

This is the first chapter of Annie McCubbin's
Why Smart Women make Bad Decisions.
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Why smart women make bad decisions

and how critical thinking
can protect them

Annie McCubbin



Praise for *Why Smart Women Make Bad Decisions*

‘The thing about Annie McCubbin’s writing is the detail. It’s specific and concrete and it makes you laugh out loud when you read it because you instantly relate to it. It’s great storytelling, and because the story in this book is so good, you remember the science that goes with it.’

Katrina Foster, Lecturer, Writing for Performance, NIDA

‘Wow! What an achievement. I loved every part of it and wished it wouldn’t end.’

Nikki Pender, NZ barrister and business director

‘A book for our times – a serious yet entertaining look at how women can take control personally and professionally. It is also a book for men, who will surely recognise themselves or their friends somewhere in these pages and be motivated to act.’

Dagmar Schmidmaier AM, Director, CEW Leaders Program

‘Engaging, humorous and thought-provoking, *Why Smart Women Make Bad Decisions* is a must read for every 25- to 45-year-old woman.’

Amelia Russell, Retail Buying Manager, Strandbags

‘Kat’s fast-moving second-person inner-monologue made me laugh out loud! Her skewed observations and tangled rationalisations are relatable to many experiences I would rather not admit having. Annie McCubbin uses her humour and humanity to share some pertinent insights into how we can untangle our thinking and engage more meaningfully with ourselves and those around us.’

Odile LeClezio, actor and voice coach

'Loved it. Funny and informative. It's a great read on, let's face it, what could be a very dry topic.'

Vicki Yep, nurse

'This is brilliant. The book that HAS to be read right now. My genuine hope is that this book is lapped up.'

Lyndall Russell, clinical psychotherapist and transformational leadership strategist

*For David, Lily and Lachlan.
Thank you for pretending not to notice
when I feed the dog at the table.*

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'The default mode of human psychology is to grab onto comforting beliefs for purely emotional reasons, and then justify those beliefs to ourselves...'

Dr Steven Novella, MD, clinical neurologist and host of *The Skeptics Guide to the Universe*

Preface

Imagine this.

A picture of a woman – slim, hair pulled back into a ponytail, no makeup, perfect skin. She’s standing triumphantly on top of a mountain looking out over a vast vista. There is mist in the valleys; it could even be sunrise. At her feet is a backpack. The implication is she rose early, climbed alone, and she’s savouring the rich reward of her efforts.

The caption underneath the picture says something like:

Live your best life.

This statement is worthy and appealing but it’s also general and vague. I’d really like to be living my best life, you might think, but what does it look like and why aren’t I currently doing it?

What the caption should say is:

Identify the cognitive flaws in your thinking and improve the quality of your life across all contexts.

The fact is, a lack of critical-thinking skills contributes mightily to the problems in our lives, but introducing the notion of *metacognition* and advising people to *think about their thinking* is a difficult message to sell. It’s not full of easy promise. So, we listen to advice that *is* full of promise, and often offers magical solutions to our knotty life problems. The major thrust of this advice

encourages people everywhere to trust their gut, to sit in the stillness and wait for the voice of truth to arise from deep within.

The Universe will lead you. Think positively. Magic will happen if you let it.

Now let me state right upfront: I know our gut and intuition are amazing. I'm all for allowing our intuition to guide us. Just not in all contexts.

Our intuition is fabulous. It is responsible for our creativity. It is our protector in a dark car park late at night when it tells us there's danger afoot. Intuition saves us time, cutting through unnecessary analysis to arrive at brilliant decisions. It makes us perceptive, quick and decisive.

But because our intuition can be so right, it's easy to assume it is right all the time.

It is not.

The truth is, our intuition, like all our mental and emotional functions, is limited, often flawed, and quite often highly inaccurate.

The key to getting our lives back on track is understanding how deeply irrational and flawed our brains are.

Now, there's no shortage of books and podcasts selling the message 'Let your Gut be your Guide'. And, if you look for them, there are plenty of critical-thinking books as well - but their message is not as sexy. They're certainly no match for the writings of 'Warrior Women' and 'Guru Guy', so their message is lost.

When we're choosing the coat, the restaurant, the gym, the dog (a Groodle in case you're wondering), the career move or the partner, the stakes are high. Yet our analysis of the thinking that goes into these decisions is low.

When we're making a decision, our thought process should be something like: 'I have a strong feeling in my gut about this, but should I be trusting it?'

