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# Winning the Brain Game

## Fixing the 7 Fatal Flaws of Thinking

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

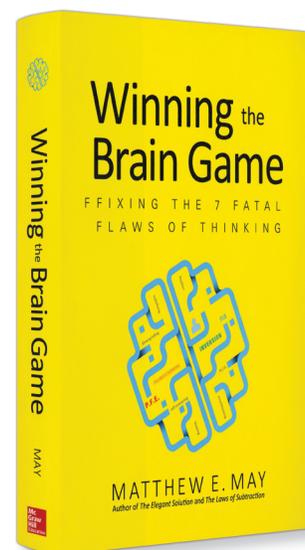
Each day, a game of mind versus matter plays out on a field defined by the problems we must solve. Most are routine and don't demand a more mindful approach. It's when we're faced with more difficult challenges that our thinking becomes vulnerable to brain patterns that can lead us astray. We leap to solutions that simply don't work. We fixate on old mindsets that keep us stuck in neutral. We overthink problems and make them worse. We kill the ideas of others as well as our own. Worse, we keep doing these things, over and over again, naturally and instinctively.

But it doesn't have to be that way. In *Winning the Brain Game*, author and creative strategist Matthew E. May explains these and other "fatal flaws" of thinking, revealing seven observable problem-solving patterns that can block our best thinking. Calling on modern neuroscience and psychology to help explain the seven fatal flaws, May draws insights from some of the world's most innovative thinkers. He then blends in a super-curated, field-tested set of "fixes" proven through hundreds of creative sessions to raise our thinking game to a more mindful level. Regardless of the playing field, mindful thinking is the new competitive advantage, and the seven fixes are a magic set of tools for achieving it.

*Winning the Brain Game* will lead you to better decision-making, higher levels of creativity, clearer strategies and overall success in business, work and life.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The seven fatal flaws of thinking and the fix for each one.
- The importance of reframing and generating the right questions.
- Concrete ideas and strategies for practicing each cure.
- How neuroscience can help solve problems.



by Matthew E. May

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: WINNING THE BRAIN GAME

by Matthew E. May

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## Introduction: 7 Fatal Flaws

An elegant solution is one that achieves the maximum effect with minimum means. But there are seven fatal thinking flaws. Each carries with it the potential to kill a great idea and prevent an elegant solution from ever seeing the light of day.

- **Leaping.** Immediately and instinctively leaping to solutions in a sort of mental knee jerk almost never leads to an elegant solution to an unfamiliar, complex problem, because not enough time is devoted to framing the issue properly.
- **Fixation.** Fixation is an umbrella term for our general mental rigidity and linear thinking — our go-to mindsets, blind spots, paradigms, schemas, biases, mental maps and models — that make it easier for us to make it through the day but harder for us to flex and shift our perception.
- **Overthinking.** This can be thought of as our knack for creating problems that weren’t even there in the first place. Overthinking is a rather deep bucket filled with a host of variations on a theme: overanalyzing, overplanning and generally complicating matters by adding unnecessary complexity and cost.
- **Satisficing.** By nature we satisfice, a term combining satisfy and suffice, and coined by Nobel laureate Herbert Simon in his 1957 book *Models of Man*. We glom on to what’s easy and obvious and stop looking for the best or optimal solution, the one that resolves the problem within the given goals and constraints.
- **Downgrading.** Downgrading is the close cousin of satisficing, with a twist: a formal downward or backward revision of the goal or situation, often resulting in wholesale disengagement from the challenge.

- **Not Invented Here (NIH).** This is defined as an automatic negative perception of and visceral aversion to concepts and solutions developed somewhere else, somewhere external to the individual or team, often resulting in an unnecessary reinvention of the wheel. We don’t trust other people’s solutions.
- **Self-Censoring.** When we reject, deny, stifle, squelch, strike, silence and otherwise put ideas of our own to death, sometimes even before they’re born, it is an act of Self-Censoring. Self-Censoring is the deadliest of the fatal flaws, because any voluntary shutdown of the imagination is an act of mindlessness, the long-term effects of which eventually kill off our natural curiosity and creativity.

