

SUMMARY

THE GREAT MENTAL MODELS

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Summary of “The Great Mental Models” by Shane Parrish and Rhiannon Beaubien

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Upgrade your thinking by learning from the best.

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Introduction

The human mind is the most powerful computer on earth. But what if you don't know how to run the software? Without the right tools to operate the machine, you'll never know how to make the machine work for you. That's why the authors invite you to embark on a crash course that will equip you with the right tools to understand your mind. By unlocking the hidden power of your mental faculties, you'll learn how to make the best decisions, solve problems quickly and efficiently, and improve your overall cognitive function. Think of it like a software upgrade for your computer! Are you ready?

Build Your Mind Map

Maps are incredible. If you're lost, they can help you find your way. If you want to learn more about a certain area, they can show you all the ins and outs. If you're new to an area, a map can provide you with the relevant information for navigating unfamiliar terrain. So, wouldn't it be great to have a map for your mind? Because-- let's be honest-- who hasn't felt lost in their own heads sometimes? Who hasn't grappled with thoughts they struggle to understand? The authors recognize that these are common problems and that's why they contend that everybody needs a map that will help them understand their own cognitive terrain. So, let's take a look at your mind map.

Although everyone's mental and emotional landscapes are different, a few key features remain the same. One is your "circle of competence." These are the things you know with relative certainty: the things you're good at, the things that make you feel confident. For example, let's say you have a strong love for reading that developed in early childhood. You have a history of winning spelling bees, writing essays, and feeling confident when you express yourself in words. So, in this example, we would put all things literature and reading-related in your circle of competence. Other examples like being the friend who always gives good advice or knowing how to administer CPR would also go in your circle of confidence; these are the areas in which you know what you're doing.

Everything outside that sphere, however, is unknown or unfamiliar to you. You might be able to acquire a new skill with time, education, and practice, but you're not perfect at it yet. Knowing this is crucial to your personal and professional development because it helps you to accept your own limitations. Accepting our limitations is something that many of us struggle with and that's why it's one of the first steps on our mind map. We don't like to admit that we're not right for the job or that we might have too much on our plate, so we often make the mistake of biting off more than we can chew. Maybe we do it to save face or to secure a new promotion. Maybe we

do it because we want to feel good about ourselves. But no matter what our motivation, it's always better to acknowledge our weaknesses and seek help than pretend we can instantly succeed at something that's outside our circle of competence.

For example, if you want to run for President of the United States, but you don't know the first thing about politics, you might want to reconsider your career choice. Or if you want to be an Olympic gymnast, but you can't walk and chew gum at the same time, it's wise to accept your limitations and admit you shouldn't pursue this course of action. So, the first stop on your mind map is familiarizing yourself with your circle of competence and being honest about what is and isn't inside that sphere.

Think Outside the Box

The next step involves developing your powers of creative problem-solving. This can be tricky because it requires us to think outside the box. And when our society places us under tremendous pressure to conform, to think and act like everybody else, it can be tough to break the mold. So, how do you do it? To accomplish this task, the authors suggest an exercise that is commonly used in marketing: the principle of inversion. It's been said that you can sell anything to anyone if you just present it in the right way. Inversion allows you to find that way by taking the traditional presentation and flipping it on its head. So, no matter what problem you want to solve, start by doing the opposite of what you'd normally do to come up with a solution.

To take a look at this ideology in practice, let's consider an example. Imagine you're an adults-only luxury resort company and 99% of your clients are male. So, your task is to convince more women to book vacations at your resorts. Your traditional approach might be to ask yourself what would make your vacation package desirable to guests. So, to that end, you might tout the value of beautiful beaches, all you can eat buffets, specialty cocktails, and the joy of being free from annoying children or crying babies. But if that approach isn't resulting in more female customers, it's time to think outside the box.

So, instead of asking what's wrong with your ad campaigns, ask yourself why they're not appealing to women. Could it be that women don't feel comfortable abandoning their children for a luxury getaway? Do they feel as though it's not socially acceptable or that they would be mom-shamed for taking time for themselves? Your male clients don't feel this pressure because men are granted social clemency for being uninvolved parents; of course they feel free to leave their children behind and treat themselves! So, if you want to appeal to women, your approach will need to shift its aims. Instead of simply trying to convince women to stay at your resort, you'll need to try and change the social double standards that confine them. With

this aim at the heart of your campaign, your advertising might now be directed toward moms and acknowledging how hard they work. Your commercials will praise mothers and normalize their need for a break. You'll concentrate on portraying a childless vacation as a well-deserved treat that all mothers need instead of a guilty pleasure. And by flipping the problem on its head, you'll address the root issue and attract more female clients!

The same is true for any problem you want to solve in your own life. So, if you feel that your current practices haven't led to the results you want, try flipping the problem on its head and see if you come up with new solutions! Often, the simple act of triggering your brain to think in new ways will be enough to get the creative juices flowing. And if you practice this mental model repeatedly, turning it into a habit, you'll normalize new forms of problem-solving and teach yourself to instinctively think outside the box. However, you don't have to test your new abilities on costly real-life experiments. For example, if you want to become wealthy, thinking, "I haven't tried sinking all my money in a get-rich quick scheme!" probably isn't the revolutionary approach you're hoping for. And it will be even less exciting when the scheme turns out to be a scam and you've lost your life savings!

