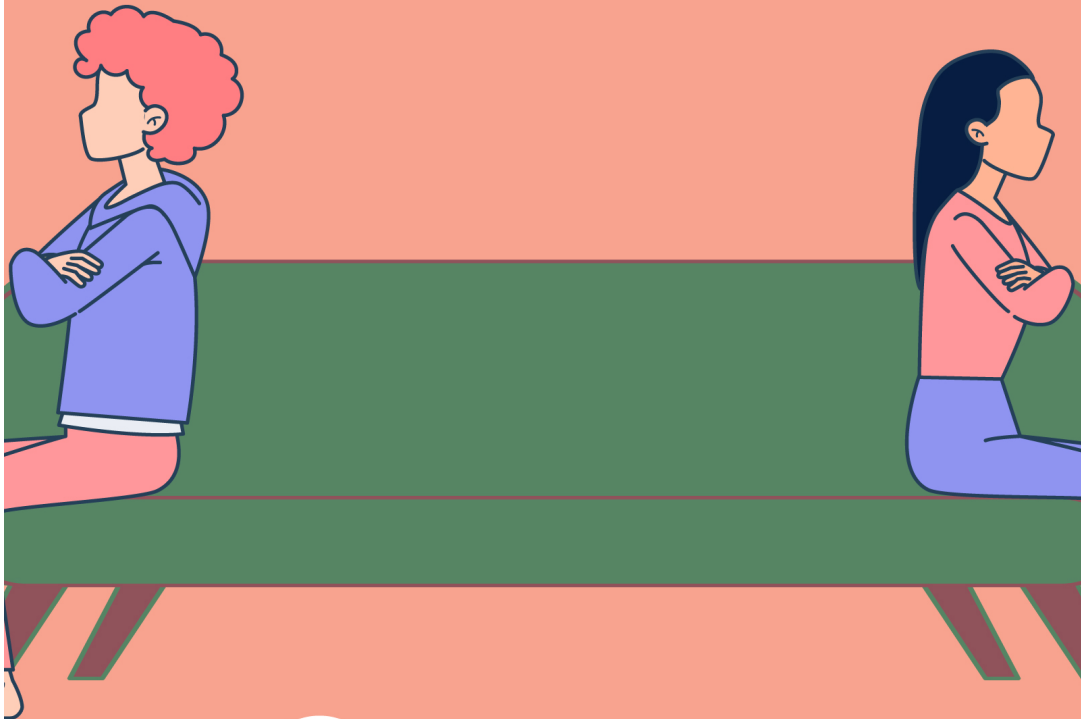


# SUMMARY

BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

## SWAY

BY ORI BRAFMAN



# **Summary of “Sway” by Ori Brafman**

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Learn why people behave in irrational ways.



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# Introduction

Have you ever made an irrational assumption? We would all like to think of ourselves as smart, reasonable, rational human beings, so you might be tempted to say, “Probably not!” (But even if you do, that’s a lie!) Because, in reality, every single human being on the planet makes irrational assumptions from time to time. And to put this into context, we’ll start by taking a look at a good example of irrational thinking in progress: recently, I sent a text to a close friend. We talk all the time and we have never had any disagreements or unpleasant words in the entire time we’ve known each other. So, the facts of the situation are simple: I love my friend and, judging by her behavior, I have every reason to believe that she loves me in return. But my friend didn’t reply to my text for a couple of days. So, instead of assuming that she might have been busy or that she wasn’t feeling well, I instantly jumped to one conclusion: she hates me and doesn’t want to talk to me any more.

Both of the former conclusions-- that she was preoccupied or ill-- would have made more sense and been more rational. But because I felt anxious about our lack of communication, I gave in to an irrational assumption that had no bearing on reality. And as silly as this example sounds, I bet it’s something you have done from time to time as well. Anybody can pass two people whispering and suddenly, irrationally wonder, “Are they talking about me?” Anybody can look at the people around them and think, “What if they all think I look weird?” All of these are common examples of logical fallacies that humans give into from time to time. But over the course of this summary, we’ll explore why our brains do this and learn how we can avoid these unreasonable conclusions.

