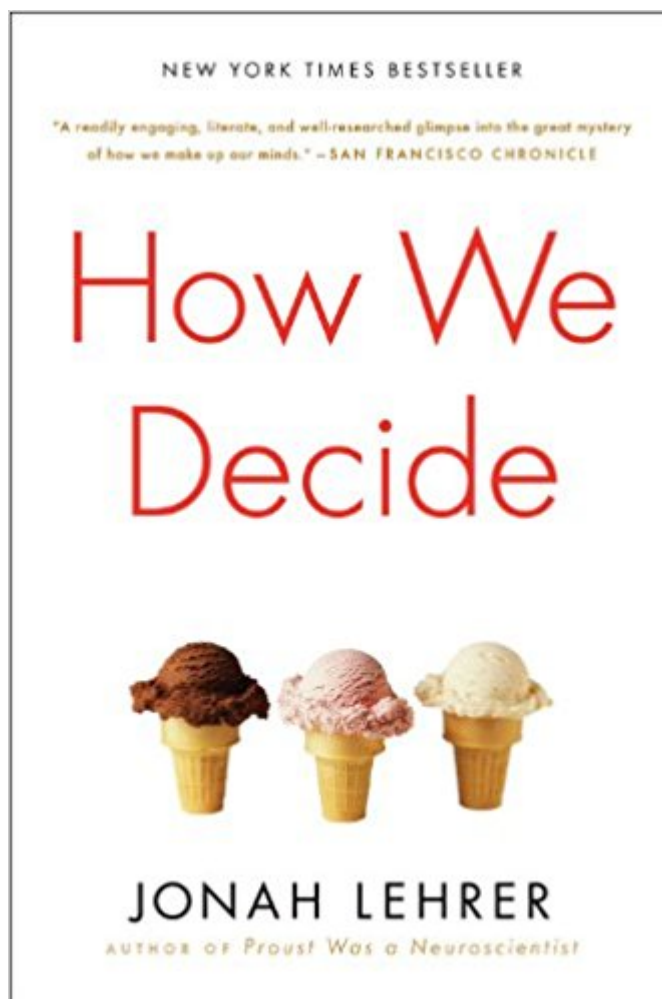


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How We Decide



Synopsis

The first book to use the unexpected discoveries of neuroscience to help us make the best decisions. Since Plato, philosophers have described the decision-making process as either rational or emotional: we carefully deliberate, or we "blink" and go with our gut. But as scientists break open the mind's black box with the latest tools of neuroscience, they're discovering that this is not how the mind works. Our best decisions are a finely tuned blend of both feeling and reason—and the precise mix depends on the situation. When buying a house, for example, it's best to let our unconscious mull over the many variables. But when we're picking a stock, intuition often leads us astray. The trick is to determine when to use the different parts of the brain, and to do this, we need to think harder (and smarter) about how we think. Jonah Lehrer arms us with the tools we need, drawing on cutting-edge research as well as the real-world experiences of a wide range of "deciders"—from airplane pilots and hedge fund investors to serial killers and poker players. Lehrer shows how people are taking advantage of the new science to make better television shows, win more football games, and improve military intelligence. His goal is to answer two questions that are of interest to just about anyone, from CEOs to firefighters: How does the human mind make decisions? And how can we make those decisions better?

Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Mariner Books; 1 Reprint edition (January 14, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0547247990

ISBN-13: 978-0547247991

Product Dimensions: 8 x 5.3 x 0.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 317 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #100,107 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #51 in Books > Medical Books > Psychology > Physiological Aspects #55 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Psychology & Counseling > Physiological Aspects #315 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Psychology & Counseling > Neuropsychology

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A Q&A with Jonah Lehrer, Author of How We Decide

Q: Why did you want to write a book about decision-making? **A:** It all began with Cheerios. I'm an incredibly indecisive person. There I was, aimlessly wandering the cereal aisle of the supermarket, trying to choose between the apple-cinnamon and honey-nut varieties. It was an embarrassing waste of time and yet it happened to me all the time. Eventually, I decided that enough was enough: I needed to understand what was happening inside my brain as I contemplated my breakfast options. I soon realized, of course, that this new science of decision making had implications far grander than Cheerios.

