CAROLINE WEBB

'An extraordinary book'
Susan Cain, author of *Quiet*

HOW TO HAVE A GOOD DAY

Think Bigger, Feel Better and Transform Your Working Life

Additional Advance Acclaim for *How to Have a Good Day*

"There's a big difference between having a great, productive day and having a bland, ordinary one. Caroline Webb deftly explains how to squeeze the most out of twenty-four hours to create more of the former. Very useful." —Sir Michael Moritz, chairman of Sequoia Capital

"A powerful toolkit to improve both work and well-being. From email and meetings to making the most out of every day, Webb shows us not just how to be more productive but how to be more fulfilled along the way." —Jonah Berger, Wharton professor and bestselling author of *Contagious* and *Invisible Influence*

"Imagine what your life would be like if you could simply 'choose' to have a good day. Webb makes a powerful case that we can. Best of all, she shows us how. Webb gets her arms around the vast body of information coming at us from behavioral economics, psychology, and neuroscience, and distills the best of it into the kind of practical advice a wise friend might offer. It's the book Daniel Kahneman might write if he'd been working in the business world for twenty years. Masterful." —Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen, coauthors of the bestselling *Difficult Conversations* and *Thanks for the Feedback*

"This is a brilliantly useful book. Caroline Webb has a quite exceptional range of organisational experience. She uses it to review a vast span of the latest academic 'thinking about thinking' in the clearest possible way. And then she applies this wisdom to help us all sort out the frazzle of our own working day. Her approach is utterly straightforward but based in deep insights into how human beings really behave." —Peter Day, BBC business correspondent and presenter of *In Business* and *Global Business*

"Years ago I was a rower, and in sports everyone knows you need to pay attention to yourself, your intent, and your mindset to be at your best. This book reminded me of all I learned from those days about the importance of having the right attitude. I found it a great, practical guide to applying these and other helpful psychological insights in business—something we do all too infrequently. Built solidly on the latest research, brought to life with storytelling, it offers many simple ways to boost your performance and give you a better day at work—and if you're a leader, it will show you how to make sure that your colleagues are in top form, too." —Matt Brittin, president of Google Europe, Middle East, and Africa; former rowing world championship medalist and British Olympic team member

"*How to Have a Good Day* speaks to every area of your workday and shows how making a few critical adjustments to your everyday behavior will leave you amazed by the results. By applying the lessons in Webb's book, all based on science, you'll maximize your performance and be more energized than ever." —Marshall Goldsmith, bestselling author of *Triggers*, *MOJO*, and *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*

"The quest for self-improvement usually takes place on a well-trodden path, with many different gurus offering guidance. But the advice, in addition to being contradictory, often lacks solid foundations. Fortunately, *How to Have a Good Day* is the breakout exception to this category. The evidence and examples packed inside its pages leave the reader in no doubt that Webb's advice will make a real difference. Better days lead to better lives, and this extraordinary book will lead to both." —Chris Guillebeau, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The $100 Startup* and *The Happiness of Pursuit*

Harness the Power

of Behavioral Science

to Transform

Your Working Life

HOW TO HAVE A GOOD DAY

Caroline Webb

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First Edition

For my mother and my father,
who gave me both confidence and cause

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INTRODUCTION

How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.
—ANNIE DILLARD

Thirty years ago, I picked up my first paycheck. It wasn't a check, in fact—just a small collection of bills and coins in an envelope, my wages for working as a clerk in a local supermarket. On the face of it, it wasn't a great job. It was poorly paid, and certainly not glamorous. I stacked shelves, mopped floors, and wore a company-issued uniform marked with stains from its previous owner. The manager was gruff and kept an eye on the store from a booth high above the shop floor. And yet, somehow, I liked it. There was camaraderie among the staff, and even the occasional night out together. I took pride in pleasing customers with my speed at the register. I felt useful.

Six years later, I landed a far more upscale role as a researcher at an economics institute. I had my own office and a surprisingly large number of recycling bins all to myself. But I soon felt strangely miserable. I couldn't get anyone to pay attention to my work, and I drifted. I wrote an enormous, earnest report—on economic development in post-Communist Europe—that I'm pretty certain nobody read. I was dealing with what we'd these days call a "first-world problem," and I knew I was lucky to have the job. But it became hard to summon the energy to turn up to work every day. And at that point in my life, I didn't know how to turn it around. I treaded water till my contract was up, then quietly moved on.