Regardless of the playing field, mindful thinking is the new competitive advantage, and the seven fixes for the seven flaws are a magic set of tools for achieving it. The seven can all be placed in a larger toolbox properly called Reframing. Reframing is the singular response to the question of how to respond to the following mantra: “What appears to be the problem, isn’t; what appears to be the solution, isn’t; what appears to be impossible, isn’t.” ●

## PART I: MISLEADING

### Leaping

Perhaps the easiest way to explain Leaping is to do what psychologists and neuroscientists alike do: categorize our thinking into two main circuits. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman in his 2011 book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* uses terms coined by psychologists Keith Stanovich and



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Richard West: System 1 and System 2. Let's just keep it simple and memorable, taking our cues from Kahneman: FAST and SLOW.

FAST does the rapid, automatic, reactive, unconscious and instinctive thinking we employ to solve routine problems. SLOW handles the labored, effortful, conscious and rational thinking we employ to solve more complex and unfamiliar challenges. FAST is where our expertise and confidence live, where our intuitive "sixth sense" operates. It's also where almost all of our mistakes get made. And it's where Leaping occurs. Kahneman tells us that our FAST circuit is a "machine for jumping to conclusions" when information is limited.

While deeper thinking SLOW should be the one that prevents mistakes and keeps us out of trouble, it's lazy. It wants to act like FAST. SLOW thinking is just plain hard work, requiring too much mental and physical effort. And our formative years have not focused on thinking slow but, rather, how to economize thinking to make it fast.

What can we do to improve the tension between FAST and SLOW? We can leverage our FAST circuit to improve our SLOW and train our minds to fix our brain's fatal flaw of Leaping. The secret lies in how to trigger SLOW so that it acts and feels like FAST.

### The Fix: Framestorming

The fix for Leaping is Framestorming. Framestorming is a mash-up of framing and brainstorming. Framestorming operates under the same basic rules of brainstorming: Go for quantity, build on ideas, withhold judgment. That's the storming part. It's the part that feels good, because it calls up FAST. What about the frame part?

How we frame something has everything to do with how well it turns out. The ability to properly frame an issue or problem goes far in avoiding the typical pitfalls that limit our ability to reach the elegant solution. With framestorming, the focus is on generating questions, not solutions. The power of framestorming lies in its ability to engage our SLOW thinking in a manner that feels like FAST thinking.

Framestorming consists of three straightforward steps conducted under the general rules of brainstorming, with the ultimate goal of stating the challenge as a compelling question that acts to frame a problem as an intriguing puzzle, one that engages our more imaginative SLOW thinking.

**Step 1: Cue the language of frames.** Good frames are stated as questions. Author Warren Berger writes, "a beautiful question is an ambitious yet actionable question

that can begin to shift the way we perceive or think about something — and that might serve as a catalyst to bring about change." Warren advises cycling through three stages of inquiry: why, what if and how?

"Why is this a problem?" "Why hasn't anyone solved it?" "Why might it represent an opportunity?" At some point, the innovator moves from "why" to "what-if" questions — imagining possible solutions, often by connecting ideas. "What if we tried X?" "What if we combined Y with Z?" That's the idea stage. Then, you have to get from imaginative, what-if possibilities to something more practical and concrete; you begin to ask, "How might we do this?"

**Step 2: Generate questions.** Now generate as many "why," "what-if" and "how" questions as you can. As in brainstorming, framestorming initially favors quantity over quality. Go for at least a dozen questions that frame the challenge, preferably more. Don't stop until you're well into the double digits. Reserve judgment or evaluation for step three — the last thing you want to do at this point is be conservative or critical.

