



Dr. B. Duncan McKinlay
Psychologist

London, ON, Canada
url. www.lifesatwitch.com

Website:

Tourette Syndrome • OCD • ADHD
Sensory • ODD • IED/‘Rage’

Publishing:

*Nix Your Tics! Eliminate Unwanted Tic Symptoms:
A How-To Guide for Young People*

Disinhibited Thoughts #24

Part of becoming registered as a Psychologist in Ontario is a requirement to pass a major factual exam, demonstrating that your knowledge within a variety of relevant areas is adequate. Hence I’ve spent this past summer reviewing content in such diverse topics as infant development, psychopharmacology, research design, and clinical techniques. Upon reviewing one area – cognitive psychology – I was reminded of a thought which struck me a decade-ish ago when I first studied how the human mind thinks: our brains are rather lazy things! Like indolent teens watching the clock at their summer jobs, our brains don’t care to invest more energy than is absolutely necessary, and so cut corners wherever possible.

One such shortcut is called the availability heuristic (or, availability ‘rule-of-thumb’). When we problem-solve, rather than scour the deepest recesses of our memories to best aid us in this task, our brains instead tell us that whatever thing has come readily to mind is likely the answer to our question. This ‘slacking’ may allow the brain to quit work a little early, but allowing such sloppy performance can sometimes rob us of much better and more healthy responses. Particularly when you have a difference. If you are anything like me, you’ve dwelled on your difference for many years: first seeking out a name for it, and then desperately learning more about it. Given, then, that my own difference comes readily to mind, my brain saw a golden opportunity to set itself up a tidy little program. “ALL of life’s woes stem from Tourette Syndrome”, this program proclaimed; “have a problem? It probably wouldn’t have happened to you if you didn’t have TS – blame IT!” Convenient? Without a doubt. Accurate? Often not. The truth is that life can be very unfair and a person can be very unhappy and **THESE PROBLEMS CAN BE COMPLETELY REMOVED FROM ANY DISORDER YOU HAVE**. Many problems arise independent of whether or not you have a difference at all – heck, the problem might even lie in the **OTHER** guy’s issue or difference. Always assuming that the problem and your difference are somehow related can sometimes unnecessarily cloud the picture. And if I always take the easy route my brain offers me without forcing more scrutiny I may miss much better rationales for, interpretations of, and solutions to that relationship loss, those friends that don’t call anymore, or that job that passed me by.

Another way our brains try to avoid work is called the representative heuristic: in this instance, our brains tell us that ‘if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, let’s just call it a duck, leave it at that, and then call it a day’. Again, this little convenience can get us into trouble. For example, I’ve often communicated how important it is to discriminate between people who have reacted to your difference because they misunderstand versus those who have malicious intent. Even though the first group is FAR more common than the second group (and an eager-beaver brain would keep this in mind), time and again my brain will mistake a member of the first group for the 2nd; based on surface appearances alone it will announce, “That’s a duck!” when it ain’t necessarily so. In essence, this is the root cause of stereotyping. This is also what happened at last year’s Gay Pride parade in Toronto when, congregated together with some friends at a pub after the festivities, I ridiculed a gentleman who had asked me to please stop making my noises. One of the snarky comments I recall making was, “I’ve been doing it for 29 years so it’s doubtful I’ll stop, but I’ll do my best”. Then the waitress brought me another beer, compliments of that very individual. As it arrived he also stood and apologized. Now it was my turn to be ashamed. Rather than invest the time and energy into fairly judging the situation my brain made a hasty (and incorrect) decision. Another time, when dining in a restaurant, a woman who had just been seated across from us mused out loud, “Who is making that sound?” Just as she figured out what was happening, but before she could communicate her regret for unintentionally putting me on the spot, I swung on her with a pointed ‘have you got something you’d like to say?’ Since those two occasions I now try to monitor my lazy brain, and the situations in which it finds itself, a little more carefully...

Until next time, my friends!

B. Duncan McKinlay, Ph.D., C.Psych. (supervised practice)

September 2003