Over the course of my life, I've done a lot of different types of work, some of it worse and some of it better than those two early jobs of mine. I've been a hotel maid, receptionist, and waitress. I've had demanding careers as an economist, a management consultant, and an executive coach. I've worked in the private sector and the public sector; I've been part of a huge global company and I've launched my own tiny start-up. And through it all, I noticed the same thing over and again: that the

quality of my day-to-day experience wasn't necessarily defined by my title. It was possible to have good days in "bad" jobs, while the more prestigious roles didn't always correlate with great contentment.

That paradox seeded my lifelong curiosity about what it takes to flourish at work, both mentally and emotionally. It became something of a personal cause as I sought to find the right way to handle the increasing intensity of my professional life—and even more so once I noticed how my colleagues and clients often felt frustrated and worn down, making it hard for them to function at their best. In fact, survey after survey suggests that half (or more) of all employees feel disengaged in their work.[1] Add to that the off days experienced by those of us who generally feel motivated and happy, and we're looking at a lot of lost human potential. Yet we often talk about professional dissatisfaction as if it's a casual disappointment, something to be endured until the weekend rolls around, and perhaps joked about with friends. ("What happened to you today?" "Oh, work, you know." "Ha ha. Me too. Have a drink.")

So I've devoted much of my career to figuring out how to improve our chances of saying a cheery "yes, thanks" when we're asked "Did you have a good day?" My twelve years with McKinsey & Company (the management consultancy) helped greatly in my pursuit of that goal, since it gave me the opportunity to find out what everyday life was like inside hundreds of workplaces. I specialized in projects that helped organizations shift their culture in a more positive direction, which meant I spent a lot of time studying behavior, attitudes, and processes. And whenever I could, I'd ask my clients the same three questions: What does a good day look like for you? What about a bad one? What would it take to have more good days? Then, I'd get to work, helping them turn their bad days into better days. Sometimes that would involve coaching individual leaders; other times, I'd convene large groups to help them rethink the way they worked together. Repeatedly, I observed how fairly small changes—for example, fine-tuning the way people set priorities or handled disagreements—could result in major improvements to performance and job satisfaction. It was uplifting to see.

Throughout those years, my work leaned heavily on the growing body of behavioral science findings on what it takes for human beings to thrive. My first career was in economics, but I became deeply interested in developments in the other behavioral sciences, too, so I

did some additional training in psychology and neuroscience. Then I spent countless hours reading academic articles and books (more than six hundred at last count) in the three disciplines, looking for findings that I could translate into actionable advice for my clients. And that abundance of research and practical experience is the bedrock of *How to Have a Good Day*.

SO WHAT IS A GOOD DAY?

Over the years, I noticed some common answers to my "what is a good day" question—answers that resonated with the small delights of my humble supermarket job. First, people often talked about getting a buzz from feeling productive, and from knowing that their efforts counted toward something worthwhile. The best days also tended to involve people feeling confident that they were doing a fine job, and that they had the support they needed from others. Finally, people talked about good days leaving them feeling more energized than depleted, overall. I don't mean that the work wasn't physically or mentally tiring—just that it gave back enough enjoyment and motivation to make up for whatever it was taking out of them.

Of course, whether we get to have all that agreeable stuff on a given workday is partly the result of luck. If we're handling a cranky colleague or a crisis, it's obvious that we're not entirely in control of the way the day feels. But my experience has led me to a heartening conclusion: we have more room to maneuver than we generally realize. The secret lies in learning some of the science explaining how the brain works, and why people behave the way they do. Less of the day seems driven by chance once we understand some of the forces that shape our choices and our emotions, and once we recognize how our thought patterns can affect everything from our perception of reality to the moods of those around us. Grasp these essentials, and it becomes far clearer how to bring the best out of ourselves and others. And that puts us in a much stronger position to create the kind of day we really want to have.

For example, an executive who shares his story later in the book talks about starting to have "unexpectedly great meetings" after he learned something that behavioral scientists know well: that even small challenges to a person's sense of competence will put their brain on the defensive, making it harder for them to think clearly (in turn creating something of a self-fulfilling prophecy). In his meetings, the executive's

take-no-prisoners personal style had inadvertently been triggering this defensive reaction in the people around him, and it was causing a lot of tension. But once he tweaked the way he expressed his views, the quality of his interactions changed within moments.

Elsewhere in the book, another seasoned professional tells us about "suddenly" securing new promotion opportunities after trying out new science-based techniques to sharpen her focus and self-confidence. We hear about a leader who delightedly discovered hidden talents in her team after acting on research showing that people think more creatively when given a particular type of space to think. Once an entrepreneur learns a little about the brain's reward system, he finds he can say no to people while making them feel almost as good as if he'd agreed to their requests. And so on.

