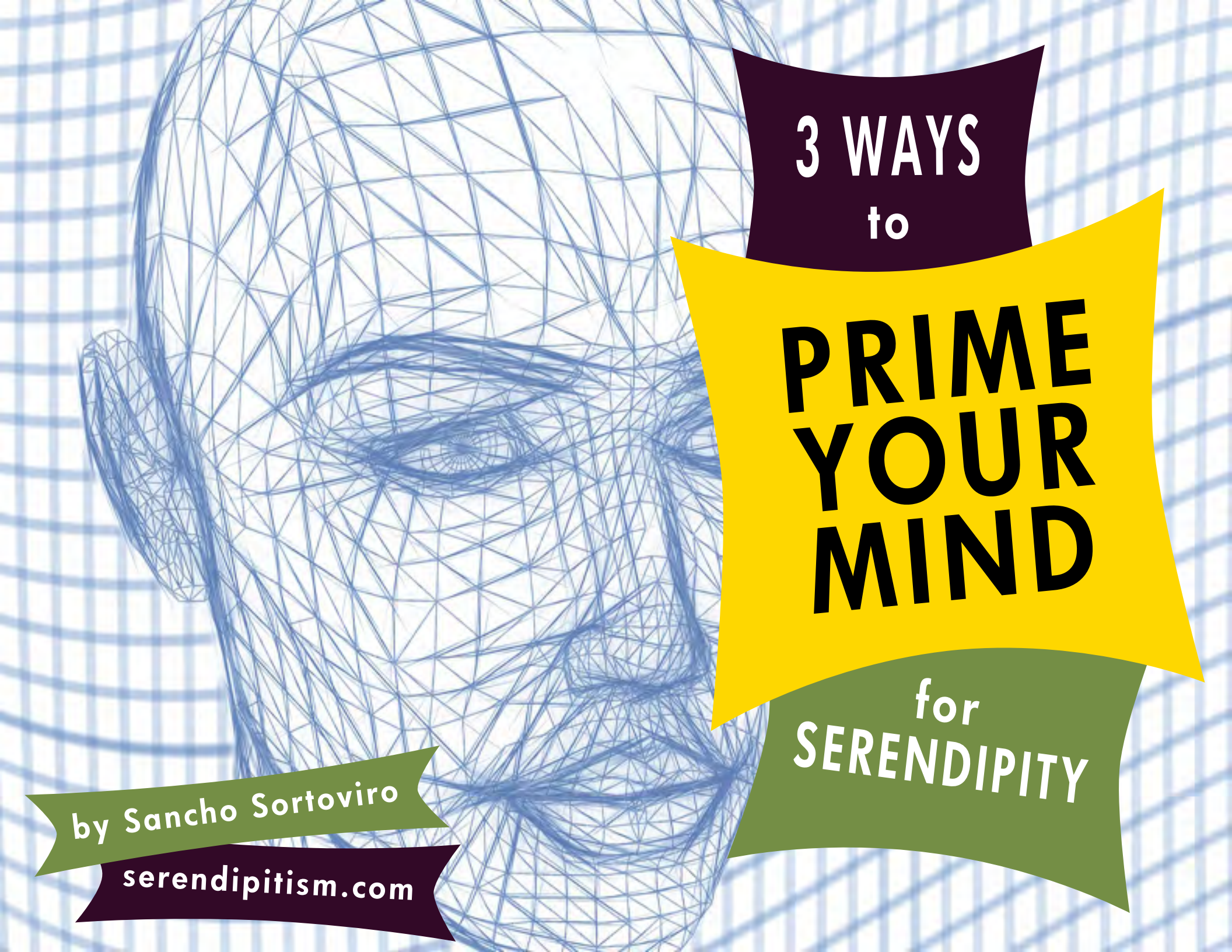
3 WAYS
to
PRIME
YOUR
MIND
for
SERENDIPITY
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Introduction

Serendipity involves recognizing and evaluating an opportunity presented by happenstance, then taking the actions necessary to realize a benefit.