**Step 3: Pick the two best.** Once you have a master list of frames, you can select at least two that will launch you into the solution brainstorming mode, which is essentially another round of the "why," "what-if" and "how" questions, this time focused on answers. From there, you know what to do! ●

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## Fixation

Psychologist Karl Duncker in his 1939 book *On Problem Solving* coined the term "functional fixedness" to explain the difficulty people have in looking at objects and situations in ways different than they commonly do or have in the past. Various other labels for functional fixedness include paradigms, blind spots, mindset, bias, brain lock and mental models.

Fixation can wreak havoc in individuals, organizations and even entire industries. Organizational theorist Ian Mitroff attributes General Motors' dramatic loss of market share in the 1980s at the hands of import car companies to a decades-old, multilevel version of Fixation that went something like this: Styling and status are more important than quality, foreign cars are no threat and workers don't make a difference. General Motors only became aware of their faulty thinking when it was far too late.

All day long, unbeknownst to us — and for the most part uncontrolled by us — our brains record every single experience, sending sensory information in the form of electrical impulses to our cerebral cortex, the "grey

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matter” that houses the brain’s higher functions. Each new experience is automatically stored as data in our brain. The process is additive and cumulative, and generally goes unedited. Different patterns combine to make memories and perceptions, and those connections are reinforced over time, becoming mental models — mindsets, biases and paradigms. As soon as our brain recognizes a piece of information as being part of a pre-existing pattern, our FAST thinking overrides our SLOW, and we get fixed on our solution, essentially screening out other possibilities.

### The Fix: Inversion

The cure for Fixation is called Inversion, because it involves flipping your thinking around in order see things through a new, fresh and unique lens, in turn sparking new neural connections in your brain, effectively rewiring it. The Inversion method is called “Opposite World.” Opposite World is about inverting the normal conditions, defining features or key characteristics of whatever challenge you’re tackling. There are three basic steps.

**Step 1: List the defining attributes.** Let’s take a common example, that of the traditional circus, first used by Stanford’s Tina Seelig in teaching her entrepreneurship class how to address what she called “problem blindness” in her 2009 book, *What I Wish I Knew When I Was 20*. The traditional circus has a number of classic elements: clowns, barkers, multiple tents, carnival music, “star” attractions, animals, cheap tickets, kid oriented.

**Step 2. For each element, list the extreme opposite or reverse.** In our circus example,

- Clowns — no clowns,
- Barkers — no barkers,
- Multiple tents — one tent,
- Carnival music — sophisticated music,
- “Star” attractions — ensemble cast,
- Animals — no animals,
- Cheap tickets — expensive tickets,
- Kid oriented — adult oriented.

You probably just experienced a bit of the Fixation flaw, if you thought of Cirque du Soleil.

Part of the point here is to illustrate the power of Inversion, an illustration which necessitates a backwards glance at something we consider nontraditional, even disruptive: Airbnb is the inverse of a traditional hotel or bed-and-breakfast in that it does not own property; Uber is the inverse of a traditional cab or limousine service in that it does not have a fleet; Tesla cars are the inverse of cars with combustible engines, at least to some degree, in

that they do not use gasoline for fuel. By taking the polar or extreme opposite view of the current or traditional way of thinking about a given concept, you can easily forge new avenues worth exploring creatively, which brings up the final step.

**Step 3: Framestorm/brainstorm, using the opposites as your starting point.** Look at your opposites list. While it may not reveal a solution, each opposite provides a starting point to now use your framestorming chops and ask Why (not)? What if? How (might we)? Those questions in turn will spark new trains of creative thought. When you’re done, you may be surprised at just how off-road you’ve gone with your thinking. ●

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## Overthinking

General George Patton once said, “No plan escapes first contact with the enemy.” Ex-heavyweight boxing champ Mike Tyson updated Patton’s sentiment by saying, “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.”

The question is, where did our love of planning come from? Part of the answer comes from our evolutionary addiction to resources: The more we have, the more we feel safe, secure, in control, shielded from risk and thus able to perform better. But in reality, just the opposite is often true — the more we attempt to control and regulate apparent risk, the more exposed and at risk we often are. That’s because the more protected we think we are, the less vigilant we become.