How to Have a Good Day is all about the ways we can create more of these sorts of lucky breaks once we know more about the science of our magnificent minds.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

I've arranged the book around seven building blocks that echo the themes in people's answers to my "good day" question. First, there are two sections designed to give you a strong foundation for everything you're doing, by showing you how to set the right kind of priorities and make the best possible use of your time. Next, you'll find three sections that explain how to transform more of your tasks into a pleasure and a triumph, by helping you to ace every interaction, maximize your creativity and wisdom, and boost your personal impact. Finally, I've written two sections on ways to maintain your joie de vivre throughout the workday, by showing you how to boost your resilience in the face of disappointment, and laying out strategies for generating more energy throughout it all.

As a bonus, you'll find advice at the back of the book showing you how to use the book's insights to improve two fixtures of modern working life: meetings and emails. There's also a handy checklist to help you use the book's tips to reinvigorate your morning-to-night routine.

SCIENCE, STEPS, STORIES

Throughout the book, you'll find a blend of scientific evidence, practical techniques, and real examples from people who've used those techniques in their own lives. Let me say a few words about each of those.

First, every piece of advice in *How to Have a Good Day* is backed up by rigorous scientific evidence from psychology, behavioral economics, or neuroscience. I've taken care to focus only on findings that are widely accepted and have been replicated by multiple research teams, though I've sometimes picked out quirky experiments that manage to illustrate a particular point while raising a smile (or a groan). My aim has been to keep the science as simple as it can be while remaining correct. To help with that, in the "Science Essentials" section which appears right after this introduction, I've written a short guide to three big cross-cutting themes that frame every idea in the book. That's all you'll need to navigate this fascinating evidence with ease.

The central purpose of the book is to translate all that science into step-by-step techniques for improving your day-to-day life. Each chapter is designed to allow you to quickly find the advice you need, because the practical pointers are highlighted with bullet points; each chapter also ends with a box that summarizes its advice for quick reference. I've laid out the chapters in a sequence that I hope is helpful—but if you're wrestling with a specific challenge at work right now, you might choose to flip ahead to material that speaks directly to your current concern. Skipping around should work, especially if you've first read the Science Essentials section.

As I've already hinted, you'll also hear real stories from dozens of successful people who describe how the advice in this book has helped them improve their working lives. Together, they represent most major industries and span every continent of the world (except the coldest one). Some are at the peak of their careers, while others are on their way up. I've used their real names in all but a couple of cases, although I've not included their surnames or organizations to keep them from being deluged with requests for advice once their wise ways are made public. I hope you'll find them as inspiring as I do. And in case you're wondering, I *do* take my own medicine every single day—so I'll also share some examples of times that these techniques helped me flourish in my career.

SPREADING THE WORD

As well as showing you how to be in top form, *How to Have a Good Day* can be used to help you bring the best out of people you lead, manage, or collaborate with. Most of the techniques here can be used in groups, to improve team interactions, or provide structure for important meetings—whether or not you refer to the science behind the techniques. (If you would like to gather colleagues together to talk about the book's suggestions, you'll find materials to help you facilitate group discussions at www.howtohaveagoodday.com.)

I've also seen the book's advice make a positive difference in settings beyond conventional workplaces. Whether you're a college student or a community volunteer, a retiree or a homemaker, you can use the principles in this book to boost your effectiveness and your enjoyment of the day. Many of my clients have even confided to me over the years that these techniques have improved their marriages and strengthened relationships with children and friends. Some grin when I ask them how it's going, telling me they've surreptitiously used their nearest and dearest as guinea pigs before trying out new approaches at work. So do have some fun experimenting with these suggestions, wherever you are.

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We all face things we can't change. But behavioral science is sometimes startling in showing us just how much influence we have on the way we experience the world. When we choose to take this evidence on board, the effect can be nothing short of transformational. We can exert more control and start to enjoy more "well-planned luck." And as a result, we can all have many more good days. Now let's get started.