# Why do We Behave in Irrational Ways?

I suffer from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, which means I'm kind of uniquely qualified to talk about irrationality. If you're not familiar with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, the very nature of OCD means that I frequently receive unwanted signals from my brain which identify certain thoughts, things, or circumstances as threats to me. And because my brain believes that those threats are real, I respond by feeling as though I need to take appropriate action to mitigate those threats. That's how the Obsessive Compulsive cycle works: unwanted intrusive thoughts produce an unshakable fear. This fear in turn creates a desperation to do anything that will make that anxiety go away. And when my brain is besieged by these fears and the intense need to get rid of them, it's easy to feel as though I don't control my decisions. Because it's impossible to out-logic OCD with rational thought, it's also easy to get stuck in a cycle of continually giving into compulsions, seemingly without hope of escape.

Fortunately, however, time and therapy have helped me to understand that I am capable of controlling my brain and that I have the power to decide which actions I take, rather than living as though these decisions have already been made for me. And although this realization can be uniquely difficult for someone with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, the truth is that everyone needs to accept this, whether they have OCD or not. Because, even if you don't have OCD, everyone struggles with irrational thoughts from time to time. And the author observes that fear-- specifically, fear of loss-- is at the heart of those irrational thoughts. To put that into context, let's consider a relatable example. Let's say that I'm a young professional in a committed relationship. My partner and I are monogamous, so we're only sexually active with each other. We want to spend the rest of our lives together but we've mutually decided that we don't want to have children.

If we did have children, we would lose a sizable portion of our income, our time, our peace of mind, and our happiness. Neither of us want to give up those things. So, because I'm afraid of losing those things, it's highly

possible that I might develop an irrational fear of pregnancy. It's possible that, despite practicing safe sex and accounting for backup methods of protection like using both condoms and birth control pills, I might be extra worried that one or both of these methods will fail and an unplanned pregnancy will develop. No method of protection is 100% foolproof, after all, so there's always a margin for error no matter how careful you are. If I allowed myself to focus on that thought, I could easily grow paranoid about the possibility of an unplanned pregnancy. Taking more than one pregnancy test is pretty normal; it's always smart to consider the likelihood of false negatives, faulty tests, and other potential issues. Testing again after a few weeks-- just to be sure-- is also fairly reasonable. Some people might consider it overly cautious, but this behavior is still within the bounds of things people do when they're trying to prepare for all eventualities.

But what if I became so paranoid that I decided to avoid sex with my partner for a period of several months just for peace of mind? This would certainly prevent the likelihood of pregnancy, but it's also a bit over the top. But what if even this wasn't enough for me? What if, despite not having sex with my partner for more than a year, I continued to take pregnancy tests throughout that abstinent year, just in case I'd missed something? This would be completely irrational! But because I'm so afraid of what I would lose if I became pregnant, my rational brain might not outweigh my fear. Although this might sound crazy, the author's research affirms that this type of extreme behavior is actually pretty typical for people who are being driven by fear. As we affirmed earlier in the chapter, most irrational thoughts or decisions are driven by fear, and we're unlikely to think clearly when we're afraid.

Unfortunately, the author has seen this play out far too often in his experience with the business world. Taking a lot of pregnancy tests or avoiding sex might be frustrating in your romantic relationships, but it's unlikely to result in a billion dollar loss. But when a CEO is deeply afraid of something and allows this fear to influence her decision making, the results can be catastrophic. The author has seen this time and time again as his

clients, terrified of what they have to lose, make a series of unwise decisions that ultimately cost them everything. In many cases, their own behavior might actually be more detrimental than the thing they feared in the first place! So, our first lesson from this chapter is pretty simple: learn to identify your fears and don't let them rule your decision making.



# Our Assessments of Information and Other People Are Often Irrational

The author observes that we often force ourselves to jump through hoops in a variety of situations because we feel pressured or nervous. (This is yet another example of irrational thoughts influencing our behavior!) For example, we might feel the need to impress someone and worry that we're too awkward to make a good first impression. In some cases, we respond to this pressure by being weirdly quiet at all the wrong moments. This behavior automatically ensures that, even if the other person didn't think we were awkward to begin with, they definitely do now!

