

Book Review

Winning the Brain Game: Fixing the 7 Fatal Flaws of Thinking

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Winning the Brain Game: Fixing the 7 Fatal Flaws of Thinking
Matthew E. May
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In his fifth book, *Winning the brain game: Fixing the seven fatal flaws of thinking*, the author and consultant, Matthew E. May, proposes a set of strategies that promise to help us to gain more control over our own brain. This is to be achieved through a more comprehensive understanding of the way in which we think, we make decisions and we act. The explicit purpose of this book is to teach readers how to reach what the author calls an elegant solution. An elegant solution is defined as the approach that will get us maximum effects with minimum means. What prevents us to apply this kind of adverbs in solving the various problems that we face in everyday life are different thinking errors. Seven of such errors build up the narrative discourse, along with calibrated techniques to avoid or cope with each of them. The arguments used by the author are empirical, whereas the phenomena which he describes have been observed in real situations, after which were conceptualized and refined. M. E. May appeals to neuroscience mainly to explain the functioning of brain structures for a better illustration of the thinking errors and the way in which they are manifested.

The author appeals to a number of quotes belonging to enlightened minds, most likely not affected by common errors of thought, such as Albert Einstein, which inspires and encourages readers in this new challenge, through the power of personal examples. For example, the take of Einstein: "It's not that I'm so smart, it's just that I stay with problems longer..." Therefore, when we have to solve a problem we should be aware that we have some thinking errors and we should not be very confident with the first solutions that come to our mind, even if they seem to be logical. Instead, we can try to change the perspective and to look at the problem from different points of view.

The seven thinking errors described in the book are: Leaping, Fixation, Overthinking, Satisficing, Downgrading, Not Invented Here and Self-Censoring. To combat them, May makes available to the readers the procedures for fixing these errors, together with a set of tools to acquire mindful thinking. In this context, he highlights mindfulness as the ability to live in the present, to be aware of an experience as it occurs in real time, and to accept what we see. Furthermore, the reframe

procedure is a concept that solves the mystery of the idea proposed at the beginning of the book: “what appears to be the problem, isn’t; what appears to be the solution, isn’t; what appears to be impossible, isn’t...” Many thinking errors occur due to the tendency of people to propose solutions and to act, instead of taking time to think and reflect on the issue. This happens because we have a tendency to treat complex problems that require slow thinking, with fast-thinking that we use daily in the common issues. Another source that feeds these errors is the fact that we forgot what we were doing when we were kids — we tested our ideas and assumptions through different games and only after that we drew the conclusions. The solutions proposed by May are based on ways of boosting the system of slow thinking and creativity. One of them is replacing the popular brainstorming with framestorming- an exercise of three steps conducted under the general rules of brainstorming: cue the language of frames, generate many questions (why?, what if? and how?) and pick the two best. Finding answers to these questions will help us to answer the first one. In this way, we understand the issue from several perspectives and have greater chances to reach an elegant solution.

The book is intended for the general public, because the author has opted for a clear and accessible language. I would definitely say that it is a very useful book for decision makers, experts, and consultants from various fields. Although most of the shown examples are from business area, the book can be valued to the same extent by specialists from different fields: doctors, judges, policemen, teachers. This is because the thinking errors are common, regardless of their area of manifestation.

I consider that one of the strengths of this book is that the author explained in neuroscientific terms the mechanism behind each error. For example, one of the techniques to combat downgrading error is setting goals. The author explains in depth that a good, structured goal has two main components: “why” and “how”, required for the full involvement of the brain in the achievement of the goal. It is important to know that the left side of the brain is responsible for the “how” processes, whereas the “why” thinking is located on the right side of the brain. Research suggests that a reverse relationship is established between these processes: when one is active the other is passive. The direct implications lays in the recommendation to avoid focusing in the same time on both components because this will confuse us. However, we need to maintain a strong relationship with them in order to be able to achieve our goals. Another interesting aspect is represented by the examples of problems to which the reader is invited to respond. This offers the possibility of discovering the errors in his own thinking processes, without having any doubts on the validity of the information.

This book is a helpful tool for those who want to embrace innovative thinking since, as Albert Einstein has wisely said, “we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them”. From his words, it appears that the first step towards solving problems is changing and renewing the mind. A good start in this direction may be considered reading this book, and then see the problems that we commonly face as good ways to practice the fixes for these seven fatal flaws of thinking, as proposed by the author.