Another part of the answer centers on our need to be certain and correct, a need easily traced to how we learn and how we are educated. Consider first the natural learning that occurs long before we ever enter a classroom. By all accounts, it is our most intensive learning period. It features failure upon failure: learning to smile, hold our head up, roll over, grab things, sit up, crawl, walk, talk . . . everything is an experiment, nothing happens right the first time, and what we now call failure was not at that time thought of much less labeled as failure but rather a continuous cycle of learning and progressing and improving — the very nature of growing.

Once in the classroom, our fearless learning through testing was replaced by a new kind of learning. Our teachers now asked the questions, and we had to answer correctly. The need to be certain and correct grew. In a complete reversal of toddler learning, we faced a new kind of test, one that came after the lesson. There was a right and wrong answer involved with this kind of test, and a grade called “F” for failure. Along with grades on

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tests came fear. As the demands of homework assignments, quizzes and tests grew, so grew the need to plan our time in order to avoid failure.

The good news is that the working world now realizes the errors of our institutions and is racing to rekindle the childlike ethos of curiosity and experimentation with which we entered the world, eager to embrace what perhaps Charles Kettering said best: “Virtually nothing comes out right the first time. Failures, repeated failures, are finger posts on the road to achievement. The only time you don’t want to fail is the last time you try something. One fails toward success.” All we really have to do is get back in touch with how we made our way in the world those first few formative years.

### The Fix: Prototesting

Prototesting is a mash-up of prototyping and testing. A prototype is defined as an early model of a potential solution that can take many forms, from purely conceptual, like a strategy, to completely physical, like a product. Broadly speaking, though, a prototype in any form is at its core simply a set of educated guesses about the future. And the fancy word for an educated guess is hypothesis. And the purpose of a hypothesis is to guide a test, an experiment. Creating a prototype is play; testing it is purposeful play. Two powerful tools will help you raise your Prototesting game.

**Surfacing Assumptions: What Must Be True?** If we want to survive Patton’s “first contact with the enemy” and avoid Tyson’s getting “punched in the mouth,” we must address the assumptions inherent in our potential solutions. The best technique to surface an assumption and alchemically turn it into an advantage amounts to a single but powerful question: *What must be true?*

For example, determining whether a prototype strategy represents a good set of choices may require asking what must be true about the industry structure, market segmentation, distribution channels, cost structures and competitive reaction. A prototype product or service offering may require asking what must be true about what users truly value. Once you develop a list of answers to the question of what must be true for your concept to be a good choice, you will have a fairly robust set of conditions for success. This list is your portfolio of educated guesses about the future, your hypotheses.

**Testing Assumptions: Experimental Design.** The following test design is so simple it needs no further explanation; simply plug in your most worrisome assumption from the what-must-be-true exercise, and you’re good to go. Here are the test design parts:

- **Conditions:** Which of our what-must-be-true assumptions are we most worried might not be true? Why is it so worrisome?
- **Hypothesis:** What must we learn? What is our testable belief about future value creation?
- **Experiment:** How will we test our hypothesis? What is the target metric that will be our standard of proof that helps determine pass/fail?

What is so attractive about Prototesting is that it calls up the kind of learning that creates new and valid knowledge, in which it is the test that produces the lesson. And the Overthinking flaw fades away. ●

## PART II: MEDIOCRE

### Satisficing

Satisficing is a real word, part satisfying and part sufficing, coined by the late economics Nobel laureate Herbert Simon his 1956 book *Models of Man*. He used it to describe our natural inclination to settle for “good enough” when faced with a decision.

In general, we go with the first option that offers an acceptable payoff, choose the one that appears to get us “in the ballpark” quickest, but then stop looking for other ways, including the best way, to solve the problem. We rationalize that the optimal solution is too difficult, not worth the effort involved or simply unnecessary. Simon called this “bounded rationality.”

In the vast majority of routine, everyday decisions, we’d be wise to satisfice. That’s when “good enough” is, well, just that. But when you’re trying to solve a difficult problem in which a suboptimal solution could put you at risk is not one of those times.

