

BOOK REVIEW

How We Decide by Jonah Lehrer

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009,
\$25.00

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In a little over a decade there has been a spate of books written about how we make decisions. It started with *Descartes' Error*¹ by Antonio Damasio. Prior to Damasio's work, emotions were disregarded as too difficult to study and irrelevant to the decisions made by our rational brains. Damasio proved that emotions are critical to our decision-making. We would not be motivated to make decisions without emotions. Emotions can be studied and we all use emotion/intuition more than we realize.

How We Decide by Johan Lehrer is a recent and creditable addition to this genre. It is hard to not be fascinated by research into the brain and mind as neurology and psychology have bridged the gap in the field of neuroscience. Making decisions is, indeed, influenced by our personal lives and our emotions influence what we do each day in our offices. The study of the decision making process begs several questions:

Can I become better and more consistent at making decisions?

Can I be more effective at understanding and interacting with others?

Can I apply my experience to help me to learn from my mistakes?

Can I better balance introspection and intuition?

Can answering these questions help me to provide more effective therapy to our patients?

Education, preparation, experience and concern are all important prerequisites but do not necessarily guarantee that we consistently make the best decisions. *How We Decide* explains the fascinating

experiments that have been performed are relevant to the questions above.

Jonan Lehrer has the advantage of following some excellent writers who have written on this topic over the last few years. His book is well-researched and well-written as the material in this field has continued to expand. Lehrer has chosen to use actual events from a number of areas as diverse as football, poker, piloting an airplane, opera and golf. Using examples is an effective technique to bring the reading experience closer to the physical experience, and demonstrates many different categories of decision-making. Lehrer makes a strong argument for the role of passion in making decisions. It has been shown that individuals, whose brain areas that contribute to emotions have been damaged, may not be able to make decisions at all. And, Lehrer argues, that there are some decisions that are best made by how it feels instead of a very lengthy attempt to list and weigh all of the possible factors. The reader should know that much of what Lehrer labels as emotion is labeled as intuition by others.

My reservation with Lehrer's premise is that he is often overly optimistic about our ability to choose the correct style of decision-making in a particular instance. He does not address that some decisions are much more important than others. He stresses the importance of our background of experiences, but does not address the effects of flawed learning experiences. He believes that we can overview our decision-making processes by thinking about thinking. Two areas where Lehrer clearly states that we deceive ourselves are political and economic projections.

Lehrer's book has the potential to help us become better decision-makers if we can read it with the open mind. This, unfortunately, is a trait we are constitutionally in jeopardy of not possessing. We like certainty. The desire for certainty has been shown to be one of the causes of poor decisions. Most of what transpires in our

brains, even in the process of making decisions, is outside of our conscious awareness. We are not immune to the same pitfalls and misperceptions that we recognize in others. We, too, are vulnerable to perceptual narrowing due to stress and multi-tasking. We, too, are better problem-solvers when we are in good moods than bad. We, too, make better decisions for patients when we can empathize with their situation. We, too, have areas of our brains making us feel better when we do good things for other people. This is one of the reasons we find what we do to be so rewarding. If you choose to read *How We Decide* I believe you will share my enthusiasm for its merits.

Reference

1. Damasio A. *Descartes' Error*. London: Penguin Books, 2005.