More than mere good luck, serendipity is a process that requires us to condition ourselves to recognize and exploit opportunity, and to position ourselves to encounter opportunity more frequently.

We must approach this process with positivity and hope if we expect to stay focused and resilient until we realize our goal.

The first step for most of us is to eliminate, or at least mitigate, some of the negative cognitive influences that hold us back.

Three of the most pernicious influences that we must overcome include:

- Our fear of failure
- Our need for control
- Our cognitive biases

This guide discusses ways to overcome each of these obstacles and presents some easy-to-remember priming principles to help you stay aware of these techniques.

1 Redefine Failure

In the United States, 35 percent of would-be entrepreneurs cite fear of failure as a reason for not starting a business.[1] That's a surprising statistic, because you would think that people who are driven to entrepreneurship would be more risk-tolerant than most.

Sometimes fear of failure can be the result of childhood incidents, such as being punished by a parent or being embarrassed at school for some sort of failure or wrongdoing.

Our fear of failure can also be driven by our own personal issues, such as lack of confidence, low self-esteem, or perfectionism. Cultural expectations of success can also contribute to fear of failure.

In its most persistent and irrational form, fear of failure is known as *atychiphobia*. But many of us fear failure at least to the extent that we engage in self-sabotaging and avoidance behaviors that stifle our progress.

"If you're afraid of failing, you won't get very far." - Steve Jobs

THREE PRIMING PRINCIPLES

- ✓ Failure is an opportunity to learn
- ✓ Failure is practice for success
- ✓ Failure is better than regret

The Silicon Valley startup culture learned to embrace failure long ago.

As Steve Jobs said, "You've got to act, and you've got to be willing to fail. If you're afraid of failing, you won't get very far.“

Failure really only represents the gap between our expectation and the eventual outcome. Just because we didn't achieve a particular expected outcome doesn't mean that nothing positive came from the effort.

The only true failure is giving up too early, or not trying at all.

By redefining failure and reassessing its impact, we can break free from our fear and move forward.

Failure is an opportunity to learn

Failure is really nothing more than feedback.

In fact, a lot of very valuable and objective feedback can come from failure, which means failure itself is but another opportunity – to learn.

If we get into the habit of expanding all of our goals to presumptively include learning something new, then we will begin to see failure differently. Because regardless of whether we measure an outcome to be good or bad, we will have still learned

something new, and therefore will never completely fail.

With learning comes improvement. Every failure reveals some things we probably shouldn't have done at all, some things we may have done poorly, and some things we can do to get better.

Assess the impact of every failure. But go beyond just the data-driven, quantifiable impact. Also take stock of how the failure affects your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Nurture the concept of successful failure. Every failure encourages learning, improvement, and growth.

Failure is practice for success

Success is often the result of trying many different approaches to a problem until we find the solution that works best. This means that failure is not only common, but that failure is likely inevitable if we are exploring many options or testing several ideas.

Success can be an iterative process involving multiple attempts and failures. Each failure reveals something new and valuable, and each failure allows us to refine our approach.

In an interview about SpaceX, founder Elon Musk said, "Failure is an option here. If things are not failing, you are not innovating enough."

Many highly successful people are successful *because* of their previous failures. Even after a highly successful venture, many of these people experience failure in subsequent endeavors. They see failure as a necessary part of the process of success. They expect and even embrace failure, and they give themselves permission to fail without self-judgment.

To reinforce the concept of failure as practice for success, read about and watch interviews with highly successful people. Almost all of them will have experienced multiple and often significant failures before they got to where they are now.

Failure is better than regret

Reflecting on his decision to leave his job as senior vice-president of a hedge fund to start Amazon, Jeff Bezos said, "I knew that if I failed I wouldn't regret that, but I knew the one thing I might regret is not trying."

Bezos was keenly aware of the risks of his new venture, and even warned early investors that there was a 70 percent chance Amazon would fail. He knew he might lose face, lose money, and disappoint investors. But he decided that dealing with those potential negative outcomes would be easier than forever living with the regret of not taking a chance, of wondering what might have been.

