

Mind Traps

Avoiding biases, fallacies, and distortions.

Three situations, before any of them has a name.

- A fox jumps for grapes he cannot reach. After several tries he walks off, telling himself they were probably sour anyway.
- One candidate lays out a detailed health policy with data behind it. The other replies: of course you would say that, you are a career politician out of touch with real people.
- Your daughter is struggling with something she was raised to believe. The conversation goes badly. That night you lie awake certain it is because you failed her.

Each of those is a mind trap: a way the mind simplifies or short-circuits a situation. Like the cheese in a mousetrap, tempting and dangerous. They appear to be hardwired. Research reproduces them over and over, in everyone. You cannot switch them off. You can learn their names and the situations that produce them.

Medicine works the same way. You learn the pattern of an illness so you can name it, and naming it is what makes a treatment possible. There is one difference worth knowing about. Medical students hear a disease described and become convinced they have it. With mind traps the failure runs the other way: you hear the list and become certain you are immune, while seeing every item on it in your neighbor.

The first principle is that you must not fool yourself, and you are the easiest person to fool.
(Richard Feynman)

So read this with a list going. For each trap, ask where you might be using it. It does not mean you are wrong. It may mean you are not seeing the whole truth.

Three kinds of trap

- **Cognitive biases** are judgment errors. They affect how you evaluate and decide.
- **Logical fallacies** are reasoning errors. They affect the structure of an argument.
- **Cognitive distortions** are perception errors. They affect how you interpret reality.

Cognitive biases

Shortcuts. The brain has limited processing power, so it economizes. Because the shortcuts are systematic, they are also predictable. Deliberate reasoning is a rider on an elephant: the elephant is fast, emotional, automatic, and much the larger animal, and the rider mostly explains after the fact where it went.

Rationalization: building reasons for a behavior, feeling, or decision that are not the real reasons.

- Looking backward it is easy to spot. I did not really want that job, it would have been too much stress. That school is not as good as people say.
- Looking forward is the insidious form. You feel inclined to put your name in, then fear arrives dressed as practicality, and you say you are too busy this year. Test it: if you knew the job was yours for the asking, would you still be too busy?
- The same machinery covers what you already did. Just this once. I deserved it. They should not have put it in front of me.

Confirmation bias: searching for, reading, and remembering information in the way that confirms what you already believe.

- Students holding opposite views on the death penalty each read two fabricated studies, one supporting their position and one opposing it, with equally convincing statistics. Each group rated the study that agreed with them as credible and the other as unconvincing. Both groups left more certain than they arrived. (Lord, Ross and Lepper, 1979.)
- Upton Sinclair: it is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it. Substitute ego, reputation, social standing, or identity, and the sentence keeps working. Identity is the expensive one.

Logical fallacies

a claim is made → the honest response addresses the claim → the response leaves the track → the conclusion is unsound

A fallacy does not make the speaker wrong, and it does not make what they said irrelevant. It means they did not answer. Usually that is because they cannot, and often it is aimed at whoever else is listening.

Ad hominem, against the person: refuting an argument by attacking whoever made it.

- Claim: two plus two is four. Response: how would you know, you repeated second grade. Obviously absurd.
- Change the claim to two plus two is five and that same response suddenly feels like a fair hit. It is not. What happened in second grade has nothing to do with arithmetic. Your own agreement is doing the work.
- Change it to a calculus claim you cannot evaluate and the attack is the only handle you have left. That is when it works on you.
- It runs in every direction. You do not care about the environment, you drive an SUV. You only want tax cuts because you are wealthy.
- It skips your reasoning and goes for your ego, which is why a hypocrisy catch is so satisfying and so uninformative.

Strawman: replacing the real argument with a twisted or exaggerated version, then defeating that.

- We should set a budget. So you want us to stop doing anything fun and live like misers.
- Lower business taxes can create jobs. So corporations should pay nothing while the poor suffer.
- It works best when the other side is not in the room to say that is not what I said, which is why it is the standard form for describing people who are not present.

Cognitive distortions

Not errors of logic. Errors of perception, and they hurt. Here the emotional system runs unchallenged and the reasoning brain starts writing stories that make sense of what is being felt. These are closely associated with anxiety and depression, and they are what cognitive behavioral therapy was built to treat.

Personalization: feeling responsible or guilty for things outside your control.

- A team misses a deadline: this is my fault, though I worked extra and did my part. A friend cancels: they do not want to see me. A partner goes quiet: they are angry with me. Someone falls asleep in your class: it was boring and useless.
- Underneath is an insecurity. Something that would threaten your worth might be true, so you scan for evidence of it and find it everywhere. It usually says more about you than about the situation.

Emotional reasoning: treating a feeling as evidence.

- I feel anxious, so this must be dangerous. I feel depressed, so my life must be pointless. I feel excited, so this investment must be good. I feel drawn to this person, so this must be the one.
- Fear is a real signal when there is real danger, and we would not want to lose it. Very little of modern life is that. Here the elephant tells the rider what to think, and the rider agrees and starts running.
- Epictetus: it is not the things that disturb us, but our interpretation of their significance.
- The practical rule is do not reason while emotional. On identical evidence, people judge themselves more capable when happy and less capable when sad.

TRY THIS

- Pick one trap and watch for it in yourself this week. Not in anyone else.
- Name something you may be rationalizing right now, then run the thought experiment on it.
- Find one topic where you are only collecting the supporting evidence.
- Watch for ad hominem and strawman in political coverage. They are everywhere once you can name them.
- Discuss this with your family.

Every one of these is easier to see in someone else. That is the trap around all the other traps, so look inward first.

Resources

Questions to ask when a reply feels like a win

- Did that actually address the claim?
- What would answering it have looked like?
- Am I agreeing because the put-down landed?
- Would I accept this response if it were aimed at me?

Challenging personalization

- **Identify the thought.** Notice the sentence as it arrives. This is my fault. I failed here.
- **Examine the evidence.** Is there concrete evidence my actions caused this? What else was in play?
- **Consider alternatives.** List other reasons this could be happening that have nothing to do with you.
- **Depersonalize.** Another person's path is their own experience, not a report card on you.
- **Seek feedback.** Ask someone who will tell you the truth whether your reading is fair.

Referenced in this session

- Aesop, the fox and the grapes. The origin of the phrase sour grapes.
- Biased assimilation and attitude polarization, Lord, Ross and Lepper, 1979. The death penalty study.
- Upton Sinclair, 1935, on salary and understanding.
- Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, on interpretation.
- Richard Feynman, on fooling yourself.

Reading

- *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman. The fast system and the slow one, and why the fast one keeps embarrassing us.
- *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt. The elephant and the rider, at length.
- *Shortcut Through Therapy*, Richard Carlson. Short, plain, and aimed at distortions rather than arguments.

Watch

- Therapy in a Nutshell, "Emotional Reasoning: the cognitive distortion that makes you emotionally reactive."
- Therapy in a Nutshell, "How to stop taking things personally."

Theme: thinking well. From my course *Think Better*. The companion sessions are on discernment, mental models, and mindset.