



Episode 13: The 3 Reasons Our Brain Jumps to Conclusions

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host Deb Elbaum and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi, everyone. It's Deb. Today, we're going to talk about our brains, the stories they make up and jumping to conclusions. We jump to conclusions all the time. We just know what other people are going to say or why they said what they said or why they're not responding to our emails or texts. Our brain creates reasons behind all of these.

And unfortunately, most of the time, our brain's reasons are not correct. They are assumptions. Jumping to conclusions about other people and their motives is a problem because it leads to frustration, disappointment, or anxiety. When we make up these stories, we then often act accordingly and we might do things like cut people off, shut down conversation, or disengage. These behaviors and thoughts hurt our relationships and they hurt us. When our brains make up a story, there's usually a cost to our feelings, our thinking, and our relationships. Stories we make up can quickly spiral out of control and lead to long lasting hurt and lots of judgment.

The good news is that we can teach our brains to do things differently. We can understand the science behind making up these stories and we can then choose different ways to think and speak. We can bring curiosity instead of resistance, feel calmer instead of getting worked up and be more compassionate, instead of judgmental. I have a few big ideas to share today about the science behind why and how our brains make up stories.

First, our brains make up stories because our brain operates in prediction mode. It is our brain's sole job to keep us alive and well, and it does this by predicting what it needs to do to keep us functioning properly in every situation. When our brain predicts, it filters the sensations in our body and the inputs from the outside world through a lens of past experiences. This means that our brain uses past experiences to predict what it needs to do now and in the immediate future. Let's think about that a second. It is wonderful that our brain has a way to keep us alive. But what happens when we use these past experiences to predict what other people are thinking now? What happens when our brain fills in the gaps and creates a whole story about someone else based on incomplete data? The cost is hurt, disappointment, anger, and judgment.

That's partly because of big idea number two. Big idea number two is that our brain has a negativity bias, meaning that it sees the negative more than the positive. Our brain also has a self referential bias, meaning that we usually put ourselves in the center of a story. Like if we see someone look at us and laugh, our brain usually thinks that they're laughing at us.

When our brain makes up stories and attributes reasons to other people's behaviors, it's usually a negative story and it usually involves us.

Here's an example from a client. A client of mine received a verbal offer for a job. Wonderful. And she was told that she'd soon get an offer letter in the mail. But a few days later, the offer letter still hadn't arrived. And after about four or five days, she emailed me really upset, and she emailed didn't it mean something bad that she didn't get the letter?

She was worried that there was something problematic going on behind the scenes about the offer. Maybe they didn't want her. Her brain was making up stories, and with the negativity bias and the self-referential bias, these stories were about her and they were negative. And it had a real cost. The cost to her was increased stress and worry.

And when she received the offer letter, a few days later, she realized that she worried for nothing. Here's another example about our brains making up stories from me. This is from a recent interaction I had with a colleague. My colleague Kelly and I were working together to create a talk to deliver to our organization, and a lot of our meetings were over video. One day, we were hopping onto a video meeting and we entered the meeting and Kelly said, Deb are you okay? Are you mad at me about something? This surprised me. Not at all, I said. What gave you that impression? She said, because your face looks like it has a bit of a scowl.

And when I looked at myself in the video camera, I did see a scowl. I had no idea that that was my facial expression. Not at all. I said, I just had some computer issues and I was having a hard time logging in. So here's what's so interesting about that. I was not aware that that was the facial expression that I had, and Kelly was aware of it. She noticed it immediately, and immediately her brain made up a story that I was mad at her. Now I'm so glad that she said something, because what if she hadn't? What if she had just assumed that I was mad at her? She might have then been terse with me and that might've made me think she was mad at me. And then the whole situation could have quickly spiraled into a place of hurt feelings.

This brings me to big brain idea number three. It is a myth that universal facial expressions for emotions exist. Recent research from Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett at Northeastern University shows that despite what we might have been taught in our psychology classes in high school and college, there are no universal facial expressions of emotion.

This means that if you're looking at someone's face and you see their mouth in a frown, it does not necessarily mean that they're angry. It might mean that they're upset or thinking deeply or confused, or even anxious. Think about all of those times that you guessed someone's feelings based on their facial expression. Those guesses were based on false and incomplete data.

Now, maybe you are right and maybe you are wrong. But don't, you wish you had a more accurate way to understand how other people think and feel? What can we do to decrease the stories, our brains make up and get to the truth of what's happening. It's simple. We can ask more questions. We can let people know that we're making up a story about something and then ask a question about what might be really going on.

Here's another example from my life. Early on, when I had just started my coaching practice, I was working with a client I'll call Chris. Chris and I had a few great coaching sessions in which she seemed really engaged and motivated for our work. Then after two sessions, she canceled session number three, and my emails to her about rescheduling were not answered. There was total silence. Crickets. Can you guess the story my brain made up? My brain was making up that she thought I was a horrible coach and that our work wasn't helpful and she never wanted to talk to me again. That was the dramatic story that my brain made up and it caused me lots of distress.

Now at the time I was working with my own coach and my coach suggested that I reach out one more time with an email, letting Chris know the story I was making up and asking for some insight. So I emailed Chris with a slightly more positive story and I wrote, dear Chris, I'm making up a story that you are totally overwhelmed with life and kids and completely buried, and don't even have a moment to email back. I'm worried about you, and I would love some sign that you are okay. And lo and behold, Chris responded, and she wrote, hi Deb, I'm so sorry for the radio silence. Lots going on. I appreciated our work and need to pause. Now receiving this response was reassuring. One, I took the fact that she emailed me back to me in that she didn't hate me. And two, her message reminded me that other people have lots going on in their lives that have absolutely nothing to do with us.

So what can we do when our brain makes up stories? Here are three concrete steps. First, recognize that your brain is making up a story. Recognize that your brain is in prediction mode and filling in the gaps. Say something to yourself like, wow, my brain is making up a really dramatic story.

Two, check in with the other person, if possible, and say something, like, I'm making up this story that you're really mad about something I said, or I'm making up the story that you forgot about my request.

And three, get curious and ask open-ended questions. What are your thoughts? What's on your mind? What's your timeline for getting back to me? Try to get some data that your brain can use to confirm or deny the story and guide your next steps.

So let's bring this to you. In the next few weeks, please be on the lookout for any negative stories your brain might be making up about the people you live or work with and what their motives might be.

Then test out some of these assumptions. Step into a curious and nonjudgmental mindset. Let the people know that you're making something up and ask an open ended, curious question to flesh out your understanding of the situation. Doing this will give your brain more experience and more data that it can use the next time it goes into protection mode.

And remember, just like your brain makes up stories, other people's brains make up stories, and other people's brains who you live and work with are making up stories about you, too. In order to help these stories be more accurate and reflect how you're accurately thinking, there are things that you can do.

You can communicate. You can tell other people the conclusions you want them to draw about you and what you're doing. Please don't let their brains fill in the gaps with a negativity bias. Tell the people around you what you're thinking about, what your reasoning is, and what your facial expression might mean.

Clear communication leads to fewer assumptions, more understanding, and more connection and compassion. And if you really have to make up stories, please at least make them some good ones. Thank you so much for being part of my community and listening into my podcast. Until next time... .