HOW TO HAVE A GOOD DAY

FIRST OF ALL...	THEN IN EVERY TASK...	...AND THROUGHOUT THE DAY
↓	↓	↓
PRIORITIES Set intentional direction for your day	RELATIONSHIPS Make the most of every interaction	RESILIENCE Sail through setbacks and annoyances
◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆
PRODUCTIVITY Make the hours in the day go further	THINKING Be your smartest, wisest, most creative self	ENERGY Boost your enthusiasm and enjoyment
	◆◆◆	
	INFLUENCE Maximize the impact of all you say and do	

The Science Essentials

> I'll believe anything, no matter how wild and ridiculous, if there is evidence for it. The wilder and more ridiculous something is, however, the firmer and more solid the evidence will have to be.
>
> —Isaac Asimov

We're living in a golden age of behavioral science, where every passing week seems to deliver fresh insights into the way we think, feel, and act. Neuroscientists, psychologists, and economists are busy unraveling the important mysteries of our time, questions like: "How can I conquer my inbox?" "Why do perfectly reasonable people get their wires crossed?" "What would it take for me to stop procrastinating right now (or later today, or tomorrow)?" Scientific research has ever more to say in answer to these sorts of pressing questions.

You might reasonably wonder what's changed. Why are so many media articles suddenly illustrated with pictures of brains? The three disciplines that form the backbone of this book—psychology, behavioral economics, and neuroscience—have been around for a century or more, after all. But right now we're sitting at the intersection of some big trends that are making these three behavioral sciences more applicable to our everyday lives. Let me describe some of that backstory, before I lay out the three big cross-cutting science themes that run through the rest of the book.

PSYCHOLOGY: GREATER FOCUS ON WELL-BEING

For much of its history, psychology was mostly concerned with investigating the causes of negative behavior. Researchers did important work to understand pathologies such as paranoia and depression; they

explored the dynamics of fear and aggression. Given this, it's perhaps no surprise that one of psychology's most well-known experiments was Stanley Milgram's controversial exploration of how far people were willing to submit to authority—the one where he tested whether volunteers would be willing to give potentially fatal electrical shocks to strangers when told to do so by someone in a white coat.[1] (A disturbing number of them obeyed.) Obviously, this kind of research did a lot to illuminate the complexities of the human mind, and has laid the foundations of modern behavioral science. But the findings didn't readily translate into uplifting guidance for living a good life.

In recent years, however, the balance has shifted toward exploring the conditions that invite positive behavior. Perhaps the most visible catalyst for the shift came when Martin Seligman, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, was elected president of the American Psychological Association in 1998. Seligman's own research had previously focused on the study of helplessness. But he announced with some fanfare that the theme for his term of office would be "positive psychology," the serious study of what it takes for us to be the best version of ourselves. And since then, psychologists have directed more energy toward understanding the jollier side of human experience—what helps us thrive, lifts our spirits, and boosts our productivity. These are exactly the sort of things that most of us are hungry to know more about, especially on those days when our workplaces feel like a Milgram experiment.

ECONOMICS: MORE REALISM IN THEORIES OF BEHAVIOR

At the same time, economics has also moved toward a more rounded view of the human condition. At its heart, economics is the study of the way people make choices: how we weigh the costs and benefits of different options, and what we decide to do as a result. The choices might be mundane, like deciding which snack to buy, or they might be consequential, like deciding which multimillion-dollar project goes forward. Either way, to predict people's choices, economists used to build theoretical models that assumed humans always accurately and independently assessed the benefits of each option open to them. But those models weren't able to explain a lot of real-life behavior: for example, the way we often make snap decisions based on little information; the fact that we sometimes change our minds, based on what others think;

the way we occasionally do nice things for other people without any expectation of payback.

This spurred two psychologists—Daniel Kahneman of Princeton and Amos Tversky of Stanford—to cross enemy lines in 1979 and publish an article in *Econometrica*, an influential economics journal. In the article, they highlighted that people *don't* behave like machines when it comes to the choices they make.[2] Emotional and social considerations drive many of our choices, often for good reason and in quite predictable ways. And with that, they sparked a revolution. Soon there was a new movement called "behavioral economics" that was devoted to applying the powerful analytical tools of economics to the way that real people make decisions in the real world. The result? Well, Kahneman went on to win the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2002. But more important for us is that economists now have a much more nuanced and accurate understanding of the choices we make from day to day, and what it takes for us to nudge our behavior one way or another.

NEUROSCIENCE: MORE SOPHISTICATED MEASUREMENT OF BRAIN ACTIVITY

Finally, neuroscience has benefitted from dramatic advances in techniques for observing ordinary brains in action. Neuroscientists have long had access to a range of scanning techniques that helped reveal the structures and activities of the brain. Those scanning technologies often came at a cost of exposing the brain's owner to a good deal of radiation—so they weren't ideal for non-medical research. Since the 1990s, though, steady improvements in less risky imaging technologies (including the discovery of functional MRI scanning) have made it easier for neuroscientists to watch what happens to *healthy* people's brains while normal things are happening to them. That means researchers can see which areas of the brain become active when a person is tickled by kindness or energized by accomplishment. They can observe the neural activity associated with someone feeling unhappy or stressed (for reasons beyond the fact that they're lying in a noisy metal tube or have electrodes strapped to their heads).

