

# HOW TO MAKE DECISIONS



mindapples  
BITESIZE

Think things through, trust your judgement and make fair, unbiased choices

## THE SPRINTER & THE THINKER

"If you have to make a decision, it's because you don't have **enough information**.

If you have all the information, there's **no decision to make**."

Gudo Wafu Nishijima

We like to think we make decisions rationally, but we are also quite emotional. In fact, without emotions, we may struggle to make decisions at all. This is because decision-making is not an intellectual exercise: it is the point at which you stop thinking and take action. We haven't evolved to be perfectly rational; we have evolved to make quick, intuitive decisions and keep moving forward. Yet we also have the ability to think things through rationally, to apply our conscious minds to information, reflect on our choices and have "second thoughts". Humans are unique in our ability to change our minds. These two types of thinking - quick, unconscious choices, and slow, reflective thought - are known as "dual process theory".

### THE SPRINTER

Intuitive, instinctive

The unconscious "sprinter" gives you quick answers based on habits and social cues. It gets most things right, but you can never be quite sure where it gets its answers from, so you need to keep a close eye on it.



**AUTOMATIC**

**FAST**  
**UNCONSCIOUS**  
**EMOTIONAL**  
**INTUITIVE**  
**BIASED**



**CONTROLLED**

**SLOW**  
**CONSCIOUS**  
**ANALYTICAL**  
**DELIBERATE**  
**LABORIOUS**

### THE THINKER

Conscious, analytic

The "thinker" is your conscious mind, putting attention on a problem, using analytic tools and thinking conceptually. It is rational and deliberate, but it is also slow, and you can't use it for everything.

## YOUR UNRELIABLE MIND

Your unconscious mind isn't dumb: it processes information, makes connections, spots patterns and automates common tasks. You wouldn't get very far without your "sprinter" working away in the background, making guesses and keeping you moving forward. The trouble is, it has a few blind spots and weaknesses that mean we often make regular, repeatable mistakes. We call these common flaws in our judgement "unconscious biases".

#### We see patterns everywhere

We imagine connections between random or coincidental events, select evidence to support our theories and ignore the rest, and notice things more after we have heard them recently.

#### We manipulate evidence

We cling to some facts and ignore others, prioritise information that is easy to remember, look for evidence that fits our opinions, focus on exceptions rather than rules, and are influenced by ideas even after we find out they are false.

#### We are easily led

We believe things everyone else does without questioning, make different decisions depending on context, like things just because they are familiar, and notice what's in front of us, but not what's missing.

#### We are too proud

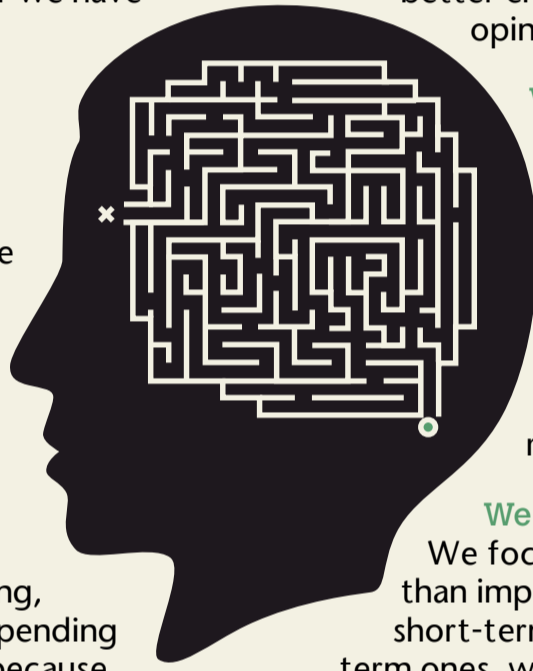
We think we are less biased than other people, overestimate our knowledge, skills and levels of control, think we made better choices than we did, and ignore opinions from people we dislike.

#### We manipulate evidence

We respond to counter-evidence by becoming even more certain, throw more resources into bad decisions rather than cutting our losses, take big risks to avoid losses but not to achieve gains, and make up false reasons for our choices.

#### We are bad at prioritising

We focus on trivial decisions rather than important ones, favour small short-term gains over large long-term ones, worry about losses but ignore opportunities, and think good things are more likely to happen than bad things.



### Training your sprinter

You can improve your intuition by training your unconscious mind to give you better answers:

- **Pay mindful attention.** When you aren't paying attention, memories are encoded badly and become harder to recall later, meaning key experiences get wasted. The more you can be present and focussed, the better you can recall memories later when you need them.
- **Avoid multitasking.** Your intuition about one task may affect your judgement in another. When making important decisions, try to focus your mind on one thing at a time.
- **Feed it better information.** The more you know about a subject, the more you can trust your gut. Intuition is more reliable if it is informed by real expertise, not wishful thinking.

## HOW TO BE THOUGHTFUL

You are always free to change your mind, to reflect on your decisions and check your instincts. To do this, you need to engage your "thinker", focussing your conscious attention and analysing things rationally. The trouble is, doing this is tiring and you can't do it for everything. You need to notice when your mind is racing away, and learn to stop and think. Psychologists call this "need for cognition". We call it "thoughtfulness".

### MENTAL ENERGY

One of the best things you can do to improve your decision-making is to conserve mental energy. When your mind gets tired, you have fewer mental resources to consider your decisions, which makes you more vulnerable to bias. You go with your first instincts and struggle to correct for mistakes.

Sleep on big decisions and keep your mind well-fed, healthy and rested to give yourself more energy for thinking things through. Making decisions depletes mental energy too, so try to make important decisions first, when you feel fresh, and avoid unnecessary decisions. Mental energy is finite, so save your energy for the things that matter.

### TIPS FOR SMARTER DECISIONS

A **well-rested, well fed** mind makes better decisions.

Take **big decisions first**, before other minor choices.

Avoid **distractions** and practice mindful attention.

**Seek opinions** from others to test your assumptions.

**Listen to your mind**, but remember it can be fooled.



### METACOGNITION

Critical thinking, logic and reason can help you confirm evidence and check for bias. Bear in mind though that we can miss key information and then use our conscious minds to reinforce our errors.

Try to keep a perspective on your thoughts to spot any gaps in your reasoning. Check your decisions with people who think differently to you, question your assumptions and consider what you might have missed.

This is called metacognition, the ability to observe and analyse your own thinking. Making good decisions is not about being perfect, but about correcting for your imperfections. Learn how your mind works, notice how you come to decisions, and keep an eye on your thinking.

This may be why one of the best ways to improve your decision-making is actually to **study psychology**...

This free tip sheet was created by Mindapples to support people during the COVID-19 pandemic. To find out more about our apps, e-learning, webinars, face-to-face training and charitable work, visit [www.mindapples.org](http://www.mindapples.org).