There is a lot of good science out there. It can be utilised to work out when your brain can be trusted and when it's feeding you fake news. But we are more inclined to be attracted to the notion that there is meaning in the things that happen to us, and that our intuition is leading us down the right path.

Challenging some of these deeply held beliefs can make us extremely uncomfortable. Considered analysis just isn't as seductive as the spiritual slogan. This is why so many well-educated, intelligent people are wooed by simplistic and romantic assertions.

The absence of critical thinking is understandable. Being understandable, though, doesn't make it right.

So, I have written a book about how the flaws in your thinking can make you susceptible to poor decision-making and exploitation. We follow the life of Kat, a thirty-something woman who, while in the midst of a fractious breakup, still has to deal with the everyday challenges of being a working woman. She pitches an idea to the insurance firm she works for, endures a performance review, has a breakdown in front of her neighbours, learns Morse code, goes to a party, stalks her ex on Facebook, goes away for a weekend and, as the story progresses, begins to understand some of the flaws in her thinking.

Every chapter of the story is followed by an analysis of the cognitive biases that shaped her decision-making.

Women are particularly vulnerable to the 'trust your gut' message. Women are particularly vulnerable to being gaslighted. Consider your own experience and the experiences of your friends and family members. How many decisions have been made off the

back of ‘a feeling’? How have they worked out? I imagine brilliantly sometimes, and other times disastrously. How did you talk about it afterwards? Did you get closer to the truth?

Wouldn’t you like to understand the pitfalls in your thinking so you can steer your life with a steadier hand?

Then read on.



Kat and The Hipster

For the first time since the breakup, you do not have to sprint for the bus. You are leaving the flat on time. You have managed to put a load out and feed the cat. Your handbag is over your shoulder, your KeepCup is in your hand, and you are about to pull the front door shut, when a retching sound stops you in your tracks.

You pause, your hand on the doorknob.

Then, your brain catches up, and notifies you that the sound is not a good one. You throw yourself into reverse, fling the door back open, and lurch back into the flat.

The Cat is vomiting in the lounge room.

You reach for The Cat, trip on the rug, and your KeepCup shatters.

You rise from the floor, dust the glass shards from the knees of your new linen pants, and stand gaping at the defiled floor.

You curse The Cat.

She is now sitting on the kitchen bench, looking at you implacably. She seems to have recovered.

You find it viciously unfair that the KeepCup has dropped on the unforgiving surface of the floorboards, while The Cat has elected to vomit on the absorbent nap of the rug.

The rug was new and The Cat's interest in its arrival only seemed piqued when the opportunity to vomit on it was presented.

After the gag-inducing clean up, you are now Late. You sprint for the bus, miss it by ten seconds, have to get an Uber and abstain from your morning coffee, as you can't bear the disapproving face of Dean, the vegan activist barista, without your KeepCup.

As you arrive at the office you comfort yourself that Bad Things Always Happen in Threes, and you've had your quota for the day.

Though, thinking about it, there have actually been four, if you count the Missed Coffee on top of the Broken KeepCup.

Actually, five, if you count the Uber in a separate category to the Missed Bus.

This is a worrying thought. It means you could now be in the second tranche of Bad Things Happening in Threes, which means you're waiting for the Sixth Bad Thing.

Christine appears at your desk to present you with the Sixth Bad Thing.

She tells you that you sent version 2.3, instead of 2.4, to the Head of HR. You smile apologetically at Christine, while you fire up your computer. You find twenty-five emails telling you the same thing.

'They're waiting in the meeting room to talk about version control,' says Christine.

You pick up your staff room coffee cup, which says *Go For It, Legend*, when your phone buzzes.

Your heart leaps.

It's The Hipster.

You scroll down the text looking for the words, 'I'm sorry.'

They're not there.

He's texting to say his friend Anton is coming tonight to pick up the couch.

You wish you had version control over The Hipster. You'd go with an earlier one.

'It's not convenient,' you text back. 'I'm out.'

'No problem,' texts The Hipster. 'I've given him my key.'

You start writing 'Give me back my key,' then delete it. Maybe having the key means he's still thinking of coming back.

Your phone buzzes again. It's your sister, Samantha. The text reads, 'Toby just proposed. Am sobbing. With Joy of Course. Head bridesmaid, darling. As discussed, caramel.' You'll look hideous in caramel. Samantha has been planning her wedding since she was four, so she'll probably have it ready to go in three months. That gives you under three months to lose the 2.75 kilos. You're regretting the cinnamon scroll you scoffed this morning in place of the Missed Coffee.