As a result, neuroscientists are gaining an increasingly refined understanding of the biological mechanisms behind our everyday thoughts, feelings, and actions. And that means they're exploring the kind of behavioral topics that also fascinate psychologists and

economists—for example, questions about the way we solve challenging problems and handle complex social interactions. In fact, many of the studies I cite in this book result from collaborations across the three behavioral science disciplines; it feels as if we're living in an era of "neuro-psycho-economics." (Or something like that.) And this multidisciplinary mash-up is great news for us. It means we get to benefit from complementary perspectives (biological, observational, and analytical) on topics that matter to us in the workplace—which in turn results in richer guidance on ways for us to stay in top form.

So all in all, it's an excellent time to be thinking about the way that science can help us flourish.

THREE BIG THEMES

Now, how do we apply all this evolving, exciting science to the everyday details of our working lives? That's where *How to Have a Good Day* comes in. This book is dedicated to translating the most valuable research into the context of today's working world—the tough assignments, the packed schedules, the complex relationships—to show you how to make every day reliably more enjoyable and productive.

Before we dive into the advice on creating the seven building blocks of a good day, I'm going to highlight three important scientific themes that cut across the boundaries of the disciplines and recur throughout the book, to give you a foundation for the evidence and advice you'll find in each chapter. (If you'd prefer to skip ahead to Part I of the book and get started on the practical applications, that's fine—there's a glossary at the end of the book and you can always come back to this section later.) The three themes, in brief, are:

- **1. The two-system brain**: The brain's activity is split across two complementary systems—one deliberate and controlled, the other automatic and instinctive. The combination of the two makes us smart and productive. But we can make our cognitive resources go even further if we adjust the way we work to reflect each system's strengths and weaknesses.

- **2. The discover-defend axis**: Subconsciously, we're constantly on the lookout for threats to defend against and rewards to discover. It takes very little to put our brains into defensive mode, and we're not at our

smartest in that mode. However, a dose of self-awareness and the pursuit of certain types of rewards can help us move back into clearer-thinking discovery mode.

➨ 3. **The mind-body loop**: The state of our bodies and that of our minds are far more deeply entwined than we generally realize. As a result, certain simple physical interventions can immediately boost our intellectual performance, emotional resilience, and personal confidence.

THEME 1: THE TWO-SYSTEM BRAIN

Our brains are impressive, by any measure. They keep our bodily functions humming while offering us immense storage capacity for complex memories and ideas. They're also capable of remarkable processing and calculating feats, giving us the ability to do things as diverse as mental arithmetic, guessing other people's motivations, keeping our cool in the face of provocation, and telling corny jokes. If brains were smartphones, they'd be flying off the shelves.

To make all of this possible, our brains run two very different systems in parallel. Each has its own strengths, and it's the combination of the two that gives us so much intellectual horsepower. Psychologists had observed for many years that our minds seemed to have two quite different modes—one more analytical, the other more instinctive.[3] But it was Daniel Kahneman who brought the concept into the public spotlight when he accepted his Nobel Prize for Economics in 2002. He centered his acceptance speech on describing the distinction between "effortless intuition" and "deliberate reasoning," concepts central to his bestselling book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*.[4] Let's examine what he meant, and what that means for us in the workplace.

The Deliberate System

First, let's talk about the system we're more aware of, the one that controls the things we do consciously and carefully. Most of it sits in the part of the brain called the prefrontal cortex, and it goes by a lot of different names. In scientific circles, it's sometimes known as the "controlled," "explicit," or "reflective" system. Daniel Kahneman calls it the "slow" system, because it's indeed the slower of the two systems.[5] I'm going to refer to it as the *deliberate system*.

This deliberate system is broadly responsible for the sort of grown-up behavior that would surprise us in a toddler (or even a teenager): reasoning, self-control, and forward thinking.

By reasoning, I don't just mean logical thinking; I mean any effort to work out the best response to a situation that isn't routine. Whether we're fixing an error-laden document or figuring out how to help a stressed-out colleague, we're leaning on our deliberate system and asking it to do the following: review some information, connect that information to our past experience, make sense of it all, generate options, and evaluate those options wisely. Logic might be involved in that process, but so might empathy and creativity.

