



3 Be Radically Open-Minded This is probably the most important chapter because it explains how to get around the two things standing in most people’s way of getting what they want out of life. These barriers exist because of the way that our brains work, so nearly everyone encounters them.

3.1 Recognize your two barriers. The two biggest barriers to good decision making are:

- your ego
- your blind spots.

Together, they make it difficult for you to objectively see what is true about you and your circumstances and to make the best possible decisions by getting the most out of others. If you can understand how the machine that is the human brain works, you can understand why these barriers exist and how to adjust your behavior to make yourself happier, more effective, and better at interacting with others.

a. **Understand your ego barrier.** When I refer to your “ego barrier,” I’m referring to your subliminal defense mechanisms that make it hard for you to accept your mistakes and weaknesses. Your deepest-seated needs and fears—such as the need to be loved and the fear of losing love, the need to survive and the fear of not surviving, the need to be important and the fear of not mattering—reside in primitive parts of your brain such as the amygdala, which are structures in your temporal lobe that process emotions. Because these areas of your brain are not accessible



to your conscious awareness, it is virtually impossible for you to understand what they want and how they control you. They oversimplify things and react instinctively. They crave praise and respond to criticism as an attack, even when the higher-level parts of the brain understand that constructive criticism is good for you. They make you defensive, especially when it comes to the subject of how good you are. At the same time, higher-level consciousness resides in your neocortex, more specifically in the part called the prefrontal cortex. This is the most distinctively human feature of your brain; relative to the rest of the brain, it's larger in humans than in most other species. This is where you experience the conscious awareness of decision making (the so-called "executive function"), as well as the application of logic and reasoning.

b. Your two "yous" fight to control you. It's like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, though your higher-level you is not aware of your lower-level you. This conflict is universal; if you pay close enough attention, you can actually see when the different parts of a person's brain are arguing with one another. For example, when someone gets "angry with himself," his prefrontal cortex is sparring with his amygdala (or other lower-level parts of his brain²⁵). When someone asks, "Why did I let myself eat all that cake?" the answer is "Because the lower-level you won out over the thoughtful, higher-level you." Once you understand how your

a) logical/conscious you

and b) emotional/subconscious you fight with each other, you can imagine what it's like when your two yous deal with other people and their own two "thems." It's a mess. Those lower-level selves





are like attack dogs—they want to fight even when their higher-level selves want to figure things out. This is very confusing because you and the people you are dealing with typically don't even know that these lower-level beasts exist, never mind that they are trying to hijack everyone's behavior.

Let's look at what tends to happen when someone disagrees with you and asks you to explain your thinking. Because you are programmed to view such challenges as attacks, you get angry, even though it would be more logical fo

r you to be interested in the other person's perspective, especially if they are intelligent. When you try to explain your behavior, your explanations don't make any sense. That's because your lower-level you is trying to speak through your upper-level you. Your deep-seated, hidden motivations are in control, so it is impossible for you to logically explain what "you" are doing. Even the most intelligent people generally behave this way, and it's tragic. To be effective you must not let your need to be right be more important than your need to find out what's true. If you are too proud of what you know or of how good you are at something you will learn less, make inferior decisions, and fall short of your potential.

c. Understand your blind spot barrier. In addition to your ego barrier, you (and everyone else) also have blind spots—areas where your way of thinking prevents you from seeing things accurately. Just as we all have different ranges for hearing pitch and seeing colors, we have different ranges for seeing and understanding things. We each see things in our own way. For example, some people naturally see big pictures and miss small details while others naturally see details and miss big pictures;





some people are linear thinkers while others think laterally, and so on. Naturally, people can't appreciate what they can't see. A person who can't identify patterns and synthesize doesn't know what it's like to see patterns and synthesize any more than a color-blind person knows what it's like to see color. These differences in how our brains work are much less apparent than the differences in how our bodies work. Color-blind people eventually find out that they are color-blind, whereas most people never see or understand the ways in which their ways of thinking make them blind. To make it even harder, we don't like to see ourselves or others as having blind spots, even though we all have them. When you point out someone's psychological weakness, it's generally about as well received as if you pointed out a physical weakness. If you're like most people, you have no clue how other people see things and aren't good at seeking to understand what they are thinking, because you're too preoccupied with telling them what you yourself think is correct. In other words, you are closed-minded; you presume too much. This closed-mindedness is terribly costly; it causes you to miss out on all sorts of wonderful possibilities and dangerous threats that other people might be showing you—and it blocks criticism that could be constructive and even lifesaving.