You realise Christine is speaking to you again.

'Yes,' you say, 'I'm coming.'

Before you can rise from your seat your star performer, Jay, comes over, threatening to quit. This is the Seventh Bad Thing today. This could be the beginning of the third tranche of Bad Things. He tells you he can no longer tolerate working with Lisa (pronounced Liza).

'Yes,' you say to Jay, 'I completely understand. Leave it with me.'

You can't tolerate working with Lisa (pronounced Liza) either. The problem is you're her boss, yet you find her a bit scary.

'That's what you said last week,' he says.

'Yes, I know. I've been snowed under.'

You're flat-chat busy. You don't have the time to have endless Performance Management conversations every time there's a

problem in the team. Also, you'd attempted to have a Performance Management conversation with Lisa last Wednesday, which ended in you implying she was in line for a promotion, so what's the point?

'Also,' Jay says, 'What's happened to your hair?'

'I have alopecia,' you say. 'It's genetic.'

This is not true. You've been so stressed that you've literally been pulling your hair out. You're beginning to suspect that this run of bad luck is karma for the amount of mean, vengeful things you've been thinking and for putting your wine bottles in Mrs Hume's bin.

Anyway, Lisa (pronounced Liza) led you astray at her interview. She was impressive, articulate and funny.

She's not funny now.

Since her arrival a month ago, your previously harmonious workgroup has splintered into multiple warring factions. Lisa either inspires great loyalty or committed loathing. She's aggressive, defensive and petty. Not to mention lazy, divisive and belligerent.

She's eaten your lunch from the mini fridge. Twice. She flatly denied it while wiping the telltale haloumi crumbs from her mouth. She could stare down Putin if required.

Her red hair – which she is not pulling out strand by strand – serves as a trigger for anxiety every time you pass her desk. Maybe, like Donald Trump, she will rise to great heights. She could take your job, then end up running the entire organisation on the back of her schismatic personality, lack of expertise in any area and breathtaking self-belief.

Your phone beeps again. It's someone called Meredith texting about the room to rent. You dislike her use of smiling emojis and text her back saying it's taken. You just can't interview another potential flatmate. After hiring Lisa (pronounced Liza), your confidence in your interviewing ability has plummeted.

‘Are you alright?’ asks Jay.

‘Yes,’ you say. You look at your hand. You’ve pulled out another four hairs. That’s okay, only 109,459 to go before you’ll need a wig.

Exactly four weeks ago, there was no Lisa (pronounced Liza), no cat vomit, no version-control problem, no broken KeepCup, no broken heart, no trichotillomania and your hair was still your most impressive feature. On the same morning you interviewed Lisa, you woke at 6.30 to find The Cat sitting on The Hipster’s warm pillow, regarding you genially. The Hipster’s bearded head normally remained in residence on the pillow long after you’d risen. You’d become adept at avoiding the three recalcitrant floorboards, as he was prone to developing migraines if woken by floor-generated noises.

The day before, however, The Hipster had cleaned furiously in preparation for the upcoming real estate inspection, and that day he had risen early to bring you a cup of tea in bed. With normal milk. He only drank almond milk, as products produced from a cow offended him. However, that morning he’d overcome his distaste and smiled as he handed you the cup.

You’d had a strong feeling this relationship was *meant to be* the first time you looked into his eyes. ‘We will grow old together,’ he’d said the night you’d met. He moved into your flat a month later.

Accepting the cup of tea, you recalled the real estate agent, Rebecca, saying how beautifully you kept your flat, and what a lovely man your partner was.

You drained your cup and lay on your side looking at him across the room, doing an efficient downward-facing dog in the slanting sunlight. It’s true, you thought. He is lovely. He stretched luxuriously, took your empty cup from you, ran his fingers through your hair and strolled towards the kitchen – perhaps, you thought

wondrously, to unpack the dishwasher. It seemed anything was possible that morning.

The Hipster had been encouraging you to do a gratitude meditation every day, saying it opened channels to receiving all the things you deserved from the Universe. You'd been applying yourself assiduously to the task, sitting compliantly with The Hipster on the floor on a special Gratitude Meditation Cushion. Apparently, the cushion was important: it helped with alignment of the spine. You were unsure why spinal alignment was important.

Early on you'd asked The Hipster, 'But what if somebody disabled meditates, and they can't sit on a cushion or keep their spine straight?'

'Kitten,' The Hipster had said, stroking the inside of your wrist, 'how about you just try and quiet down that brain of yours and sit in some stillness for a bit?' The Hipster's beard gave him a Jesus look, which you knew wasn't congruent with meditation and veganism, but nevertheless, you found it reassuring.