As people grappling with various thought challenges engage in Satisficing behavior, they ignore the very constraints that can paradoxically open up new and different ways of looking at things. They mistakenly pose the question, “What should we do?” before asking, “What is possible?” They want a solution, but they don’t have the patience to pursue the optimal one, favoring implementation over incubation. They would much prefer to throw some resources at the problem and move on, or tweak a previous solution and fit it to the current situation. They fail to look more holistically at the challenge, to search, scan and see the bigger picture. The result is that elegant solutions completely elude them.

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## The Fix: Synthesis

An easy way to think about Synthesis is “both-and” thinking, versus “either-or.” Here are two ways to synthesize.

**Double Down.** Here, you have two solutions, one of which has many benefits with one huge drawback and the other of which has one huge benefit but many drawbacks. Taking a cue from Blackjack players who double down on a hot hand may be a way to synthesize a third option. Roger Martin and Jennifer Riel state that, “The trick is to find the conditions under which the first model can produce the benefits of the second.”

They give the example of Walmart, facing a huge drawback in the form of a massive erosion of their global reputation if they did not change both their stance on environmental sustainability as well as carbon footprint. Doing so would be expensive, which for a low-cost provider strategy is a big drawback, but would do wonders for the company’s reputation. Walmart effectively doubled down by extending their general strategy of placing pressure on suppliers to reduce costs. In this case they placed pressure on their suppliers to adopt more environmentally friendly strategies, refusing to purchase goods from suppliers who did not meet certain standards for water, waste and carbon.

**Decomposition.** When you have two equally attractive solutions that you wish you could fully implement simultaneously but can’t because they are in direct conflict and require significant trade-offs, break the larger context down into component parts, so that you can apply each solution in whole to those components.

When Target was in its early years, its senior executives realized they faced a dilemma: It had to contend on one hand with Walmart, far and away the low-cost retail leader. Seeing Kmart relegated to also-ran status, Target knew it couldn’t win the game of everyday items offered at rock-bottom prices. On the other hand, it faced successful, highly differentiated department store retailers, such as Nordstrom and Macy’s, strong brands that would be nearly impossible to steal significant share from, much less unseat.

In order to compete effectively, Target adopted a strategy of decomposition. It decided that groceries and everyday commodities — a box of Tide, a package of Bounty — would be sold at prices equivalent to Walmart’s. However, when it came to apparel and other higher-margin items, Target chose to partner with well-known designers and celebrity homemakers looking for broader audiences. These offers had no direct substitutes at either Walmart or higher-end retailers, and Target was able to create the

illusion of being a discounter in one part of the store and a unique retailer in another. It broke the problem down and essentially created two stores under one roof, becoming a discounter-plus-retailer, convincing people that they could get fashionable things along with the halo of everyday low prices from the store within a store. Target grew exponentially, carving out a unique playing field on which it could win.

As with all Synthesizing, the goal of decomposition is to avoid satisficing compromises and “either-or” trade-offs in order to create more value through “both-and” thinking. ●

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## Downgrading

Henry Ford once said, “If you think you can or can’t, you’re right.” In that single line he captured the sum and substance of Downgrading. By Downgrading we somehow fool ourselves into believing we can declare victory ... through a pre-emptive surrender!

The legendary Jack Welch faced this very issue during his tenure as CEO of General Electric. Welch was known for his winner’s mindset, demanding that all GE lines of business maintain no less than second place in market share, and preferably first. But his lieutenants began gaming the goal by revising how they defined their respective markets, shrinking the market small enough that they could declare themselves number one or two in the space. Welch caught on, though, and reset the constraint so that no business could hold more than a 10 percent share, believing that if people defined their market to be much larger than their share of it, they would be more aggressive in pursuing opportunities to win the top spot.

When we view a problem as unsolvable or a goal as unattainable, we go through four phases. The first thing we do is try harder. No surprise there. Next, if our efforts don’t yield the results we want, we get angry. Again, no surprise. Third, we resign, mentally distancing ourselves from the goal, and we get depressed. Finally, our commitment dissolves completely, and we become open to committing to a new goal.