The end result of these two barriers is that parties in disagreements typically remain convinced that they're right—and often end up angry at each other. This is illogical and leads to suboptimal decision making. After all, when two people reach opposite conclusions, someone must be wrong. Shouldn't you want to make sure that someone isn't you? This failure to benefit from others' thinking doesn't just occur when disagreements





arise; it occurs when people encounter problems that they are trying to solve. When trying to figure things out, most people spin in their own heads instead of taking in all the wonderful thinking available to them. As a result, they continually run toward what they see and keep crashing into what they are blind to until the crashing leads them to adapt.

Those who adapt do so by

a) teaching their brains to work in a way that doesn't come naturally (the creative person learns to become organized through discipline and practice, for instance),

b) using compensating mechanisms (such as programmed reminders), and/or

c) relying on the help of others who are strong where they are weak. Differences in thinking can be symbiotic and complementary instead of disruptive. For example, the lateral approach to thinking common among creative people can lead them to be unreliable, while more linear thinkers are often more dependable; some people are more emotional while others are more logical, and so on. None of these individuals would be able to succeed at any kind of complex project without the help of others who have complementary strengths. Aristotle defined tragedy as a terrible outcome arising from a person's fatal flaw—a flaw that, had it been fixed, instead would have led to a wonderful outcome. In my opinion, these two barriers—ego and blind spots—are the fatal flaws that keep intelligent, hardworking people from living up to their potential. Would you like to learn how to get past them? You can do it; everybody can. Here's how.



3.2 Practice radical open-mindedness. If you know that you are blind, you can figure out a way to see, whereas if you don't know that you're blind, you will continue to bump into your problems. In other words, if you can recognize that you have blind spots and open-mindedly consider the possibility that others might see something better than you—and that the threats and opportunities they are trying to point out really exist—you are more likely to make good decisions. Radical open-mindedness is motivated by the genuine worry that you might not be seeing your choices optimally. It is the ability to effectively explore different points of view and different possibilities without letting your ego or your blind spots get in your way. It requires you to replace your attachment to always being right with the joy of learning what's true.

Radical open-mindedness allows you to escape from the control of your lower-level you and ensures your upper-level you sees and considers all the good choices and makes the best possible decisions. If you can acquire this ability—and with practice you can—you'll be able to deal with your realities more effectively and radically improve your life. Most people don't understand what it means to be radically open-minded. They describe open-mindedness as being “open to being wrong,” but stubbornly cling to whatever opinion is in their head and fail to seek an understanding of the reasoning behind alternative points of view. To be radically open-minded you must:

a. Sincerely believe that you might not know the best possible path and recognize that your ability to deal well with “not knowing” is more important than whatever it is you do know. Most people





make bad decisions because they are so certain that they're right that they don't allow themselves to see the better alternatives that exist. Radically open-minded people know that coming up with the right questions and asking other smart people what they think is as important as having all the answers. They understand that you can't make a great decision without swimming for a while in a state of "not knowing." That is because what exists within the area of "not knowing" is so much greater and more exciting than anything any one of us knows.

b. Recognize that decision making is a two-step process:

First take in all the relevant information, then decide.