Admittedly, during each meditation you struggled not to think about how many calories you'd consumed that day, juxtaposed against the amount of exercise you'd done.

Still, The Hipster delivering your tea that morning was so close to your vision of him being the domestically vigilant, sexy, affectionate partner you'd always dreamt of, that you felt yourself to be a sorceress of Universal Magic.

Or was it sorcerer? Perhaps sorceress was redundant, like 'actress'. It might be a mistake to use gender-specific terminology in the Universal realm.

You leant back on the pillows and ran your own fingers through your hair, which, unassailed by humidity, was organised attractively on the pillow. You wished The Hipster would return to see you displayed so enticingly, but you comforted yourself with the thought

that his absence may indicate domestic engagement. Seconds later you heard the first affirming noise of a glass being returned to the cupboard. Your life was complete.

Tidy flat.

The Hipster attentive, with increasing levels of domestic awareness.

Hair fantastic.

Three Good Things in a row. It was definitely going to be a good day. Even the normally disdainful Cat was positively collegial. You were so awash with love that, for minutes at a time, you forgot to worry about your recent 2.75-kilogram weight gain.

Later, as you left the flat, you noted your lovely man partner had put the recycle bin out, unasked. You nodded at Mrs Hume from Flat Ten, who was tersely rearranging all the bins centimetre by centimetre. All except yours. The look of your bin already sitting perfectly aligned on the verge filled you with joy.

Your bus pulled into the stop the exact moment you arrived, and your favourite seat was loyally waiting for you. At work you swept into the waiting lift like royalty, and Madelaine, from the eleventh floor, who habitually speaks loudly to you while staring at your forehead, was nowhere in sight.

That was the second tranche of Three Good Things. You were on fire.

At morning tea, though not a gambler, you bought a scratchie and scored an instant \$50. Such was your confidence in being 'in flow' with the Universe, you gave the \$50 to a homeless man and his adorable Border Collie.

Your phone buzzed with a text. It was The Hipster. A trail of heart emojis followed his proclamation of love. You stood in the street smiling stupidly at your phone.

You were unstoppable. The stars were aligned. The Universe had your back. You were actually looking forward to conducting the interviews for a new team member. You just knew the perfect candidate was going to show up. You could feel it in your bones. And like magic, there she was: Lisa (pronounced Liza) Miles, the first candidate.

You'd known it instinctively as soon as she'd walked in the door with her uniform fake tan. Her attention to detail around the problem areas of wrist and elbow was exemplary. Admittedly she was late, but a flat tyre could happen to anyone, and the way she told the story was so engaging, you were immediately impressed with her communication skills. She was smart, too; smarter in fact than her CV suggested, and though she'd held a lot of different positions over the last three years, she'd explained that sometimes her capacity to think outside the box was not welcomed.

Well, thinking outside the box was exactly what you were after. You liked her. She was responsive, considered in her answers and funny. She was your girl and she was going to be the perfect team member.

STOP TRUSTING YOUR INSTINCTS – SOME OF THEM ARE RUBBISH

Okay. Welcome to Kat's life, where things aren't going too well. Kat is smart, but her thinking, like yours and mine, is flawed, and those flaws influence her decision-making. Decisions she made on the day when she was feeling positive are still influencing her life a month later, and not in a good way.

There are some cognitive traps that will become evident as we watch Kat navigate her way through life. So, what can we learn from her experiences? What can we do to make sure we don't fall into the same potholes? Well, let's start with what *not* to do.

Your intuition is tricky

Don't indiscriminately trust your intuitive voice. That's the first cab off the rank. Why? Because traps in your thinking arise out of your intuitive responses.

'Leave my intuition alone,' I hear you say. 'My intuition is incredibly accurate. It's saved me from bad situations so many times.'

I'm sure it has! But, if you analyse your life through a certain lens, you'll find that sometimes your intuition has been right, and sometimes it's been wrong. However, because of one of our brain bugs called *confirmation bias*, you only remember the hits and not the misses. Confirmation bias is just one of many brain glitches that, if not recognised and attended to, can send your life careering in an unwanted direction.

So, what exactly is intuition? Well, it's when you just *know* things. Our intuition is our ability to reach a quick and ready judgment about something without going through a rational analytical process.

Our intuition can tell us things like: 'I really like this person I'm interviewing,' or 'This guy is really nice,' or 'This diet I've just read about on my smartphone looks really good,' or 'Don't go to the gym tonight, you've had a rough day, exercise some self-care, stay home and have a nice glass of pinot.'