## The Fix: Jumpstarting

Jumpstarting is a three-gear battery recharger, with three effective methods to avoid Downgrading and eventual disengagement.

**Can-If Cascading.** The concept is quite simple: Force yourself to replace “can’t because” with a “can-if” statement. If you’re on the Mars Pathfinder team, for example, “We can’t land a rover on Mars for \$150 million, because

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landing modules cost too much” might become “We can land a rover on Mars if we figure out a way to land without a landing module.” You then keep going, using either another “can if” or, if a single “can if” does the trick, a Framestorming “what if” or “how.” You never know, you might come up with the elegant solution the Pathfinder team did: Use air bags like those found in automobiles to bounce the rover to a stop on Mars.

**Why-How Laddering.** From neuroscience we know that both a “why” and a “how” must be present and connected to keep us engaged in the pursuit of a challenge. The first is about purpose; the second is about process. And since we know that focusing on both why and how isn’t possible, we need a practical method to call one or the other up when we begin to stall and contemplate Downgrading. Seemingly impossible challenges seem impossible because there is no clear how, and the entire point of such a challenge is the creative search for a solution. So we can be fairly confident that we are in for a difficult struggle with the how at some point.

That’s where Why-How Laddering comes in. If the “how” isn’t yielding the desired progress, we can ladder up to asking ourselves the “why.” If the “why” isn’t as clear as it could be, we can ladder down to a lower-level “how” until we find something we can accomplish to get a quick win and restart our progress toward the “why.”

**Fresh Starts.** According to a study by Katherine Milkman, people are more likely to set a new goal corresponding with or immediately following an event such as a birthday or the start of a week, month, season or year, suggesting that temporal landmarks or timestamps might make it easier to engage in aspirational behavior. Milkman proposes that these landmarks create new “mental accounting periods” that psychologically distance our present self from its past imperfections, propelling us to behave in line with their renewed self. Second, temporal landmarks interrupt attention to day-to-day details, causing us to take a big-picture view of our situation and focus more on the broader challenge we’re chasing.

But you do not need to wait for the new year, your next birthday or even Monday morning. The Energy Project CEO Tony Schwartz talks about the power of pulsing: working in 90-minute cycles, effectively achieving the Fresh Start effect several times a day. The science shows that after working hard for more than 90 minutes, our brains begin to slow down to conserve energy. We become more reactive and less capable of thinking clearly and reflectively, or seeing the big picture. It doesn’t matter much what you do as long as you change your space every

90 minutes or so. You’ll be surprised at the re-energizing effect this has on you. ●

### PART III: MINDLESS

## Not Invented Here (NIH)

NIH is defined as a strong resistance to, or automatic rejection of, concepts — knowledge, ideas, solutions — produced somewhere else, somewhere external to the individual or team, often resulting in an unnecessary reinvention of the wheel. The pairing of these two aspects, external idea origination and immediate internal devaluation, is the defining characteristic of NIH.

NIH becomes more prevalent as we develop subject matter expertise, which is a form of power. Psychologists maintain that deep but narrow bands of knowledge, aka subject matter expertise, provide us a bounded personal and social domain closely integrated with our self-image. As a result, we perceive anything that may breach that domain as a potential threat to our status, position or power base. If we’re the expert, we should be the one with all the great ideas, or so the thinking goes. Irrational as it may be, if someone else gets an idea or conjures up a solution that lies within our domain of expertise, we somehow get a sense of diminished capacity: “I should have thought of that.” Fear then creeps in if we feel as though others may perceive us to be somehow less of an expert, especially if those others happen to be bosses, employers, or clients. That’s when we double down on defensive maneuvers like NIH to protect our status, position or power base.

### The Fix: Proudly Found Elsewhere (PFE)

The two salient features of a PFE strategy are an outside-in flow of ideas and an inside-out connection with sources of new (to you) ideas. The following tools are among the best ways to achieve both.

