bills are eventually turned over to collection agencies and to the State of Kansas where they garnish the student’s tax returns to send us the money owed. We sometimes see the funds paid in later years when a student applies for their transcript, as we won’t release a transcript or allow them to re-enroll without paying past due bills, but often we just keep those balances on the books. It’s bad for the student who can’t pay and for the college who needs money to pay its own bills.

Fortunately very few students are unable to pay. Why? Scholarships.

Thanks to the generosity of people in our community, many students can get the help they need outside the normal government student aid system. The NCCC Foundation raises money and then cultivates those donations through investments to provide help for those who fall through the cracks. Last year alone the Foundation gave out over \$150,000 in help to students in our community. Those funds came from an endowment built over many years, but that started through generosity.

There are those who know the truth, that college students need all the help they can get to get through their education with the lowest debt, at the highest quality. They have helped those students by giving to the NCCC Foundation and, in turn, our Foundation has judiciously endowed those dollars to make sure they last forever. An example of this is that a \$10,000 gift creates a \$500 yearly scholarship that never runs out. That scholarship will outlive the donor and even the students who receive it year after year. If you would like to be one of those donors that gives something that lasts forever, please contact Kelly Colter, Director of Development at 620-432-0327.

I’ll keep working for the day when my Confirmation Bias is the truth – that everyone who wants to can go to college no matter their financial status. I believe that soon college will be affordable to all, but only if we keep prices down, enlist help of many agencies, and rely on the generosity of our foundation and its donors.

In the meantime, I might look into hiring a good defense attorney, or plan a 50th birthday for a loved one, whichever is more plausible.

On behalf of all of us at Neosho County Community College, Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays! And for this year especially, a very Happy New Year to you!