We tend to regret what we *didn't* do, not what we did.

Failure may have costs, but we are repaid in experience. After failure, we can ask ourselves what we could have done better. Having learned from the experience, we can answer that question and keep moving forward.

But if we don't try, we can only ask ourselves, "What if?" And we are left with nothing but wild speculation and a lifetime of wondering.

You can teach yourself not to regret failure, but you will always regret not trying. Failure is temporary. Regret is permanent.

2

Understand Control

To understand control means to understand what can be controlled and what can't be controlled. Understanding what can be controlled allows us to focus our energy and effort productively. Understanding what can't be controlled eliminates a lot of fear, anxiety, and unnecessary worry.

"There is only one way to happiness and that is to cease worrying about things which are beyond the power or our will." - Epictetus

Epictetus said, "There is only one way to happiness and that is to cease worrying about things which are beyond the power or our will."

Whenever we undertake a new venture, our likelihood of success will often depend partly on factors that we can't control. Some of those factors may even be completely hidden and therefore unknown to us.

Sometimes we try to control things because we fear what might happen if we don't. But just because we *want* to control something doesn't mean we *can*.

THREE PRIMING PRINCIPLES

- ✓ There are three levels of control: complete control, some control, and no control
- ✓ Every decision we make should begin by establishing our level of control over the situation
- ✓ Understanding our level of control allows us to prioritize our energy and effort

Other times we feel the need for control because we've become too attached to a specific desired outcome. But again, just because we *want* a particular outcome doesn't mean we'll *get* that outcome, or even that it's necessarily the best outcome.

Trying to control too much often results in losing control altogether. By understanding what we can and can't control – and what we can merely influence – we can proceed with much more clarity.

There are three levels of control: complete control, some control, and no control

Broadly, everything in life can be placed into one of three categories: things we can completely control, things we can somewhat control, and things we can't control at all.

You have complete control over your decision to go for a bike ride tomorrow. You have no control over whether or not it rains.

Barring some type of dysfunction or disorder, we have complete control over things like our voluntary actions, our decisions, our intentions, our attitude, and our effort.

Conversely, we have no control over things like the past, the weather, the fact that we get older, some types of illness, traffic, and the inevitability of change.

However, many things in life aren't so cut and dried. For example, we are often told that we can't make someone like us. That may be true, but we can probably strongly influence whether or not they do by how we treat them, or by establishing some common bond.

Also, there are things that no individual human can control, such as the weather.

Then there are things over which most people have no control, but over which some people have some control. For example, most of us have no control over the U.S. stock market. However, there are individuals of extreme wealth or power who can at least influence the market.

It's usually fairly easy for us to determine the things over which we have complete or no control. But we need to train ourselves to fairly estimate the amount of influence we actually have on those things over which we have only some control.

Every decision we make should begin by establishing our level of control over the situation

Here's a simple exercise you can use to help train yourself to assess your level of control over a particular situation:

1. Accurately describe the situation.
2. Estimate your level of control (complete, some, none).
3. If it's some, list all the factors that you can control, and all the factors that you can't control.

If we have no control, our decision-making will become contingency planning. If we can't control or influence the outcome, we assess the likelihood of various potential outcomes and prepare as best we can for each.

If we have complete control, we must choose the course of action that will most likely lead to the desired outcome.

If we have some control, we must determine precisely what we can control. Then we must assess what actions we can take, how much these actions will influence the outcome, and the cost of these actions versus the level of effort required.

Understanding our level of control allows us to prioritize our energy and effort

We make the most progress when we focus our energy and effort on the things over which we have the most control.

When we stop worrying about things that we can't control, we can redirect that energy toward productive effort.

Once we have established the things that we have the most control over, we can create a clear hierarchy of priorities for action.

There's a 17th-century nursery rhyme that can help remind us of the utility of productive effort versus the futility of wasting energy on things we can't control:

For every ailment under the sun
There is a remedy, or there is none;
If there be one, try to find it;
If there be none, never mind it.