Self-control is also a broader concept than you might think. Most obviously, it's involved whenever we resist temptation—for example, when we manage to bite our tongue rather than blurt out the foolish thing that we desperately want to say to our co-worker with the new haircut. But our deliberate system's self-control function is also central to something scientists call "emotional regulation"—that is, not losing our cool when we're upset—and to our ability to concentrate in the face of distractions.

Finally, our hardworking deliberate system is responsible for planning—that is, setting goals and working out how to get there. That requires us to think abstractly: to imagine what the future looks like, to consider the various paths to get there, and to assess the eventual benefits of setting off on any of those paths. We run this sort of complex calculation every day, even when our goal is just to organize ourselves to get to a meeting on time.

In short, the deliberate system is responsible for putting us on our best behavior. When it's in full control, it makes us wise, self-possessed, and reliable. But let's be honest: we're not always like that. That's because our deliberate system has several limitations.

Smart—but Small, Sequential, and Slow

First, it has limited capacity, because it relies heavily on something called *working memory*. Part notepad for incoming new data, part librarian for accessing stored experience, our working memory is the space where we hold information in our conscious mind as we figure out what to do with it. And our notepad only has so much space on it. For years it was thought we could hold about seven pieces of informa-

tion in our minds at once, but more recent research suggests it's three or four at most.[6]

Those three or four chunks of information can be big or small. For example, suppose you have an elaborate new idea for a project. Your working memory is full of your thoughts on this new idea. But then the name of a colleague comes to mind—someone you're supposed to call. Then, a message pops up on the screen in front of you. Maybe there's a blinking light on your phone. And all these things demand space in your working memory. Suddenly your deliberate system can't think as clearly about your new project idea, because some of your ideas have been moved off the notepad to make space for the name, the message, and the light. (What *was* that idea again?) So the size of our working memory places a limit on the deliberate system's ability to excel at all the reasoning, self-control, and planning activities I described above.

In fact, while the deliberate system has access to maybe three or four pieces of information at once, research suggests that it's only able to actually *do* one thing at a time. It can give a good impression of multitasking when we're on the phone at the same time as we're checking email. But our deliberate system isn't actually doing anything in parallel at all; it's switching from one task to another and back again.[7] It gets tired pretty easily, too. If we don't regularly rest and refuel our brain, the quality of our reasoning, self-control, and planning declines sharply.[8] And overexertion in one part of the deliberate system can deplete our abilities in other areas. For example, research has found that asking our deliberate system to remember a random seven-digit number makes it harder for it to muster the self-control necessary to resist a calorie-laden piece of cake.[9] No wonder we find it harder to be creative toward the end of an interminable meeting; our deliberate system has spent all its energy on staying focused and polite for hours, leaving little in the tank for brilliant insight.

Those limitations of our deliberate system wouldn't be a problem if we led simple lives. But we don't. We're constantly bombarded with information and possibilities. Even in the briefest of conversations, your brain has to process not only the meaning of the words spoken but also the subtle details of the other person's demeanor: tone of voice, body language, and what the person might be trying to convey with that bold new haircut. There are countless objects in your field of vision, each a potential distraction. Not only that, but your brain has to rapidly calculate the right thing to do, think, or say in response to it all. If you

tried to consciously process every single bit of data and assess every possible course of action in depth, your brain would crash like an overloaded computer.

The Automatic System

So how do we handle that nonstop bombardment? The answer lies in the brain's heroic second system, which I'll call the *automatic system*. Like the deliberate system, it goes by a lot of different names. Some scientists call it the "reflexive system," while others give it animalistic names like the "chimp" or the "elephant." You might know it as the "subconscious." Daniel Kahneman calls it the "fast" system, since it operates so much more quickly than the sophisticated-but-slower conscious mind. By whatever name, the magic of this system is that it has automated the majority of what we do to get from one day to the next, and its quick, automatic processes remove the need for us to think consciously about every single thing we do. That frees up our deliberate system to focus on what it's best at—things like handling unfamiliar situations, resisting temptation, and thinking ahead. It's a beautifully efficient solution, most of the time.

There are a few ways that our automatic system lightens the load on our deliberate system. Perhaps the most obvious is the way it takes care of our more familiar tasks by turning them into autopilot routines. Some routines are quite basic, like locking your front door when you leave home, or knowing how to step on and off an escalator without falling over. But our autopilot function can also handle complex actions as long as they've become very familiar to us, which is how you find yourself able to navigate a complicated route to work without too much conscious thought.