We call it our 'gut feeling'. It feels good to go with your gut. It feels right. Our bookshelves, TVs and podcasts are awash with information pointing to the conclusion that your intuition is a hallowed instrument of truth.

In fact, intuition is very likely *causing* problems in your life. Your thinking is littered with cognitive biases leading you down the wrong path, again and again. These cognitive biases are sneaky and deserve your attention.

In the story, cognitive bias led Kat to believe she was making rational decisions. She felt strongly that Lisa was the right candidate, that The Hipster was the right partner and that her day was going well. Feelings are important, and nobody should ever tell you your feelings are wrong. But feeling something 'very strongly' doesn't mean you have to act on it. It just means you have a strong feeling.

Indeed, one of the core themes of Kat's story is that intuition is susceptible to error and manipulation and it should not be accepted uncritically.

The false god of the New Age

One of the places these cognitive biases do their sneaking around is in the sentiments of a lot of New-Age thinking. We are told to

tune into our deep, intuitive voice; that success lies in our connection to our higher selves.

And where do these messages from our higher selves come from?

Our brains.

The bit that's left out of this highly appealing narrative is how flawed it is. Our feelings should, of course, always be acknowledged. Always. But are they necessarily the harbingers of truth?

Introducing your limbic system

The brain is extremely complex, but for the purposes of understanding where decisions are made in our brain, we are going to basically look at two of its parts. One is the limbic system: the emotional seat of our brain. The other part is our frontal lobe: the rational, reasoning part of the brain, where planning and executive function occur.

So, if we go back to Kat's story where her day was *not* going well, her limbic system – the emotional part of her brain – was telling her to avoid having a difficult conversation with Lisa, as she felt intimidated. This was all subconscious. Kat was aware she found Lisa scary, but not so much that it was going to affect her decision-making. The next part of the process was also subconscious for Kat, and she was unaware of it happening. Her frontal lobe – the rational, planning, decision-making, social moderating part of her brain – post-rationalised her feelings of being intimidated and came up with an explanation that made Kat feel okay about herself: that she was busy, and it was pointless talking to Lisa anyway.

The limbic system makes decisions for us, unbeknown to our conscious brain, and the frontal lobe is left trying to post-rationalise that decision. This process goes on day-in, day-out,

because the limbic system (where intuition springs from) is vital for our survival. We need subconscious processing to function in our everyday lives. We don't have the mental bandwidth to consciously examine every bit of information taken in by our senses. The subconscious part of our brain takes in vast amounts of data all the time. Think of your subconscious as a massive supercomputer, and the conscious part of your brain like an early edition smartphone. Our conscious brains are just no match for our subconscious brains in terms of speed and data storage. We are only consciously aware of a tiny portion of that data at any time.

A good moment to listen to your gut

You are in a dark car park late at night and feel an intuitive sense of danger. Acting on that gut instinct could save your life. Your subconscious has scanned the environment and told you to get in your car quickly and drive away. Do not hesitate. Do what it's urging you to do. Your subconscious is picking up data from the environment and giving you signals. Get in the car, lock the door and drive.

This more primitive part of your brain developed millions of years ago, before we had language, when we were roaming around on the savannah. (Not carrying designer handbags, just to clarify.) It developed to deal with a much simpler and more dangerous world, when the possibility of being some lion's dinner was still on the cards - and not because you'd jumped out of the four-wheel drive to retrieve your phone while on safari at Kruger.

Our brains were designed for a more dangerous time and are easily spooked.

With an ancient computer in her head, Kat didn't know the difference between an aggressive person in her team and being confronted by a lion at the mouth of her cave. It's why holding her ground with Lisa felt so dangerous.

We too can feel like we're making rational choices when we're actually being guided by the flawed calculations of our primitive brain. So, as we follow Kat and observe her dealing with challenges common to most of us, the tricky role of the subconscious will become more and more evident – as will the errors in our processing and the flaws in our thinking. We'll see how these errors affect her decision-making, and the impact that has on different areas of her life. If Kat can learn to identify the bugs and flaws in her brain and understand how powerful her subconscious is, she can learn to live in a less reactive way.

This is not a book about creative visualisation

Author's note: when I say 'the subconscious parts of our brain are powerful', I'm not saying you can harness the subconscious to manifest whatever you like. It's not that kind of story.

