

MODULE 8

Thinking About Thinking

The skill underneath every other skill: metacognition.

“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 (or at least often attributed to him, although Viktor Frankl Institute points to Stephen Covey)

WHAT WE WILL COVER

Learning to watch your own mind

1

What Is Metacognition

The observer, the observed, and the two systems

2

Setting Intention

Choosing the day instead of reacting to it

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Cognitive Biases

The bugs in the machine you are running

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Self-Awareness: The Shadow

Moving the subconscious into the conscious

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Happiness as a Moral Obligation

Seeing the world and people clearly

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Choosing your own definition of winning

01

What Is Metacognition

Taking the observer's seat in your own mind.

WAKE-UP QUESTION

Raise your hand if you think you are a fairly rational, objective thinker?

By the end of this session, every hand in this room should be down. That is the whole job.



The observer and the observed

There is the thought, and there is the one who notices the thought.

Fused

Most of us live inside the contents of the mind. We ARE the anger, we ARE the worry. There is no gap, only reaction.

The observer's seat

Metacognition is stepping back to watch the thought instead of being it. Notice that you are thinking right now. That noticing is the muscle.

Two systems (Kahneman)

System 1

Fast, automatic, effortless, emotional, always on. It runs your day. Habits, intuitions and biases all live here.

System 2

Slow, deliberate, effortful, logical, and lazy by design because it costs energy. We avoid waking it.

The master skill

Metacognition is the deliberate decision to point System 2 at System 1.

- **Knowledge.** Knowing how your own mind works: what you actually know, where you are weak, what tends to fool you.
- **Regulation.** Using that knowledge to plan, monitor and correct yourself in real time.
- **Everything is downstream.** Intention, bias control, self-awareness, a real definition of success - all of it rests on noticing your mind in motion and choosing instead of reacting.

02

Setting Intention

Choosing the day before it chooses you.

WAKE-UP QUESTION

This morning, did you choose how you would show up today? Or did the day just start happening and you reacted to it?

The discomfort is the point. That gap between chosen and defaulted is exactly what intention closes.



THE DISTINCTION

Goals vs intentions

They are not rivals. You want both, but only one is available in this exact moment.

A goal

A destination in the future. External, measurable, binary. You either hit it or you miss it. “Close ten clients this quarter.” It pulls you from out there.

An intention

A direction in the present. Internal, a quality of being you bring now. “Show up fully present and useful.” It steers you from in here.

The advantages of intention

- **Circumstance-proof.** A goal can be taken from you by a shifting market. An intention can never be prevented.
- **Renewable.** You reset it every morning, so a bad day is never a failure, just a fresh start.
- **Keeps you in the process.** Not hostage to the outcome, which is the very trap that breeds the arrival fallacy.
- **Answers who and how.** Not just what you are chasing, but the person you are being while you chase it.

How to set an intention

Present and value-based

Phrase it as the person you are choosing to be, not the result you want to extract.

Narrow and daily

One intention you can actually hold in attention. Not a list.

Bridge with if-then

“If X happens, then I will do Y.”
This turns a wish into something System 1 can run automatically.

03

Cognitive Biases

An ancient operating system on modern hardware.

ORIGINS

Features, not bugs

Biases are shortcuts that evolved for fast, good-enough decisions under scarcity and danger.

The ancestral logic

Mistake a stick for a snake and you lose a jolt of adrenaline. Mistake a snake for a stick and you lose your life. The mind over-detects threat. Negativity bias is a survival setting.

Speed over accuracy

System 2 is slow and metabolically expensive. Reason every choice from scratch and you starve before lunch. Most of the time the shortcuts are right, which is why we trust them.

Librarian or farmer?

“Steve is shy and withdrawn, helpful but not much interested in people. He likes detail, order, and putting things in their place. Is Steve more likely a librarian or a farmer?”



How we fool ourselves

Confirmation Bias

THE MISCONCEPTION

Your opinions are the result of years of rational, objective analysis.

THE TRUTH

They are the result of years of attending to information that confirmed what you believed, while ignoring what challenged it.

Hindsight Bias

THE MISCONCEPTION

After you learn something new, you remember how you were once ignorant or wrong.

THE TRUTH

You look back on what you have just learned and assume you knew it, or believed it, all along.

Confabulation

THE MISCONCEPTION

You know when you are lying to yourself.

THE TRUTH

You are often ignorant of your motives and invent fictional narratives to explain your decisions, emotions and history.