Most people are reluctant to take in information that is inconsistent with what they have already concluded. When I ask why, a common answer is: "I want to make up my own mind." These people seem to think that considering opposing views will somehow threaten their ability to decide what they want to do. Nothing could be further from the truth. Taking in others' perspectives in order to consider them in no way reduces your freedom to think independently and make your own decisions. It will just broaden your perspective as you make them.

c. Don't worry about looking good; worry about achieving your goal. People typically try to prove that they have the answer even when they don't. Why do they behave in this unproductive way? It's generally because they believe the senseless but common view that great people have all the answers and don't have any weaknesses. Not only does this view not square with reality, it stands in the way of their progress. People interested in making





the best possible decisions are rarely confident that they have the best answers. They recognize that they have weaknesses and blind spots, and they always seek to learn more so that they can get around them.

d. Realize that you can't put out without taking in. Most people seem much more eager to put out (convey their thinking and be productive) than to take in (learn). That's a mistake even if one's primary goal is to put out, because what one puts out won't be good unless one takes in as well.

e. Recognize that to gain the perspective that comes from seeing things through another's eyes, you must suspend judgment for a time—only by empathizing can you properly evaluate another point of view. Open-mindedness doesn't mean going along with what you don't believe in; it means considering the reasoning of others instead of stubbornly and illogically holding on to your own point of view. To be radically open-minded, you need to be so open to the possibility that you could be wrong that you encourage others to tell you so.

f. Remember that you're looking for the best answer, not simply the best answer that you can come up with yourself. The answer doesn't have to be in your head; you can look outside yourself. If you're truly looking at things objectively, you must recognize that the probability of you always having the best answer is small and that, even if you have it, you can't be confident that you do before others test you. So it is invaluable to know what you don't know. Ask yourself: Am I seeing this just through my own eyes? If so, then you should know that you're terribly handicapped.



g. Be clear on whether you are arguing or seeking to understand and think about which is most appropriate based on your and others' believability. If both parties are peers, it's appropriate to argue. But if one person is clearly more knowledgeable than the other, it is preferable for the less knowledgeable person to approach the more knowledgeable one as a student and for the more knowledgeable one to act as a teacher. Doing this well requires you to understand the concept of believability. I define believable people as those who have repeatedly and successfully accomplished the thing in question—who have a strong track record with at least three successes—and have great explanations of their approach when probed. If you have a different view than someone who is believable on the topic at hand—or at least more believable than you are (if, say, you are in a discussion with your doctor about your health)—you should make it clear that you are asking questions because you are seeking to understand their perspective. Conversely, if you are clearly the more believable person, you might politely remind the other of that and suggest that they ask you questions. All these strategies come together in two practices that, if you seek to become radically open-minded, you must master.

3.3 Appreciate the art of thoughtful disagreement. When two people believe opposite things, chances are that one of them is wrong. It pays to find out if that someone is you. That's why I believe you must appreciate and **develop the art of thoughtful disagreement**. In thoughtful disagreement, your goal is not to convince the other party that you are right—it is to find out which view is true and decide what to do about it.





In thoughtful disagreement, both parties are motivated by the genuine fear of missing important perspectives. Exchanges in which you really see what the other person is seeing, and they really see what you are seeing—with both your “higher-level you” trying to get to the truth—are immensely helpful and a giant source of untapped potential. To do this well, approach the conversation in a way that conveys that you’re just trying to understand.

Use questions rather than make statements. Conduct the discussion in a calm and dispassionate manner, and encourage the other person to do that as well. Remember, you are not arguing; you are openly exploring what’s true. Be reasonable and expect others to be reasonable. If you’re calm, collegial, and respectful you will do a lot better than if you are not. You’ll get better at this with practice.

To me, it’s pointless when people get angry with each other when they disagree because most disagreements aren’t threats as much as opportunities for learning. People who change their minds because they learned something are the winners, whereas those who stubbornly refuse to learn are the losers. That doesn’t mean that you should blindly accept others’ conclusions. You should be what I call open-minded and assertive at the same time—you should hold and explore conflicting possibilities in your mind while moving fluidly toward whatever is likely to be true based on what you learn. Some people can do this easily while others can’t.