But this is a better story. It's more productive to identify the bugs in your thinking that contribute to you making rubbish decisions, than hope the universe will intervene and grant your deepest desire. The idea of 'manifesting' also gives us a false sense of control over our lives, allowing us to cling to the hope that thinking or meditating on what we want will magically make it appear. You're better off spending your time doing practical things in the real world.

Critical-thinking skills are the bomb

Think of yourself as an actor on stage, with your life as the performance. You feel like you're in control of your performance: that

every action is your choice. But in reality, it's more like you're a marionette – while you're standing on stage performing your current scene, your cognitive biases are on a platform above the stage in the darkness, pulling your strings. So practiced and deft are they at the string pulling, you're not even aware they're there. So instead of your character reaching for the chamomile tea, she mixes a margarita. You look at your hand and think to yourself, 'This was an alcohol-free night. Oh well, now I've made it, shame for it to go to waste!'

But all is not lost. You are not destined to forever be helpless in the face of unseen machinations. By the time you've finished reading Kat's story, you should be able to pause the performance of your own life, ask the audience to wait a minute, shine the torch your character is holding up into the darkness, and tell those sub-conscious processes you know *exactly* what they're doing. You can demand they cut the strings. Be firm with them. You're running the show now. That's how you mitigate their influence: you use your new-found understanding to illuminate their role in your performance. Then you're free to think analytically and rationally about why you're doing what you're doing, and thinking what you're thinking.

Introducing patternicity

Okay, come on, 'fess up. Do you think bad things happen in threes? You're not alone.

But do they?

Well, probably not.

Kat, like the rest of us, saw patterns in the development of her days. When things were going badly, she saw the negative events in her day as happening in lots of three. Once the cat vomited on her new rug, her KeepCup broke and she missed the bus, she

felt confident there would be no more bad things in that day, as she had completed the magic three. But then she realised a fourth bad thing had happened (the missed coffee), so she had to start counting another three, and then another.

It was the same with the good day. The idea that there was already a pattern of good things happening in threes predisposed her to think the afternoon's interview with Lisa Miles was going to go well.

Humans love looking for patterns. We love it so much we do it subconsciously, and when we think we detect one, we invest it with meaning.

'Patternicity', a term coined by science writer Michael Shermer, is the tendency to find meaningful patterns in meaningless noise – hence, two bad things happen then you wait for the third. It gives a sense of order to chaos. It is a cognitive bias left over from a period when identifying patterns was essential for our survival. For example, when wandering about on the savannah, it was good practice to notice paw prints in the sand, in case it meant a lion was near. It was also good to track the pattern of seasons, as that was essential for survival.

Unfortunately, however, we also notice patterns when they're not really there.

Introducing magical thinking

Magical thinking is everywhere and wears a lot of different guises. One guise suggests that if you wish really hard (often dressed up as a meditative practice) you can change your fortunes. Another guise suggests that if you have a lot of negative thoughts, you could in turn create negative events in your life.

Kat believed the gratitude meditation encouraged by The Hipster produced the positive events in her life, and that the negative events were tit-for-tat karma at play. Since the interview

with Lisa came after a series of positive events in the day, Lisa was placed into the 'Going Well' bucket. Therefore, her positive characteristics were painted in bright, bold colours, and anything negative was quickly dismissed.

Author's note: the universe is a big thing with stars and planets. It doesn't care about you. It's not involved in the day-to-day workings of your life, and it is not planning life lessons for you.

Yes, what you think influences your behaviour, but your thoughts don't have a special energetic influence of their own. One of the worst sorts of magical thinking is believing that all illness is the result of negative thinking, negative belief systems or karma. To suggest people are responsible for 'creating their illness' via their thinking is pernicious, simplistic and dangerous.

It's just magical thinking. All of it. And belief in magical thinking can be bolstered by patternicity - the thinker sees a pattern between their internal thinking and the world around them.

Was it really 'meant to be'?

'Bad things happen in threes' lies in the same realm as saying it was 'meant to be' when something good or bad happens. Kat felt very strongly that her relationship was meant to be.

Was it? Why?

People often use the phrase 'It was meant to be' when something is going well. It could be a big thing, like finding your life partner, or a small thing, like finding the perfect car park. The phrase also gets an outing when someone has a painful breakup or experiences some other distressing event. If you extrapolate that thought out, then you'd have to believe that *everything* happens because it was meant to be. So, is it meant to be when a mother in a refugee camp loses her child to dysentery? When a lonely seventy-year-old man loses his entire life savings to a romance scam? Are we

saying that all negative events happen for a reason? Seems a bit brutal. Perhaps this magical, mysterious energy that apparently finds people convenient car parks and perfect partners could be co-opted to sort childhood poverty.