Q: What are some of those implications? **A:** Life is ultimately just a series of decisions, from the mundane (what should I eat for breakfast?) to the profound (what should I do with my life?). Until recently, though, we had no idea how our brain actually made these decisions. As a result, we relied on untested assumptions, such as the assumption that people were rational creatures. (This assumption goes all the way back to Plato and the ancient Greeks.) But now, for the first time in human history, we can look inside our mind and see how we actually think. It turns out that we weren't designed to be rational or logical or even particularly deliberate. Instead, our mind holds a messy network of different areas, many of which are involved with the production of emotion. Whenever we make a decision, the brain is awash in feeling, driven by its inexplicable passions. Even when we try to be reasonable and restrained, these emotional impulses secretly influence our judgment. Of course, by understanding how the human mind makes decisions--and by learning about the decision-making mistakes that we're all vulnerable to--we can learn to make better decisions.

Q: Can neuroscience really teach us how to make better decisions? **A:** My answer is a qualified yes. Despite the claims of many self-help books, there is no secret recipe for

decision-making, no single strategy that can work in every situation. The real world is just too complex. The thought process that excels in the supermarket won't pass muster in the Oval Office. Therefore natural selection endowed us with a brain that is enthusiastically pluralist. Sometimes we need to reason through our options and carefully analyze the possibilities. And sometimes we need to listen to our emotions and gut instinct. The secret, of course, is knowing when to use different styles of thought--when to trust feelings and when to exercise reason. In my book, I devoted a chapter to looking at the world through the prism of the game of poker and found that, in poker as in life, two broad categories of decisions exist: math problems and mysteries. The first step to making the right decision, then, is accurately diagnosing the problem and figuring out which brain system to rely on. Should we trust our intuition or calculate the probabilities? We always need to be thinking about how we think.

Q: Are you a good poker player? A: When I was in Vegas, hanging out with some of the best poker players in the world, I convinced myself that I'd absorbed the tricks of the trade, that I could use their advice to win some money. So I went to a low-stakes table at the Rio, put \$300 on the line, and waited for the chips to accumulate. Instead, I lost all my money in less than an hour. It was an expensive but valuable lesson: there's a big difference between understanding how experts think and being able to think like an expert.

Q: Why write this book now? A: Neuroscience can seem abstract, a science preoccupied with questions about the cellular details of perception and the memory of fruit flies. In recent years, however, the field has been invaded by some practical thinkers. These scientists want to use the nifty experimental tools of modern neuroscience to explore some of the mysteries of everyday life. How should we choose a cereal? What areas of the brain are triggered in the shopping mall? Why do smart people accumulate credit card debt and take out subprime mortgages? How can you use the brain to explain financial bubbles? For the first time, these incredibly relevant questions have rigorously scientific answers. It all goes back to that classical Greek aphorism: Know thyself. I'd argue that the discoveries of modern neuroscience allow us to know ourselves (and our decisions!) in an entirely new way.

Q: How We Decide draws from the latest research in neuroscience yet also analyzes some crucial moments in the lives of a variety of "deciders," from the football star Tom Brady to a soap opera director. Why did you take this approach? A: Herbert Simon, the Nobel Prize-winning psychologist, famously compared our mind to a pair of scissors. One blade, he said, represented the brain. The other blade was the specific environment in which our brain was operating. If you want to understand the function of scissors, Simon said, then you have to look at both blades simultaneously. What I wanted to do in How We Decide was venture out of the lab and into the real world so that I could see the scissors at work. I discuss some ingenious experiments in this book, but let's face it: the science lab is a startlingly

artificial place. And so, wherever possible, I tried to explore these scientific theories in the context of everyday life. Instead of just writing about hyperbolic discounting and the feebleness of the prefrontal cortex, I spent time with a debt counselor in the Bronx. When I became interested in the anatomy of insight (where do our good ideas come from?) I interviewed a pilot whose epiphany in the cockpit saved hundreds of lives. That's when you really begin to appreciate the power of this new science--when you can use its ideas to explain all sorts of important phenomena, such as the risky behavior of teenagers, the amorality of psychopaths, and the tendency of some athletes to choke under pressure. Q: What do you do in the cereal aisle now? A: I was about halfway through writing the book when I got some great advice from a scientist. I was telling him about my Cheerios dilemma when he abruptly interrupted me: "The secret to happiness," he said, "is not wasting time on irrelevant decisions." Of course, this sage advice didn't help me figure out what kind of cereal I actually wanted to eat for breakfast. So I did the only logical thing: I bought my three favorite Cheerios varieties and combined them all in my cereal bowl. Problem solved. (Photo © Nina Subin, 2008) --This text refers to the Preloaded Digital Audio Player edition.

As Lehrer describes in fluid prose, the brain's reasoning centers are easily fooled, often making judgments based on nonrational factors like presentation (a sales pitch or packaging)...Lehrer is a delight to read, and this is a fascinating book (some of which appeared recently, in a slightly different form, in the New Yorker) that will help everyone better understand themselves and their decision making. • "Publisher's Weekly, starred review --This text refers to the Preloaded Digital Audio Player edition.

