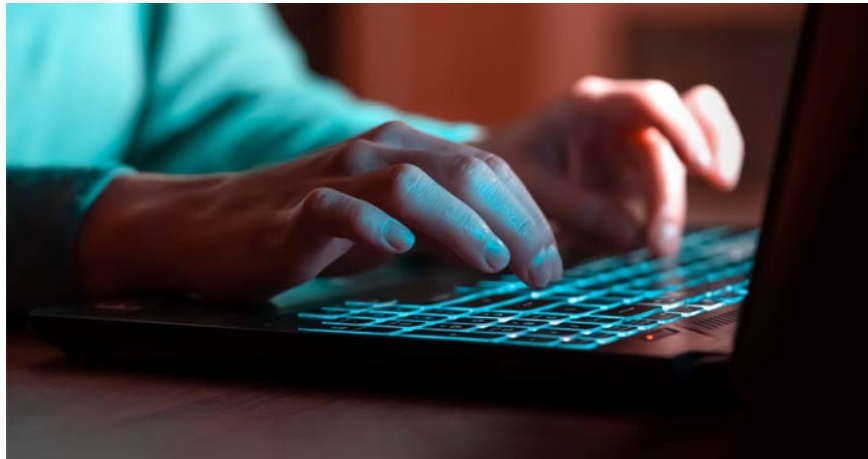


# Psychological tricks that scammers often use

In the heat of the moment, you are vulnerable to manipulation and if you accidentally associate with a scammer, you will likely experience one or more of the psychological tricks the scammer uses to catch you off guard.

**Scams** can come and go anywhere these days, in any form, whether over the phone, via email, or on social media. Last year alone, there were 2.6 million fraud reports, and the total amount of money scammed topped \$10 billion. It seems like every second message you receive is a romance scammer, a pork butcher, or an impersonator. You may think you'll never fall for one—but you certainly could.



That's because **scammers use a variety of psychological tricks to confuse you and convince you to make decisions that seem unbelievable in retrospect**. In the heat of the moment, you're vulnerable to manipulation, and if you're unwittingly hanging out with a scammer, you're likely to experience one or more of the **psychological tricks** the scammer uses to get you to let your guard down.

## Impersonating authorities

Scammers often impersonate people in authority—government officials, law enforcement officers, or professionals. We are all trained to obey the law and follow the instructions of those in authority. Scammers use that to suppress any resistance we might have to what we are being asked to do. For example, if the police call to tell you that you have missed a court date and must pay a fine or be arrested immediately, our instinct is to do what is asked to avoid trouble.

This tactic takes advantage of something called the Halo Effect—a tendency for positive first impressions to influence how we perceive subsequent interactions. If someone establishes themselves as an authority figure, we are more likely to follow their orders even if they seem strange.

**What to watch out for:** If someone claims to be an authority but resists any requests to verify their information — by claiming you'll be arrested if you hang up or not having time to verify their request — you should be wary. Legitimate authorities should have no problem with you conducting a reasonable verification.

## Time pressure

Scammers want you to use your instinctive, emotional brain, so they often try to use scarcity and fear to pressure you into doing what they want. Scammers often present limited opportunities, either in time or supply, that immediately put you in a don't-want-to-miss-it state. This works even if the benefit you're being offered wasn't even on your radar a few minutes ago—as soon as you're told you can have something, your first reaction is to protect it. Rational thinking is downplayed.

Another common tactic scammers use is to fake a delivery or use fake invoices, which often include a convenient contact link or phone number that you can easily click on. Your emotional reaction to seeing a large bill that you never authorized is to click right away to resolve the error, so you don't stop to think about verifying the contact information.

**Note:** Whenever you are pressured into taking immediate action to solve a problem or secure some benefit, back off. No legitimate business requires you to make such a hasty decision.

## "Foot in the door"

Scammers know that people are wary of large sums of money, or anything that involves a lot of effort. So they use a technique called the 'Foot in the Door' to make it easy for you to be scammed. It works simply: They start the contact with a small, easy request—sometimes as simple as asking, 'Can I have two minutes of your time?' or asking you to answer a simple question. If you've ever been stopped on the street by someone trying to collect an autograph and they start with a question like, 'Do you like animals?' then you've encountered the 'Foot in the Door' tactic.

That first question is followed by a series of additional requests—but you're already in an accepting frame of mind, and agreeing to the previous requests can make it difficult to refuse to cooperate later. For example, if you've already agreed that a particular cause is worth supporting, refusing to donate money would make you feel like a liar.

This technique also uses the 'Sunk Cost Fallacy'. Once you've invested time, effort, and emotion into answering questions and become increasingly involved in a conversation, you're less likely to walk away or end it without a concrete outcome. Foot-in-the-Door can also be used in reverse—the scammer opens with a large request that's easy to refuse, then follows it up with a much smaller request that suddenly seems reasonable by comparison.

**What to watch out for:** Whenever a stranger opens with a question without any greeting or pleasantries, it's time to think.

## Reciprocity

Reciprocity is why civilization works—when someone does something for us, we feel a 'debt of gratitude' to reciprocate. Remarkably, this works even when we don't want what we're getting in the first place. This often

comes in the form of a favor—a special price or special access given to you because you seem like a nice person, but it can also be used subtly to get you to keep talking. The scammer will compliment you or show interest in you so they can establish that debt. This can be used to create mental fatigue—after you've been talking to the scammer for a long time, you may be exhausted and more susceptible to manipulation.

**Beware:** Random compliments or offers of help from people you've never met could be a warning sign that you're about to encounter a request for reciprocation and the scammer wants to make you feel indebted to them.

## Love Bomb

Romance scams are long-term scams in which the scammer pretends to be an attractive, caring romantic partner who is sadly far away and therefore unable to meet in person. The scammer convinces the victim that they are in love, then asks for money in various forms to solve temporary problems—such as a car that needs repair or a travel problem.

From a distance, it may seem unbelievable that people aren't immediately suspicious when their new friend asks for money. But these scammers use what's known as 'love bombing' to emotionally overwhelm and manipulate their victims. Love bombing starts with constant, dramatic displays of affection, but then withholds those feelings without explanation, forcing the victim to work hard to regain that feeling of admiration. Before you know it, you're trying to do whatever they want in order to regain their credibility.

**What to watch out for:** If someone you've never met starts showering you with attention and compliments, be suspicious. If they then seem "cold" and angry toward you, you're almost certainly being manipulated (or the person isn't in a healthy emotional space—either way, it's time to walk away).

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