So, instead of carrying out risky experiments, you can test your new problem-solving abilities on mental experiments. Even if what you're thinking about sounds crazy, playing out a scenario in your head can help you generate real answers. Even if it doesn't lead to anything productive, your brain will be fired up by the practice of running through complex scenarios and pondering what would happen. And your cognitive performance will improve as a result! That's because these kinds of thought experiments connect with the creativity of your inner child. If you think back to your childhood, you'll see just how true this is. Because kids aren't afraid of crazy thought experiments. They don't hesitate to ask things like, "What if there was a spider as big as your house?" or "What if you could fly all the way to the moon?" They might not find practical answers to their

questions, but that boundless creativity keeps them sharp and passionate.
And it can do the same for you!

Applying Occam's Razor

Have you ever heard of a principle called Occam's Razor? It comes to us from a 12th century philosopher named-- you guessed it!-- William of Occam. William of Occam theorized that the simplest explanation is almost always the right one. And although it might seem overly simplistic, the surprising truth is that it's usually right! How does it work? The definitive principle of Occam's Razor is that simple explanations are more likely to occur because there are fewer variables required to orchestrate that outcome. The more outlandish the possibility, the more variables are present, and therefore, that complicated scenario is rendered more unlikely. That's why the next step on your mental map is learning the value of Occam's Razor and how you can apply it in your everyday life. Occam's Razor is a great principle for daily living because we can use it to depower some of the common anxieties that beset us. Fear and anxiety are most often the result of catastrophizing or letting our imaginations run amok. If we're not careful, the anxiety-inducing scenarios we envision can paralyze us, and that's why it's vital to develop some mental tools to combat them.

So, for example, let's imagine that you invited your girlfriend to your birthday party. It's now thirty minutes past the party's start time and she still hasn't shown up. Anxiety is likely to kick in then and cause you to imagine the worst and most elaborate possibilities. What if she doesn't love you at all and she's decided to tell you by boycotting your partner? What if she's been in a horrific car crash? What if she's bleeding out by the side of the road while you're here eating cake? All of these theories are grounded in fear and none of them are realistic! So, if you instead run the bare facts-- "I invited my girlfriend to my birthday party. She's thirty minutes late"-- through the filter of Occam's Razor, you're likely to come up with a far more reasonable explanation. Perhaps she's running late. Perhaps she ran into traffic. Perhaps she took the bus and her bus was delayed. All of these possibilities are simpler and far more likely.

That doesn't mean that none of your worst-case scenarios are impossible or that you should always disregard your suspicions. All of the scenarios listed above are indeed plausible. But they're unlikely because they require many more variables like your girlfriend's emotional state, the possibility that she is a cruel or manipulative person, or an unsafe driver crossing her path at precisely the right moment on her way to the party. These scenarios are also indicative of the fact that when we learn to think outside the box, we may find it easy to get carried away. And if we're not careful, our imagination can take us to some pretty scary places. So, learn to think creatively-- but learn to temper your imagination with realism that's grounded in science. And most importantly, habitualize the practice of principles like Occam's Razor in your thought life so you can battle anxiety with ease.

You may also find it helpful to employ a common companion to Occam's Razor: a principle called Hanlon's Razor. Much like Occam's Razor, Hanlon operates from the starting point that the simplest explanation is the most likely. But it goes one step further to disempower our anxiety by acknowledging that, when unfortunate circumstances occur, the most likely motivation is stupidity rather than cruelty. Why? Because although it's true that people can be both stupid and cruel-- and that both traits are heavily present in the human race-- one is more likely than the other. That's because people are just more likely to be stupid than they are to be mean.

If you want to test the accuracy of that theory, just think about the amount of times you misplace your keys, forget where you parked, or walk into a room only to instantly forget what you came for. If you're like most people, you do those things on a weekly-- if not daily-- basis! But how often are you deliberately cruel to someone else? How often do you intentionally do something malicious? Rarely if ever, right? That's because most people are usually just wrapped up in the concerns of their own everyday lives. We're thinking about what we need to pick up from the grocery store, what somebody said in that meeting at work, or what we want to watch on Netflix. Although we can often be selfish or insensitive, it's usually because we weren't actively thinking of being kind to others in that moment. The

corollary of that is that we also rarely make a deliberate effort to be cruel to others. So, by applying these two principles to your daily thought patterns, you can achieve a great deal of peace!

Final Summary

As we said at the beginning of this book, the human mind is the most powerful computer in the world. But if you want to know how to make it work for you, you have to know how to run its software. Constructing a mental map is like designing a personalized guidebook that shows you how to operate your brain. You can identify the various components that need updates and learn how to improve their performance. And that's why the authors believe in the importance of studying some of the world's greatest models for beneficial thinking. So, by identifying your sphere of competence, learning to think outside the box, and applying principles like Occam's Razor and Hanlon's Razor, you can stimulate the areas of the human brain that most often need help. Doing so will not only improve your cognitive function, but teach you new ways of thinking that will upgrade your quality of life!



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