Our automatic system is also capable of doing multiple things in parallel, unlike our "one thing at a time, please" deliberate system. That allows our automatic system to process huge amounts of data—encoding today's experiences and connecting them to our memories of past experiences, for example—while our deliberate system handles the conscious activities of everyday life. We're rarely aware of all that background processing, except when it contributes to a "wisdom of the shower" moment—that is, when a fully formed idea seems to pop into our conscious minds out of nowhere.

That's already quite useful, but there's another way the automatic system saves us mental energy, which is this: it rapidly sifts through information and ideas, prioritizes whatever seems relevant, and filters out the rest. This is all happening below the level of our consciousness, so we're not aware of hearing or seeing anything that our automatic system has filtered out as irrelevant "spam." And this neatly reduces the number of things our deliberate system needs to engage with.

About That Spam Filter

How does our brain's automatic system sift and filter so quickly? Broadly speaking, it takes shortcuts—rather like your computer's spam filter does when it's assessing incoming email. When your computer flags incoming messages with large numbers of recipients as junk, for example, it hasn't actually read them in depth; it just applies a rule of thumb based on the fact that group emails often *are* junk. Your spam filter doesn't always get it right, but it's faster than you reading every large-group message to see if it's worth your time. Similarly, your brain's automatic system adopts some easy shortcuts to keep your mental inbox a little slimmer—shortcuts that are mostly helpful but occasionally a little off base.

Behavioral scientists have identified hundreds of these shortcuts—which they call *heuristics*—and given them labels you might recognize: confirmation bias, groupthink, priming, and so on. I'll talk about several of them in detail later in the book (and there's a glossary at the back). But what all these shortcuts have in common is this: they direct our deliberate system's conscious attention toward things that feel comparatively easy to wrap our heads around, while deprioritizing anything that feels harder to grasp. They're all versions of the following exchange between the real world and your brain's impatient automatic system:

> **REAL WORLD:** "It's all very complex . . . there's a lot I need to tell you about. There are gray areas . . . everyone's different, and there's no one right way to think about this . . ."
>
> **AUTOMATIC SYSTEM:** "Look, let's make some simple assumptions about what's important, and focus on that. Okay?"

As a result, the startling truth is that we don't experience the world as it is; we're always experiencing an edited, simplified version. Princeton psychologist Anne Treisman discovered this *selective attention* feature of the automatic system back in 1967.[10] Even so, it's still a little hard for most of us to accept; we rather like the idea that we have a good grip on reality. And since the filtering is automatic—and therefore subconscious—it's often difficult to believe it's really happening.

That's why it was so helpful that psychologists Chris Chabris and Dan Simons, from Union College and Beckman College, respectively, made a video to demonstrate conclusively the existence of selective attention. In this now famous clip, they showed that a person in a gorilla suit could walk through the middle of a basketball game without being noticed by half the people watching the video. That's despite the fact that the "gorilla" stops to face the camera and ostentatiously beats its chest as the players pass the ball around it.[11]

In my consulting practice, I've seen Chabris and Simons's results echoed every time I've shown the clip to groups: without fail, at least half of them miss the gorilla. Why? Because at the beginning of the video, I do what Chabris and Simons did: I ask people to count the passes between the basketball players who are wearing white shirts. At that point, their brain's automatic system applies a simple, powerful rule that looks something like this: "stated task = the thing to focus attention on; everything else = things to ignore."[12]

Our brain's energy-saving automatic system doesn't just filter our perceptions of the world. It also streamlines our decision making by nudging us toward whichever choice requires the smallest amount of conscious effort. If there's a plausible option already on the table, or one that doesn't involve thinking hard about the future, or one that resonates with something we heard recently, our automatic system will say: "Fantastic! Let's apply the 'most obvious option = best option' rule. No need to think further."

Like our perceptual shortcuts, these decision-making shortcuts are mostly helpful in everyday life. If you're trying to pick a restaurant for lunch, your automatic system can relieve you of the need to read a bunch of restaurant reviews; perhaps it subconsciously recalls the Italian co-worker who just said a cheery "*buongiorno*" in the elevator, which spurs you to book a table at Luigi's, that nice new Italian place. Problem solved. But taking shortcuts is less ideal when making our more important decisions. If, instead of finding a place for lunch, you

were deciding on the country where your company should expand its business, you wouldn't want your cheery co-worker to be the hidden reason Italy showed up on your short list.