While the author's reputation may have suffered and his books largely consigned to the rubbish bin, I'd had this on my shelf for a long time and finally decided to read it. It is well written, entertaining and enlightening. It's too bad that the author who wrote it made such bad decisions himself.

It's a shame that Jonah Lehrer went on to write a book (Imagine) in which he ran into ethical trouble, because it will most likely hurt the image of the excellent work that he did do. This is my favorite of his books. No matter what he plagiarized elsewhere, this book is the closest to his background (neuroscience at Columbia), so he's got the bona fides for what is in this book. My recommendation for those interested in why we make the decisions we do (whether from a behavioral economics/finance perspective (like myself) or otherwise), is to first read Predictably Irrational (Dan Ariely) and SuperFreakonomics (Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner), and THEN this book. That

way you first learn about all sorts of interesting stories -- the kind that you remember and share with others -- and THEN learn WHY that is. After that, my personal favorites include Fooled by Randomness (Nassim Nicholas Taleb), Nudge (Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler) and Getting to Why (a different "why") (Simon Sinek).

This book was good in the sense that it explains the science behind our decision making. I liked it because the author discussed the particular brain regions that are associated with the decision making process. I am a psychology nerd, so I love learning about what brain regions cause us to act in certain ways. However, the author is a bit of a story teller and I felt at times the book was "long winded" and I thought to myself, "get to the point guy". Also, a few of the terms he used were not used in the proper context which led me to wonder if he was the type to use big words just to seem more intelligent than he really is. For example, he used the word "neural" in a completely incorrect context in one chapter and I questioned if he even knew what that word really meant. I think he would benefit greatly from the use of a dictionary.

How We Decide is another book in an increasingly-popular genre that uses anecdotal examples to advance neurological, psychological or economic patterns. More than a few authors have attempted to exploit the genre since Freakonomics exploded a few years ago. This book is another in a long line of this genre, which cultural critic Adam Hanft has referred to as "pattern porn." I had high expectations for the book and its author, Jonah Lehrer, from reading his Frontal Cortex blog. Throughout the book, Lehrer uses many examples that are already familiar to anyone who has read other books in this now-familiar genre. Examples include the propensity of wine experts to choose cheaper wines in blind tests; how experiment subjects based purchasing decisions on seemingly random items such as their social security numbers; and numerous others. He also reviews much familiar territory in behavioral economics/social psychology/neuroscience such as loss aversion, the anchoring effect, and the placebo effect. One of the early messages of the book is that we should embrace emotion in our decision-making. This is contrary to the popular notion that emotions get in the way of "rational thinking." Emotions are actually critical to decision making. We are paralyzed without it. That is why Tom Brady identifies the right receiver in milliseconds; why a soap opera director can identify the "it" factor in actor rehearsals, and why a radar technician can distinguish an enemy missile from a friendly jet just by a literal blip on the radar. The use of emotions as decision enhancement is valid technically from a physiological perspective. Lehrer deftly explains in an understandable manner the role of dopamine receptors as emotional decision makers. But, he

tries very hard to maintain that ignorance is bliss. Lehrer contends Plato and his Enlightenment successors such as Decartes, Rousseau, and Jefferson (on this side of the pond) had it all wrong to promote reason over emotion. Reason is a blunt instrument suited only for the simplest of tasks. It is like a calculator - useful, but limited. And, there is such a thing as too much analysis. EXCEPT - "Novel problems" also require reason, as Lehrer states toward the end of the book. He concedes that "intelligent intuition (emotion)" is the result of deliberate practice. So, emotions and gut feelings work well as long as you practice at it. But, then again, you cannot over think things either. In short, emotions are great usually, reason is great sometimes, but both can mislead. My main issue with the theme is that there really is no theme. He boasts the triumph of emotions over reason for the first part of the book. Then, he explains how emotions can lead us into traps. So, sometimes reason is good. But, then again, reason is limited. The main takeaway from the book is "Think about how you think" as Lehrer states at the end of the book. And, from that perspective, Lehrer succeeds. The anecdotes have been used and re-used. There is some lack of cohesion in the overall development of the themes. But, the book will make you think about how you think.

Are you trying to decide whether to read this book? I would tell your rational brain that this book is more about good (and bad) decision making. I would tell your emotional brain that you may enjoy the many "real life" examples set forth in this book. If you still can't decide, maybe you should just flip a coin. The real life examples from sports, politics, commercial aviation, gambling, etc may seem a little dated, but they are still applicable.

I love this book. It is well written and incredibly well researched.

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