Alternatively, you might find yourself in a conversation with someone you don't like and feel pressured to be nice to them. In these scenarios, you might respond by being overly talkative. Although simply shutting up would allow the conversation to proceed in a normal fashion, you dig yourself into a deeper and deeper hole by prattling on incessantly! The end result is exactly what you hoped to avoid: the other person thinks you're weird! Whether we'd like to admit it or not, we've all been in these scenarios at one time or another. When sitcoms depict these painfully awkward moments, you can't help but laugh along because you know what it feels like to be in this uncomfortable position. But because we're all going to be in these situations multiple times through our lives, the author believes it's important for us to find better coping mechanisms. For example, even if you're enduring the company of someone you dislike, you can try to salvage the situation by altering your mindset and looking for the positive in the situation.

In many cases, that might require you to look for something positive in the other person, even when that seems impossible. And sure, you might not like everything about them; maybe they're loud, conceited, or obnoxious and they-- understandably-- get on your nerves. But maybe you can also try to identify something good about them. Is it possible that they're really great at public speaking or that they did an awesome job at leading the

team on a certain project? Maybe they have admirable time management skills. It's vitally important that we look for these things in the people we dislike because our personal biases can sometimes cause us to lose our objectivity and develop harmful biases toward another person. You know this to be true if you've ever been infuriated by the innocent actions of someone you disliked. For example, have you ever felt irrationally annoyed by the sight of someone eating crackers or posing for a picture on Instagram just because you don't like them? If your feelings were different, the action alone wouldn't bother you at all. But when it's someone you dislike, you might feel an overwhelming sense of annoyance.

The author has seen this unfortunate bias play out in the corporate world time after time and he argues that it's just another example of irrationality causing us to make foolish decisions. Here's one example that he has frequently observed. Let's say a friend came to you with a business idea. You like this friend; the two of you are quite close and regularly spend time together outside of work. Maybe you even take extended vacations together. So, when your friend tells you their business idea, you think it's awesome and you're quick to invest. But what if someone you dislike came to you with that same idea? What if it's the same person who can annoy you just by breathing? If your default position is being annoyed with everything this person does, you're unlikely to be objective in your response to their idea. Even if the premise of the idea is exactly the same as your friend's, if you heard that same idea from someone you dislike, you might be inclined to find fault with it.

The author points out that, whether your impression is positive or negative, if your impression of the idea is influenced by your opinion of the person talking to you, it's still an irrational assumption. And that's why it's crucial that we analyze our thoughts, feelings, and responses for objectivity. A purely rational response would affirm that an idea can be objectively great even if you hate the person who thought of it. Likewise, if you're being rational, you can acknowledge that you love your friend, but his business idea stinks. (And, if you're really being rational, you should be able to be honest with both your friend and your enemy!) The author observes that, in

both cases, being rational and objective can help you to make wise decisions and avoid foolish investments. It will also enable you to forge honest and authentic relationships with others!

Assessing your heart and mind can be a lot of work. And when that assessment requires you to identify and eliminate irrationality in yourself, it can be uncomfortable. But it's important to make that investment in your personal development, no matter how difficult it is. Because if we're not careful, irrational feelings can cause us to become unfairly biased toward others and this can skew our perspective. So, try to be aware of these feelings when they pop up and work to balance them with fairness. This will help you to lose that sense of awkwardness or inauthenticity and allow you to truly be yourself in every situation. You don't have to like another person or be their biggest fan. But wherever possible, you should try to be fair, genuine, and unbiased in your attitudes and interactions.

## Final Summary

If jumping to conclusions was an Olympic sport, many of us would have gold medals! That's because human beings can quickly fall prey to irrational assumptions and illogical pitfalls if we don't actively guard against them. However, the author believes that it's possible to hack your brain's decision-making abilities by improving your relationship with logic.

If you can start by understanding that irrational thinking is driven by fear, you can work to identify and conquer your fears. And as you eliminate your irrational thoughts, you can replace them with the objectivity, clarity, and courage you need to make smart decisions.



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