A good exercise to make sure that you are doing this well is to describe back to the person you are disagreeing with their





own perspective. If they agree that you've got it, then you're in good shape.

I also recommend that both parties observe a “two-minute rule” in which neither interrupts the other, so they both have time to get all their thoughts out. Some people worry that operating this way is time consuming. Working through disagreements does take time but it's just about the best way you can spend it. What's important is that you prioritize what you spend time on and who you spend it with. There are lots of people who will disagree with you, and it would be unproductive to consider all their views. It doesn't pay to be open-minded with everyone. Instead, spend your time exploring ideas with the most believable people you have access to. If you find you're at an impasse, agree on a person you both respect and enlist them to help moderate the discussion.

What's really counterproductive is spinning in your own head about what's going on, which most people are prone to do—or wasting time disagreeing past the point of diminishing returns. When that happens, move on to a more productive way of getting to a mutual understanding, which isn't necessarily the same thing as agreement. For example, you might agree to disagree. Why doesn't thoughtful disagreement like this typically occur? Because most people are instinctively reluctant to disagree. For example, if two people go to a restaurant and one says he likes the food, the other is more likely to say “I like it too” or not say anything at all, even if that's not true. The reluctance to disagree is the “lower-level you's” mistaken interpretation of disagreement as conflict. That's why radical open-mindedness isn't easy: You need to teach yourself the art of having exchanges in ways that don't





trigger such reactions in yourself or others. This was what I had to learn back when Bob, Giselle, and Dan told me I made people feel belittled.

Holding wrong opinions in one's head and making bad decisions based on them instead of having thoughtful disagreements is one of the greatest tragedies of mankind. Being able to thoughtfully disagree would so easily lead to radically improved decision making in all areas—public policy, politics, medicine, science, philanthropy, personal relationships, and more.

3.4 Triangulate your view with believable people who are willing to disagree. By questioning experts individually and encouraging them to have thoughtful disagreement with each other that I can listen to and ask questions about, I both raise my probability of being right and become much better educated. This is most true when the experts disagree with me or with each other. Smart people who can thoughtfully disagree are the greatest teachers, far better than a professor assigned to stand in front of a board and lecture at you. The knowledge I acquire usually leads to principles that I develop and refine for similar cases that arise in the future. In some cases in which the subjects are just too complex for me to understand in the time required, I will turn over the decision making to knowledgeable others who are more believable than me, but I still want to listen in on their thoughtful disagreement. I find that most people don't do that—they prefer to make their own decisions, even when they're not qualified to make the kinds of judgments required. In doing so, they're giving in to their lower-level selves. This approach of triangulating the views of believable people can have a profound effect on your life.





Even experts can make mistakes; my point is simply that it pays to be radically open-minded and triangulate with smart people. Had I not pushed for other opinions, my life would have taken a very different course. My point is that you can significantly raise your probabilities of making the right decisions by open-mindedly triangulating with believable people.

3.5 Recognize the signs of closed-mindedness and open-mindedness that you should watch out for. It's easy to tell an open-minded person from a closed-minded person because they act very differently. Here are some cues to tell you whether you or others are being closed-minded:

1. Closed-minded people don't want their ideas challenged.

They are typically frustrated that they can't get the other person to agree with them instead of curious as to why the other person disagrees. They feel bad about getting something wrong and are more interested in being proven right than in asking questions and learning others' perspectives. Open-minded people are more curious about why there is disagreement. They are not angry when someone disagrees. They understand that there is always the possibility that they might be wrong and that it's worth the little bit of time it takes to consider the other person's views in order to be sure they aren't missing something or making a mistake.

2. Closed-minded people are more likely to make statements than ask questions. While believability entitles you to make statements in certain circumstances, truly open-minded people, even the most believable people I know, always ask a lot of questions. Non-believable people often tell me that their statements are actually implicit questions, though they're phrased





as low-confidence statements. While that's sometimes true, in my experience it's more often not. Open-minded people genuinely believe they could be wrong; the questions that they ask are genuine. They also assess their relative believability to determine whether their primary role should be as a student, a teacher, or a peer.