Just a thought.

It's comforting to think that things happen for a reason. No-one likes to be rejected. Our thinking is littered with aphorisms like 'One door shuts and another one opens' – sayings that we've adopted because they give us a reassuring sense that there's meaning behind our lives. They make life seem less chaotic.

So, what's the problem with that? What's wrong with believing bad things happen in threes, or that you're on a roll so it's a good day to buy a lottery ticket? Where's the harm in believing such things? Well, if we believe there's meaning in the random things that happen in our lives, then we may develop a tendency to look for meaning in situations and come up with the wrong answer – which could lead to poor decision-making.

For example, let's say you're in a relationship that is unsatisfying. You might think to yourself, 'Well, this relationship isn't great, but maybe I'm meant to be in it. Maybe it's teaching me something. Maybe I'm meant to stay.' This sort of thinking, where you're ascribing a higher purpose to your situation, muddies the water for more clarifying critical thinking. If you remove the notion that things happen for a reason, you can look at the situation, whatever it is, with clear eyes. If you're more in control of your thinking in this way, you can have an incredibly meaningful life without magical thinking cluttering it up.

Luck has gone out of fashion – let's bring it back!

Realistically, how well your day – or, in fact, your life – goes is a combination of a whole lot of things, with some luck thrown in. Luck seems to have gone out of fashion. Of course, how hard you work, your attitude and the socioeconomics you were born into all have a huge influence on the fortunes in your life. But luck has a big part, too. The co-occurrence of so many positive things in Kat's happy morning was just coincidence, as were the negative things that transpired on the day that began with the cat vomiting. There was no underlying meaning to the morning's events, but Kat ascribed meaning to them. Then, once she'd layered on some magical thinking, she was primed to make some poor decisions.

We're influenced by our moods, and often not in a good way

During her happy day, Kat felt great. What's wrong with that? It's better than being in a rubbish mood. Studies have found that our thinking and decision-making are affected by our moods, good or bad. Happy people are more likely to anticipate that a picnic will have nice weather than sad people. People in a good mood tend to think that those around them are more skilled than those in a bad mood. People in a bad mood are more likely to attribute negative intent to another person. This can flow on to affect our behaviour.

By the time Kat was on her way to work on her positive day, she already had patternicity in her corner, telling her this was a good day so things were going to continue to be good. She had magical thinking adding an extra layer of legitimacy to this thought, by implying her happy morning was the product of her own enlightened internal reality. She was in a good mood when Lisa walked in the door – her gut told her that Lisa was the perfect candidate. It felt right; Kat could feel it in her bones.

But Kat's gut was wrong. Intuition, patternicity and luck came together to create a fallacious sense of certainty, coaxing her into making a bad decision with ongoing ramifications.

Liking or disliking someone on sight should not be the final word on them.

Beware your happy mood doesn't lead you to:

- Sign up for six months of hot yoga sessions.
- Agree to attend a Scientology session when approached on a street corner by a guy with a personality test.
- Hire someone because your subconscious gave you the nod.
- Eat a Krispy Kreme.
- Like someone on sight.

Beware of liking someone, or feeling overly positive about someone, on sight. Case in point: Kat liked Lisa on sight. Part of the appeal was that Lisa was very charming; but charming doesn't necessarily mean good, and lack of charm doesn't mean bad. Apparently, Kim Jong-un is a complete sweetie when you meet him, and many brilliant doctors have the personalities of mullets.

Now, as we have discussed, sometimes your intuition might be accurate. You might have developed a precise antenna for certain behavioural tendencies. For instance, perhaps you are attuned to the feeling of being manipulated. In this case, your gut response to the notion of being manipulated should be factored into your analysis; but it shouldn't be the end of the story.

Beware your unhappy mood doesn't lead you to:

- Sign up for six months of hot yoga sessions.
- Agree to attend a Scientology session when approached on a street corner by a guy with a personality test.
- Hire someone because your subconscious gave you the nod.
- Eat a number of Krispy Kremes.
- Dislike someone on sight.

Often, disliking someone on sight is your subconscious working behind the scenes, digging around in your old files and finding similar features. A perfectly nice man might share the handlebar moustache of a loathed teacher, triggering a response.

When Kat's day was hijacked by the vomiting cat, the sense of doom that she was in for a bad day affected her thinking and sent her into spiralling anxiety. She couldn't face the barista without her cup, she dreaded the meeting about version control and, more importantly, she couldn't deal with the issue of Lisa, who was causing a lot of trouble in her team.