Mind what matters. Apply your resources where you can have the most impact.

We can't predict the future, much less control it. We need to focus our time, energy, and effort where we can most influence the likelihood of a beneficial outcome for us.

3

Challenge Your Biases

Cognitive biases can interfere with rational judgment and influence decision-making, which subsequently affects behavior.

Opportunity recognition and evaluation are essential to stimulating serendipity in our lives, so sound judgment and decision-making ability are a must. While it's true that some cognitive biases can streamline the decision-making process, we need to make optimal decisions, not necessarily quick ones.

Most people are unaware of the many inherent biases that affect their thinking every day. Yet, these unconscious mental processes influence nearly every thought we have and every decision we make. As Daniel Kahneman said, "We're blind to our blindness."

"We're blind to our blindness." – Daniel Kahneman

One of the most pernicious aspects of these biases is that they are often in conflict with our conscious values. It's difficult to live an integral life that reflects what we believe and what we say when our own mind is secretly

THREE PRIMING PRINCIPLES

- ✓ Challenge biases by learning about them
- ✓ Challenge biases by using metacognition
- ✓ Challenge biases by making decisions under better conditions

working to derail us.

To compound matters, there's a cognitive bias called the *bias blind spot* that in itself makes it hard for us to recognize our own biases.

No one is invulnerable to cognitive biases. And since they have been affecting our thinking our whole lives, they can be difficult to overcome. Fortunately, though, we can help put our thinking back on track if we choose to actively challenge our biases.

Challenge biases by learning about them

One of the biggest problems with cognitive biases is simply that most people aren't aware of them. The first step toward challenging our biases is to acknowledge that they exist and then learn about them.

For example, entrepreneurs face significant risk when launching any new venture. So, they might do well to learn about cognitive biases that affect risk perception. Three biases that research has shown may lower our perception of risk include overconfidence, the illusion of control, and belief in the law of small numbers.[2]

Overconfidence bias occurs when our *confidence* in our judgment is greater than the objective accuracy of our judgment. It causes us to overestimate our own performance, knowledge, or

skill. Overestimating our own ability – and therefore our chance of success – can lower our perception of risk.

Illusion of control is our tendency to believe that we can control or significantly influence things that we can't. It can make people think that chance occurrences are somehow under our personal control. This can lower our perception of the risk and uncertainty of future outcomes because we might think we have more control over random risk factors than we actually do.

The law of small numbers is the mistaken belief that small samples accurately represent the much larger populations from which they are drawn. It's the tendency to form strong conclusions based on insufficient evidence. This could lead to riskier choices because we might project a more optimistic outcome than is realistic based on a few small positive samples.

Here are some other common cognitive biases that can interfere with our decision-making:

- The *availability heuristic* causes us to base our judgments more heavily on information that can be easily recalled than on objective facts.
- The *bandwagon effect* causes us to believe something just because a lot of other people do.

- *Confirmation bias* causes us to selectively collect and remember information just because it supports conclusions we have already drawn.
- The *endowment effect* causes us to ask much more for something than we would ourselves be willing to give for it.
- The *framing effect* causes us to choose options based on how the information is presented to us, rather than on the objective merits of the information itself.
- *Hindsight bias* causes us to think that events that have already happened were more predictable than they really were.
- *Outcome bias* causes us to judge a decision based on its eventual outcome rather than on the quality of the decision at the time it was made.
- The *recency illusion* causes us to think that something is new or recent simply because *we* have only recently noticed it.

These are just a few common biases. Do some research to discover the broader range of the one hundred or so cognitive biases that could be affecting you.

Challenge biases by using metacognition

Metacognition is the reflective self-assessment of our thinking

process – thinking about our own thinking.

Using metacognition, we can remove ourselves from the current decision-making context and reflect on our thought process. This allows us to weigh conflicting evidence and consider possible alternatives.[3]

Metacognitive strategies are often intended to help learners but can be applied to problem-solving or decision making as well.