3. Closed-minded people focus much more on being understood than on understanding others. When people disagree, they tend to be quicker to assume that they aren't being understood than to consider whether they're the ones who are not understanding the other person's perspective. Open-minded people always feel compelled to see things through others' eyes.

4. Closed-minded people say things like “I could be wrong . . . but here's my opinion.” This is a classic cue I hear all the time. It's often a perfunctory gesture that allows people to hold their own opinion while convincing themselves that they are being open-minded. If your statement starts with “I could be wrong” or “I'm not believable,” you should probably follow it with a question and not an assertion. Open-minded people know when to make statements and when to ask questions.

5. Closed-minded people block others from speaking. If it seems like someone isn't leaving space for the other person in a conversation, it's possible they are blocking. To get around blocking, enforce the “two-minute rule” I mentioned earlier. Open-minded people are always more interested in listening than in speaking; they encourage others to voice their views.



6. Closed-minded people have trouble holding two thoughts simultaneously in their minds.

They allow their own view to crowd out those of others. Open-minded people can take in the thoughts of others without losing their ability to think well—they can hold two or more conflicting concepts in their mind and go back and forth between them to assess their relative merits.

7. Closed-minded people lack a deep sense of humility.

Humility typically comes from an experience of crashing, which leads to an enlightened focus on knowing what one doesn't know. Open-minded people approach everything with a deep-seated fear that they may be wrong. Once you can sort out open-minded from closed-minded people, you'll find that you want to surround yourself with open-minded ones. Doing so will not only make your decision making more effective but you'll also learn a tremendous amount. A few good decision makers working effectively together can significantly outperform a good decision maker working alone—and even the best decision maker can significantly improve his or her decision making with the help of other excellent decision makers.

3.6 Understand how you can become radically open-minded. No matter how open-minded you are now, it is something you can learn. To practice open-mindedness:

a. Regularly use pain as your guide toward quality reflection. Mental pain often comes from being too attached to an idea when a person or an event comes along to challenge it. This is especially true when what is being pointed out to you involves a weakness on your part. This kind of mental pain is a clue that you are potentially wrong and that you need to think about the





question in a quality way. To do this, first calm yourself down. This can be difficult: You will probably feel your amygdala kicking in through a tightening in your head, tension in your body, or an emerging sense of annoyance, anger, or irritability. Note these feelings when they arise in you. By being aware of such signals of closed-mindedness, you can use them as cues to control your behavior and guide yourself toward open-mindedness. Doing this regularly will strengthen your ability to keep your “higher-level you” in control. The more you do it, the stronger you will become.

b. Make being open-minded a habit. The life that you will live is most simply the result of habits you develop. If you consistently use feelings of anger/frustration as cues to calm down, slow down, and approach the subject at hand thoughtfully, over time you’ll experience negative emotions much less frequently and go directly to the open-minded practices I just described. Of course, this can be very hard for people to do in the moment because your “lower-level you” emotions are so powerful. The good news is that these “amygdala hijackings”²⁷ don’t last long so even if you’re having trouble controlling yourself in the moment, you can also allow a little time to pass to give your higher-level you space to reflect in a quality way. Have others whom you respect help you too.

c. Get to know your blind spots. When you are closed-minded and form an opinion in an area where you have a blind spot, it can be deadly. So take some time to record the circumstances in which you’ve consistently made bad decisions because you failed to see what others saw. Ask others—especially those who’ve seen what you’ve missed—to help you with this. Write a list, tack it up on the





wall, and stare at it. If ever you find yourself about to make a decision (especially a big decision) in one of these areas without consulting others, understand that you're taking a big risk and that it would be illogical to expect that you'll get the results you think you will.

d. If a number of different believable people say you are doing something wrong and you are the only one who doesn't see it that way, assume that you are probably biased. Be objective! While it is possible that you are right and they are wrong, you should switch from a fighting mode to an "asking questions" mode, compare your believability with theirs, and if necessary agree to bring in a neutral party you all respect to break the deadlock.