**Open Hackathons: Bringing the Outside In.** Hackathons have moved well beyond the technology-only focus that “hack” conjures up, to become a valid method of bringing a diverse and passionate group of people — designers, storytellers, marketers, coders, entrepreneurs — together over a short time to solve real-world problems and produce a basket of strong ideas. Innovation is a contact sport, and having dozens of talented individuals rub shoulders and put their heads together is bound to produce something profound.

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**Knowledge Work: Reaching Out to Connect.** The goal of creating a knowledge network is to become more productive and commercially valuable by exploring and exploiting the talents of others and bringing their ideas into your own repertoire through a more permeable boundary than you might have right now. This will help squelch any NIH-type tendencies you may entertain. A high-quality connection is one that you reference and connect with constantly. The information, knowledge and guidance you receive is excellent and enables you to be faster, better and smarter. Your relationship to individuals is characterized by high levels of dialogue, responsiveness and collaboration. ●

### Self-Censoring

Self-censoring, the deadliest flaw, is a special form of Fixation that borders on mental masochism: We field or create a great idea; we recognize it as such but deny or kill it anyway.

The causes of Self-Censoring are both biological and social, share the same origins and invoke the same brain functions as Fixation and look a lot like NIH. There is a nuanced difference, though, and it is wrapped in the wisdom of the old idiom “once burned, twice shy.” One touch of a red-hot stove is usually all we need to avoid that kind of discomfort in the future. The same is true as we experience the emotional sensation of stress from our first instances of social rejection or ridicule. We quickly learn to fear and thus automatically avoid potentially stressful situations of all kinds.

As mindfulness author Ellen Langer defines it, “When you’re mindless, the past is over-determining the present. You’re trapped in categories created in the past. You’re trapped in a rigid perspective, oblivious to alternative perspectives.”

### The Fix: Self-Distancing

The Self-Censoring fix rests on a version of mindfulness that emphasizes a higher-order attention and noticing moment-to-moment changes around you. It is called Self-Distancing for several reasons. First, the kind of heightened in-the-moment noticing at the core of this mindfulness brings to mind a classic concept well over a century-and-a-half old — The Impartial Spectator — first introduced by Scottish philosopher Adam Smith as a central figure in his 1759 book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith wrote that we all have access to “the person within” by invoking “the impartial and well-informed spectator,”

which he defined as the ability to observe our behavior as an objective onlooker does, while remaining fully aware of our thoughts, emotions and circumstances.

Second, the modern term psychologists use for Smith’s Impartial Spectator is in fact self-distancing, coined by researchers Ethan Kross and Ozlem Ayduk. In one study, they invoked stress and anxiety in one of the most powerful ways known to turn a challenge into a threat: public speaking in front of judges without sufficient time to prepare. In this case, college students had only five minutes to prepare and could not use notes. One group was told to use first-person pronouns to work through their stress; for example, “I shouldn’t be so nervous” and “I will be fine.” The other group was told to use their name or a third-person pronoun; for example, “Matt, don’t be nervous” or “You’ll do great.” Not only did the judges find the latter group’s performances to be more confident and persuasive, but the participants themselves reported far less shame and rumination than the first-person group. According to Kross, when you think of yourself as another person, it allows you to give yourself more objective, helpful feedback.

Experiencing Self-Distancing is not unlike the feeling you might get when you travel to a distant and unfamiliar place. As visitors we are de facto spectators: naturally mindful, fully present, noticing details the locals now take for granted. We are very much the outsiders, watching ourselves as we stumble and fumble local customs, chuckling at our folly rather than stressing over how stupid we are, as we surely would as natives to the land. And all the while we stay fully aware and alert to everything happening around us. We are in it but not of it, so we are able to view ourselves in a more detached, rational and objective way.

By becoming more attentive to the moment and seeing the situation from the perspective of an objective outsider, mindlessness yields to mindful thinking, a non-negotiable requirement for winning the brain game. ●

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