Misjudging cause and chance

The Availability Heuristic

THE MISCONCEPTION

You understand how the world works from statistics and facts drawn from many examples.

THE TRUTH

You believe something is common if you can find one example of it, and doubt what you have never seen or heard of.

Texas Sharpshooter Fallacy

THE MISCONCEPTION

You take randomness into account when judging cause and effect.

THE TRUTH

You ignore random chance when the result seems meaningful, or when you want a random event to have a meaningful cause.

The Just-World Fallacy

THE MISCONCEPTION

People who are losing at the game of life must have done something to deserve it.

THE TRUTH

The lucky often do nothing to earn their fortune, and bad actors often escape any consequence.

Reading ourselves and others

Fundamental Attribution Error

THE MISCONCEPTION

You judge your own and others' actions equally, by observable behavior.

THE TRUTH

You attribute others' behavior to their character, and your own to the demands of the situation.

Spotlight Effect

THE MISCONCEPTION

Around others, you feel everyone is noticing every detail of how you look and behave.

THE TRUTH

People devote very little attention to you unless something prompts them to.

Self-Handicapping

THE MISCONCEPTION

In everything you do, you strive for success.

THE TRUTH

You often build the conditions for failure ahead of time, so a setback protects your ego.

Hidden drivers and group traps

Priming

THE MISCONCEPTION

You know when you are being influenced, and how it affects your behavior.

THE TRUTH

You are unaware of the constant nudging you receive from ideas formed in your unconscious mind.

Groupthink

THE MISCONCEPTION

Problems are easier to solve when a group gets together to discuss solutions.

THE TRUTH

The desire to reach consensus and avoid confrontation quietly hinders progress.

Catharsis

THE MISCONCEPTION

Venting your anger relieves stress and stops you lashing out at others.

THE TRUTH

Venting increases aggressive behavior over time.

Self-control and the big picture

Procrastination

THE MISCONCEPTION

You procrastinate because you are lazy and cannot manage your time.

THE TRUTH

It is fueled by weakness in the face of impulse, and a failure to think about thinking.

Negativity Bias

THE MISCONCEPTION

The world is steadily becoming a worse place.

THE TRUTH

You misremember a rosy past, get bombarded by bad news, and feel it is heartless to say things are getting better. (We return to this under Happiness.)

What the game shows, on two levels

Human decency

A pure self-maximizer would offer the minimum and accept anything above zero. Real people don't. Proposers offer near-fair splits; receivers reject lowballs even though it costs them. We pay to punish unfairness. Fairness is wired in.

Hidden drivers

The business-primed group makes stingier offers - and when asked why, gives confident reasons that have nothing to do with the image they never noticed. Priming and confabulation, live in the room.

Humankind, by Rutger Bregman

Most people, most of the time, are fundamentally decent. “Veneer theory” is largely wrong.

- **The “librarian vs farmer” error, scaled up.** We read human nature off the worst cases - the atrocity, the headline - and ignore the base rate of ordinary cooperation.
- **The dark stories flip.** The real Lord of the Flies (boys cooperated for over a year), the invented “38 witnesses” of Kitty Genovese murder, the staged or flawed prison and shock studies.
- **The move.** When you conclude “people are awful,” treat it as a base-rate error. What is your sample? You trusted dozens of strangers just to arrive here safely.

How to control biases

Knowing about a bias does not remove it. You debias the process and the environment, not the brain.

- **Consider the opposite.** On decisions that matter, slow down and ask: what would have to be true for me to be wrong?
- **Take the outside view.** Ask what usually happens in cases like this before trusting your story about why this one is special.
- **Run a premortem.** Assume the decision failed badly, then explain why. It surfaces risks optimism hides.
- **Keep a decision journal.** Write the call and the reasoning, so you can later separate a good decision from a lucky outcome.
- **Engineer disagreement.** Invite the disconfirming view, appoint a real devil's advocate, add friction before irreversible calls.

04

Self-Awareness

Integrating your shadow.

WAKE-UP QUESTION

Bring to mind the person who gets under your skin the most. Name the single trait that does it.

Now, how certain are you that the same trait is not living somewhere in you?



*“Until you make the unconscious conscious,
it will direct your life and you will call it
fate.”*

Carl Jung

THE CONCEPT

What the shadow is

Self-actualization is not adding new traits. It is reclaiming the parts you exiled.

The disowned self

Everything you repressed, denied or judged as unacceptable and pushed out of sight. It does not disappear - it runs in the background.

