

OUTSMART YOUR BRAIN

SECOND EDITION

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How to Master Your Mind When Emotions Take the Wheel

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CHAPTER 1

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Reason vs. Rationalization

Karl, my life partner, and I were rushing to catch a plane in Denver. We stopped to fill the tank of our rental car. When I tried to prepay with my credit card, nothing happened. I inserted the card a few more times, not so gently by the third try.

Karl came to see what was wrong. He began instructing me on the best way to insert the credit card, “If you try it a bit more slowly...”

I snapped, “I know how to do this,” and gave him a look of disgust before stomping off to find the cashier. I discovered the computer had gone down. We had little time to get to another gas station before having to pay triple for the gas to the car rental company. I ran to the car and started the engine. Thankfully, Karl got the point and jumped in beside me.

Once we were on the move, I said to Karl, “I’m sorry for my reaction, for biting your head off when you tried to help me.

You see, I have this thing... when someone tells me how to do a simple task, especially one most people know how to do, I get angry. I'm working on not being so reactive, but I'm not sure I'm going to stop in this lifetime."

He said, "I understand," then smiled and continued, "and you know, I have this thing... I get anxious and want to help when I see someone is struggling, especially with a simple task. I'll work on my reactions, but I'm not sure I'm going to stop in this lifetime."

We both laughed. The tension melted away. I remembered why I felt Karl was the perfect partner for me.

We could have easily simmered in resentment for a while. I could have faulted him for being a clueless man. He could have stubbornly clung to being right for jumping in.

Our *excuses disguised as reasons* would have been logical or not-so-logical rationalizations for behavior that would increase the tension. The more we stuck to our rationalizations, the more we would split apart. By stepping back and sharing what we thought triggered our reactions, we took responsibility for our words and behavior, admitting we have silly habits. The sharing and the laughter brought us back together.

After making an important decision, I often ask myself, "Do you have a *good reason* or just a *convenient rationalization* for what you are about to do?" This helps me step back and reflect before taking my next step. Asking myself this question is harder to do when intense emotions are triggered, but the more times I remember to ask, the more the question comes to me by habit.

I might not stop my emotions from being triggered in this lifetime, but I can work on stepping back and reflecting on what

I said and did once I sense an emotional shift. It helps me take back control from my reactive brain, improving my relationships and peace of mind.

Self-awareness leads to asking yourself the right questions. Self-awareness also increases empathy. You will see others and situations in a new light, providing fresh ideas on how to approach problems and conflicts.

Changing Your Mind Doesn't Make You Weak

Being emotionally triggered by events is a normal reaction. Your brain has been shaped by your life experiences. You don't have time to question everything you do, and the constant act of examining your thoughts would leave you feeling awkwardly self-conscious.

Neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga says humans get stuck in automatic thought processing and then fool themselves into thinking they are acting consciously and willfully.¹ When someone asks you why you did something, you immediately provide an ad hoc answer that fits the situation even if the response doesn't make complete sense. These instant and unconscious interpretations act to constrain the brain, limiting creativity, awareness of impact, and the freedom to choose to act differently.

In addition to instantly having a reason for your reactions, you quickly assume you understand what people mean, want, and need without fact-checking your assumptions. You often form your opinions before they finish their thoughts, and then you react negatively when they don't agree with you.

Although the process is a difficult one to master, you can slow down and contemplate your reactions and viewpoints.

You might not be able to tell your brain what to do, but you can thoughtfully consider what you will do next. You can change your mind.

The first step is willingness. You must accept you can change, and then commit to stopping and questioning your thoughts using a schedule until your brain creates a habit of self-awareness. You may be annoyed by this exercise. As Daniel Kahneman points out in his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, our brains don't like to work that hard.² We would rather believe our excuses instead.

While teaching a class on how to turn difficult conversations into positive results, a woman said, "People always want me to change the way I present my ideas. I am who I am. That's not going to change."

I sensed how protective she was of her style. I respectfully asked her to describe the results she now gets when she shares her ideas. She said, "I'm not winning most of my arguments. That is why they want me to change. I do good work on paper. I just can't get people to see what's best for them."

I asked her how she defined herself. She declared she was *the one who gets things done*. I asked her what she wanted from others. She said she wanted people to see the value in her ideas but when she got excited, they quit listening to her. She assumed they just didn't care as much as she did. I asked her if she would be willing to explore different ways of getting people to listen to her and buy into her ideas. She reluctantly agreed. I asked her if any of her peers cared *almost as much* as she did. She named two. I asked if people listened to these two people. She said "yes." We looked at the methods they used. She then willingly

explored ways she could try some new approaches in a way that felt authentic to her own style. In the end, she agreed that other people did care, and that she could still get things done and be valued for her contribution with a few alterations in her style.

The exercise worked because she was willing to step back and explore her assumptions, especially what she thought she couldn't change. On her own, she had been defending herself for years. She angrily reacted to feedback, as many people do. We started the practice of outsmarting her brain in the class. Hopefully, she would continue the practice of opening her mind after the class ended.

Admitting to what isn't working well for you, and then deciding to drop old ideas, take on a different perspective, and act differently is difficult to do on your own. You can get better at reflection and self-awareness with practice. This book will show you how. Remember, you aren't giving in. You are exercising free will.