e. Meditate. I practice Transcendental Meditation and believe that it has enhanced my open-mindedness, higher-level perspective, equanimity, and creativity. It helps slow things down so that I can act calmly even in the face of chaos, just like a ninja in a street fight. I'm not saying that you have to meditate in order to develop this perspective; I'm just passing along that it has helped me and many other people and I recommend that you seriously consider exploring it.

f. Be evidence-based and encourage others to be the same. Most people do not look thoughtfully at the facts and draw their conclusions by objectively weighing the evidence. Instead, they make their decisions based on what their deep-seated subconscious mind wants and then they filter the evidence to make it consistent with those desires. It is possible to become aware of this subconscious process happening and to catch yourself, or to allow others to catch you going down this path.





When you're approaching a decision, ask yourself: Can you point to clear facts (i.e., facts believable people wouldn't dispute) leading to your view? If not, chances are you're not being evidence-based.

g. Do everything in your power to help others also be open-minded. Being calm and reasonable in how you present your view will help prevent the "flight-or-fight" animal/amygdala reaction in others. Be reasonable and expect others to be reasonable. Ask them to point to the evidence that supports their point of view. Remember, it is not an argument; it is an open exploration of what's true. Demonstrating that you are taking in what they are telling you can be helpful.

h. Use evidence-based decision-making tools. These principles were designed to help you get control over your lower-level/animal you and put your better, higher-level decision-making brain in charge. What if you could unplug that lower part of your brain entirely and instead connect with a decision-making computer that gives you logically derived instructions, as we do with our investment systems? Suppose this computer-based decision-making machine has a much better track record than you because it captures more logic, processes more information more quickly, and makes decisions without being emotionally hijacked. Would you use it? In confronting the challenges I've faced in the course of my career I've created exactly such tools, and I am convinced that I would not have been nearly as successful without them. I have no doubt that in the years ahead such "machine-thinking" tools will continue to develop and that smart decision





makers will learn how to integrate them into their thinking. I urge you to learn about them and consider using them.

i. Know when it's best to stop fighting and have faith in your decision-making process. It's important that you think independently and fight for what you believe in, but there comes a time when it's wiser to stop fighting for your view and move on to accepting what believable others think is best. This can be extremely difficult. But it's smarter and ultimately better for you to be open-minded and have faith that the consensus of believable others is better than whatever you think. If you can't understand their view, you're probably just blind to their way of thinking. If you continue doing what you think is best when all the evidence and believable people are against you, you're being dangerously arrogant. The truth is that while most people can become radically open-minded, some can't, even after they have repeatedly encountered lots of pain from betting that they were right when they were not.²⁸ People who don't learn radical open-mindedness don't experience the metamorphosis that allows them to do much better. I myself had to have that humility beaten into me by my crashes, especially my big one in 1982. Gaining open-mindedness doesn't mean losing assertiveness. In fact, because it increases one's odds of being right, it should increase one's confidence. That has been true for me since my big crash, which is why I've been able to have more success with less risk. Becoming truly open-minded takes time. Like all real learning, doing this is largely a matter of habit; once you do it so many times it is almost instinctive, you'll find it intolerable to be any other way. As noted earlier, this typically takes about eighteen months, which in the course of a lifetime is nothing.



ARE YOU UP FOR THE CHALLENGE?

For me, there is really only one big choice to make in life: Are you willing to fight to find out what's true? Do you deeply believe that finding out what is true is essential to your well-being? Do you have a genuine need to find out if you or others are doing something wrong that is standing in the way of achieving your goals? If your answer to any of these questions is no, accept that you will never live up to your potential. If, on the other hand, you are up for the challenge of becoming radically open-minded, the first step in doing so is to look at yourself objectively. In the next chapter, *Understand That People Are Wired Very Differently*, you'll have a chance to do just that.

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