The tell is projection

The trait that most irritates you in others is very often your own disowned trait. “Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves.”

From subconscious to conscious

Yesterday's protective patterns became today's autopilot. The inability to say no is an old pattern wearing a calendar.

- **Notice it firing.** The core metacognitive act applied to emotion: catch the pattern instead of being swept along by it.
- **Name it to tame it.** Putting a feeling into words engages the observer and quiets the alarm.
- **Triggers are information.** A strong charge is a signpost pointing at something unintegrated, not proof the other person is the problem.
- **Integrate, don't eliminate.** You do not kill the shadow. You bring it into the light and give it a job. Awareness converts being driven into being able to choose.

Mindfulness is the gym for the observer's seat.

Present-moment, non-judgmental awareness. Not emptying the mind, not relaxation. The muscle that lets you notice a thought without becoming it, and sit inside Frankl's gap on purpose.

05

Happiness

As a moral obligation.

Factfulness, by Hans Rosling

Factfulness: holding only the opinions you can back with strong data and noticing when instinct bends the facts.

The negativity instinct

The same bias from the last section, now aimed at the world. “Things are getting worse” feels truer than it is.

Bad and better at once

Child mortality is still a tragedy (bad) and has fallen dramatically (better). Holding both is the skill. Not naive optimism - accuracy about direction.

Three findings, in order

1 - We are wrong

Our basic picture of the state of the world does not match the data.

2 - Confidently wrong

The confidence column connects straight back to Dunning-Kruger.

3 - Wrong pessimistically

The errors are not random. We guess the world is poorer, sicker and more dangerous than it is.

Four misconceptions

- **It is pleasure.** Pleasure is a spike, here and gone. The deeper thing is meaning, growth and contribution - which often includes struggle.
- **It is a destination.** Not a place you arrive at by acquiring the next thing. That is the arrival fallacy.
- **It is the absence of bad feelings.** A full life runs the whole range. The goal is right relationship with the lows, not deleting them.
- **It comes from getting what you want.** The hedonic treadmill resets fast. You adapt to the raise, the house, the win, and reach again.

Happiness is an obligation

Not a luxury. A responsibility.

- **Your state is contagious.** Emotions spread like weather. Your mood is part of everyone else's environment, whether you intend it or not.
- **You cannot pour from an empty cup.** Put your own oxygen mask on first - not because you matter more, but because a depleted you is useless to the people you serve.
- **Happiness widens you.** Positive states broaden what you can see and do. Misery narrows you to threat and self-protection.

Informed optimism is a discipline, not a mood.

A falsely bleak map drains the very energy the obligation to be happy requires.
Seeing clearly is part of discharging it.

06

Values & Success

The Four Idols.

WAKE-UP QUESTION

Fame, money, pleasure, power. If you had to surrender one tonight, forever, which goes first?

Now which would you fight hardest to keep? That last one is running more of your life than you would like to admit.



Whose definition of success?

Most of us inherit our criteria for winning unexamined, then chase a target we never chose.

The four false summits

Fame, money, pleasure, power: external, comparative, validated by others, and structurally impossible to ever have enough of.

The arrival fallacy

The belief that reaching the goal delivers lasting happiness, then the strange flatness after you get there. The summit is never the summit.

THE HONEST PART

If you truly want it, pay its price

To win at something rare you must do something rare. People want the outcome but not the cost.

- **Be contrarian.** Right with the crowd earns nothing rare.
- **Be right.** Contrarian and wrong is just wrong.
- **Execute massively.** Right and contrarian without execution stays a nice idea. You need all three.
- **Then choose consciously.** Name the full price, and decide with open eyes whether you want to pay it. A no here is not failure, it is clarity. Hold the desire without being ridden by it.

THE TAKEAWAY

The metacognitive toolkit

- **The daily intention.** Set the frame before the day sets it for you.
- **The pause.** Name the feeling, find the gap, choose the response.
- **Self-distancing.** Ask what you would tell a friend in this exact situation.
- **The decision journal & premortem.** Judge decisions on quality, not luck. Build disagreement into the important ones.
- **Check instinct against data.** The Factfulness habit - for the world and for the people in it.
- **Mindfulness.** A few minutes of watching the mind, daily. The gym for all of the above.

- LEAVE THE ROOM WITH THIS

What story are you running on autopilot right now – and have you stopped to ask whether it is yours?



Thank you.

One better than yesterday. That's perfec.

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