Here are three metacognitive strategies that can help us overcome biases and clarify our thought processes:

Self-questioning

We can use self-questioning to actively engage in - and guide ourselves through - our own cognitive processes. Consider asking yourself these four types of questions when analyzing a problem:

Comprehension questions help us to more fully understand the problem. What is the problem really about? What is my objective? What is my motivation? What are factors that could influence the outcome?

Connection questions allow us to try and connect the problem to a different problem we may have tackled in the past. How are they similar? How are they different? What worked then? What didn't?

Strategy questions prompt us to consider different approaches to the problem and select the most appropriate one. What approach would be the most expedient? What approach would deliver the optimal result? What approach would require the fewest resources?

Reflection questions enable us to evaluate our problem-solving process and to more deeply consider the solution we chose. Does this solution make sense? Why? Could I have solved this differently? How? Can I use this approach in other situations?[4]

Thinking aloud

The think-aloud protocol is often used to gather user data in usability testing, or to help improve reading comprehension in classroom environments. This involves a user or reader vocalizing their thoughts and opinions as they complete a task or read some text, and usually in the presence of a usability test facilitator or a teacher.

However, we can use this method to examine our own problem-solving and decision-making processes. If you want feedback, ask a friend or associate to listen and take notes as you vocalize your thought process while contemplating your approach to a problem. You can review these afterwards for insightful comments that might reveal some things you hadn't noticed or

considered before.

You can also do this alone. You can simply vocalize your inner monologue, or you could pretend that someone is interviewing you about this problem. Having to verbally explain our thinking – even if only to ourselves – helps us to define abstract thoughts in a way that they can be clearly expressed.

Externalizing

Externalizing our thoughts means transferring them to some physical medium, and most often involves some graphic representation of our ideas.

Flowcharts, graphs, diagrams, sketches, drawings, mind maps, visual models, and other visual representations are all useful methods of getting our thoughts out of our head and into a format that we can see in front of us. These can be simple pencil and paper renderings, or we can use automated tools.

Either way, graphically representing our thoughts encourages us to think more openly and creatively. It also allows is to visually represent connections and relationships that we may be able to loosely form in our mind but are having difficulty clearly linking or defining.

Also, sometimes it's just easier to sketch out what we are

picturing in our mind than it is to quickly find the right words to organize an accurate description.

Challenge biases by making decisions under better conditions

We can mitigate the influence of cognitive biases on our decisions by improving decision-making conditions. Decisions are rarely made in optimal conditions. But if we familiarize ourselves with some of the things that can negatively impact our decisions, we can try to eliminate some of those things.

Sometimes there are physiological factors that can affect our thinking, like sleep deprivation, fatigue, illness, or hunger.

Work-related factors can have negative consequences for cognition, too. Tight deadlines, multitasking, a heavy workload, unrealistic demands, and limited resources can all cause anxiety or pressure and impact our decisions.

Environmental factors such as noise, interruptions, distractions, poor ergonomics, and crowded spaces can also make it difficult to think clearly.

Consider some of the stressors that could be affecting your cognition. Whenever practical, try to address these before making important decisions.

Notes

1. Neils Bosma and Donna Kelley, "2018/2019 Global Report," *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor* (2018): 113.

2. Mark Simon, Susan M. Houghton, and Karl Aquino, "Cognitive Biases, Risk Perception, and Venture Formation: How Individuals Decide to Start Companies," *Journal of Business Venturing* 15, no. 2 (March 2000): 117.

3. Keng Sheng Chew, Steven J. Durning, and Jeroen J.G. von Merrienboer, "Teaching Metacognition in Clinical Decision-Making Using a Novel Mnemonic Checklist: An Exploratory Study," *Singapore Medical Journal* 57, no. 12 (2016): 694.

4. Vacha Kramarski and Vared Dudai, "Group-Metacognitive Support for Online Inquiry In Mathematics With Differential Self-Questioning," *Journal of Educational Computing Research* 40, no.4 (2009): 381.