Confirmation bias – the mother of all biases

Confirmation bias is our tendency to cherrypick available information to confirm what we already think. It's when we interpret and remember things in ways that validate our existing position. We all do it, all the time.

Scenario A: your partner leaves wet towels on the bed.

You've had a heated exchange about your partner not being a child, and you not being the parent. A month later, you notice the offending towels are still *always* being left on the bed, whereas your partner swears he or she *always* hangs them up now. Who's right?

Well, you're both right. You're both being cognitively hijacked by confirmation bias. You *only* notice when your partner leaves the towels on the bed, and he or she *only* notices when the towels are hung up. Mystery solved!

Scenario B: you read a report that chocolate is a most excellent food for your health and should be consumed daily.

You also read a report that chocolate is the most appalling food of all time and you shouldn't touch it. You only remember the first report, which confirms the positive qualities of chocolate, because you love it and can't imagine life without it.

Confirmation bias led Kat to only focus on the things about Lisa that confirmed her belief that Lisa was the best candidate. She admired her uniformly applied fake tan; she found her positive and charming; she excused her lateness; she rationalised away her lack of previous job stability. In other words, she interpreted the situation and evidence in front of her in a way that supported her initial position via her gut instinct: that Lisa was 'the one'.

The notion that good or bad things happen in threes is classic confirmation bias. When you expect things to happen in threes, you're on the lookout for it and select situations in your environment to confirm your belief.

Primacy and recency effects (watch out for them in restaurants)

The primacy effect is a cognitive bias causing us to remember the information presented first. A typical example of when you might fall victim to the primacy effect is when you go to a restaurant and choose a dish near the beginning of the menu. Restaurants often take advantage of this brain bias and put their most profitable item

at the top of the menu – perhaps even at the top right-hand side, where our eyes go first. Sneaky!

The recency effect means we are also more likely to remember information presented last. If we are presented with a long list of words and asked to recall them later, we will remember the words at the beginning of the list (primacy effect) or at the end of the list (recency effect) with greater speed and accuracy than those in the middle.

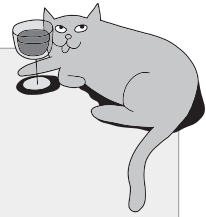
The same can apply to a schedule of candidates. Due to these biases, the first and last candidates interviewed are more likely to stick in the interviewers' minds, giving them an edge. On top of everything else, Kat fell victim to the primacy effect: Lisa was the first candidate interviewed, and was therefore subconsciously favoured.

Getting smarter

Kat is not stupid. Kat is, in fact, very clever. However, being influenced by these brain glitches is not ameliorated by being smart. Glitches in Kat's cognition were able to cloud her mind and guide her decision-making, and this is the danger. These cognitive pitfalls are not harmless: they are wildly influential in the course of our lives. Our brains – our own minds – can work against our best interests and leave us with misplaced confidence and understanding, and faulty impressions of the world.

Kat felt that charismatic, red-haired, first-in-the-door Lisa Miles was right for the job. If she'd slowed down and thought about it – taken heed of the warning signs and been a little more analytical and measured – things might have gone differently. But she *felt* that Lisa was right. She just *knew*. All these brain glitches worked together to create a strong feeling of certainty, and Kat took it at face value. And she paid dearly for that choice.

This is why it is worthwhile to pick apart these error tendencies in our neural machines. Stuff happens. We can only control our circumstances to a certain extent. But by understanding the biases, the flaws in our brains, we can try to mitigate their sway over our mental processing. We can have better control of how we think, and how that affects our decision-making. There is no magical trick - no silver bullet - but knowing some of the brain bugs causing havoc with your thinking is a good start.



Get your thoughts straight

The Gambler's Mistake

Notice whether you're seeing patterns where they actually don't exist, except in your imagination – for example, do you think you're having a run of good or bad luck?

The Happiness Error

Make a note of the differences in your decision-making when you're in a good mood or a bad mood.

You're Not a Magician

Watch for instances where you've layered meaning onto a situation – for example, you visualised a car park and found one, or you were thinking about someone and they called.

Escape the Bubble

Watch out for only registering information that you already agree with. Take a note of how your social media reflects back what you already believe.

Seek Out the Devil

Make a point of seeking an opinion that is antithetical to the one you hold.

Left or Right

Watch when you look at a menu. See if your eyes go to the top right-hand corner of the page first.