Physicist David Bohm said the tendency to cling to how we see the world and our opinions is a hedge against our fear of not knowing.³ Your brain wants you to feel safe and comfortable in a known world. Connecting with others happens when you have the courage to let go of assumptions so new perspectives and ideas can emerge. The three words, "I don't know" are very powerful. They allow you to then say, "Let me think about this." When you open yourself to examining and changing your thoughts, reactions, and behaviors, you are more open to listening, connecting, and creating with others.

To do this, you need to understand what you need and what the people you are with need, too. You then want to notice your

typical reactions when your needs are not met, or you fear they won't be met. These are the crucial steps to take to outsmart your brain.

Common Sense, But Not Common Practice

If mastering emotional reactions and learning how to factor the needs of others into conversations are so important, why are emotions not talked about in the workplace? Most cultures champion technical prowess in schools, and organizations prioritize technical achievement when hiring and promoting. Emotions do not show up in the language of report cards and performance reviews except when they are hidden in comments such as “she has a poor attitude” and “he has difficulty taking feedback from anyone.”

Thus, we are inadequately trained in getting along with others at work and at home. The focus on the technical and intellectual aspects of work hinders success by limiting collaboration and creativity.

The real travesty is that you naturally have immediate access to your emotional needs. When you were young, you knew what you felt and what you wanted. Babies quickly respond to what makes them happy and sad. Toddlers are particularly sensitive to the feelings of others.

As you grew up, you were taught to deny this intelligence. You were cautioned by your parents and teachers to be practical. You learn from your peers that when you show love and compassion, you could end up feeling rejected, humiliated, and sad. You should never cry. You should hide your fears. This conditioning makes you distrust the messages you get from

the emotional centers of our brain. At some point, you may have learned how to ignore these messages altogether.

Now, as adults, when you go to work:

1. You don't heed what our "gut" tells you to do.
2. You are careful not to let your heart rule your mind.
3. You strive to keep a "stiff upper lip" because displays of emotions make you look weak.

These habits block your ability to use emotional information when you make decisions and communicate with others. Ask most people how they feel and they say, "Fine." Some respond with no emotion. Others reveal their true state in the inflection and volume of their voice. Few people stop to assess their condition. Of those who do, most think twice before telling the truth about how they feel unless they are feeling great. Though many people yearn to express how upset they are—how angry or afraid they feel—they remain tight-lipped, secretly hoping the asker will sense their pain and inquire about what they need.

In short, you weren't taught in school how to use the wisdom of your emotions. Then you grow up and experience a high level of anxiety at work. You might be able to attend standard courses in conflict resolution and handling stress. These classes are generally limited to one-day "fix-it" programs, quickly forgotten when under pressure back on the job. And, if you are a manager, you probably don't even show up for class unless someone higher than you mandated you attend.

Most people don't even have the literacy to define how they feel when asked. There might be an academic discourse around emotions when prompted to look at past interactions, but most people struggle when asked to name what they are experiencing in the present moment.

Our cognitive brains have lost touch with the emotion expressed in our bodies except in extreme cases of excitement or pain. We miss important data and, even worse, have learned to numb ourselves to our senses.

Prior to attending classes I teach that include emotional awareness, I have participants complete the inventory in Appendix A called "*Name that Emotion.*" The instructions ask you to stop at four intervals throughout the day and write:

1. what you are feeling, and
2. what do you think is the source of your feeling?

You have a list of nearly eighty emotions to help you articulate what you are feeling.

Most people struggle with the exercise at first. They dislike taking the time out from their work and can't differentiate one type of happiness, fear, or anger from another.

After a few days, the exercise gets easier. Those who continually mark their charts notice distinctions and begin to identify patterns in their reactions. They write words such as

confused, delighted, embarrassed, or depleted without looking at the list. They feel more in control of their emotions simply by taking the time to check in with themselves.

Awareness is the first step. Once you can label the emotions you feel, you can more easily shift your emotional state if you choose to. Or, you can accept the emotion you are feeling as a relevant expression in your current situation. The power lies in making the conscious choice of how you want to feel, which is fully within your power to do.

EXERCISE #1—Name that emotion

Start a daily practice of using the inventory, *Name that Emotion*. Notice what you are feeling and write the words in the charts. Fill out the chart four times a day for two weeks. As you familiarize yourself with your emotional states, you will better understand their effect on your behavior, including your productivity, confidence, and happiness. Then, when you learn more about what triggers your reactions and what other choices you can make, you will be freer to choose how you want to feel and act in all circumstances.

Between stimulus and response,
there is a space.

In that space is our power to
choose our response.

In our response lies our growth
and our freedom.

—Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

¹Michael Gazzaniga. *Who's in Charge: Free Will and the Science of the Brain*. Ecco, 2011, page 43.

²Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Farrer, Straus & Giroux, 2011, page 32 begins the description of the brain's laziness, a reluctance to do more than what is strictly necessary.

³David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, Routledge; 2nd Edition. 2004. The book is a collection of Bohm's essays and lectures exploring human communication, what stops us from connecting, and how we can transcend the barriers to create mutual understanding.