The Silver Lining

Behavioral scientists often say that the shortcuts taken by our brain's automatic system make us rather irrational, because those shortcuts can lead us to miss important aspects of what's going on around us, or to choose the easy answers rather than the correct ones. But I'd argue that our brain is adopting a highly rational strategy—one that makes the most of our scarce mental energy. We just need to understand the interplay of the brain's deliberate and automatic systems, so we can make best use of their complementary strengths and cover for their weaknesses. And I'll highlight several ways to do this throughout the book.

For one thing, we can be more proactive in telling our brain what's "important" enough to merit our conscious attention, in a bid to get it through the spam filter. Since our reality is subjective, we might as well seize the chance to make that reality more of what we'd like it to be. I'll explain how to do this in the first part of the book, on the value of having clear intentions.

We can also be smart in how we use the limited capacity of our deliberate system, by ensuring we're lightening the load on our precious working memory where possible. I'll show you some techniques for doing this when you're setting goals, managing your workload, and solving problems (in Parts I, II, and IV, respectively). Part IV also contains some simple routines to help us slow down and engage the wisdom of our deliberate system more fully when we're making choices with real consequences.

Understanding that we each see the world in our own incomplete way can also explain a lot of workplace disagreements. Imagine a discussion between the eagle-eyed people who saw the gorilla and the task-focused people who didn't notice it. Both sides will be certain of their view of what happened and think the other group is a little crazy ("There was a gorilla!" "Don't be ridiculous! Also, you can't count!"). These sorts of crossed wires arise every day, since our brains are all making slightly different decisions about what deserves our attention. In Part III I'll look at several ways to resolve these kinds of tensions,

and in Part V I'll also cover ways to overcome other people's spam filters when you'd like them to pay attention to your ideas.

And finally, the subjectivity of reality also means that however bad a situation seems, there's always a different way of seeing things. The way we interpret what we've experienced is much more up for grabs than we generally realize. This can be hugely liberating as we ride the ups and downs of working life, as you'll see in Part VI, when I talk about resilience.

Things to keep in mind about the two-speed brain:

- Your *deliberate* system is responsible for sophisticated functions such as reasoning, self-control, and forward thinking. It excels in handling anything unfamiliar, complex, or abstract. But it has limited capacity and gets tired quickly. When it's overused, overloaded, or distracted, it's harder for you to be wise, balanced, or reliable.

- Your *automatic* system lightens the load on your deliberate system by automating most of what you do and taking fast shortcuts that filter out "irrelevant" information and options. That's mostly helpful. But it inevitably leaves you with blind spots. And the fact that nobody ever experiences an entirely objective version of reality can lead to crossed wires and poor choices in the workplace.

- You make the most of your brain's talents if you adjust for the limitations of each system. That means creating the conditions for your deliberate system to function at its best, and recognizing when to slow down and come off autopilot.

THEME 2: THE DISCOVER-DEFEND AXIS

Every moment of the day, our brain is busy scanning the environment for unpleasant things we should avoid and pleasant things we should rush toward. "Is this a threat or a reward?" is the first question our brain asks of everything we encounter—each email we read, each conversation we have. Depending on the answer, it triggers the appropriate behavior in us. Either we take steps to defend ourselves from the "threat," or we embrace the "reward" with delight.

This fundamental "threat or reward" question drives much of our day-to-day behavior, and is why we act one way when we're feeling defensive and another way when we're feeling generally charmed by life. Throughout the book, I use the term *defensive mode* to describe the times when we're focused on protecting ourselves, and *discovery mode* to describe those times when it feels as if the world is on our side. And it won't surprise you to hear that we're far more likely to have a good day if we manage to spend as little time as possible in defensive mode. So I'd like to explain these two modes a little more, and start to show how it's possible to spend more of life in the more enjoyable one of the two.

Defensive Mode: Protecting Ourselves Against Threats

Imagine this: you're heading into work, gearing up for a big meeting on a new project. While you're checking your calendar to confirm exactly where and when it's taking place, you absentmindedly step out between two parked cars to cross the street. Before you know it, a speeding truck whizzes past—but you've somehow already jumped backward, out of harm's way. Your heart is racing, and you notice you've dropped your phone. Luckily, it's still in one piece, and so are you.

When we face this kind of life-threatening experience, we're given a visceral reminder of what NYU neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux calls the "survival circuits" that we all have buried deep in the automatic system of our brain.[13] When those survival circuits pick up any sign of potential danger, they work fast to defend us by launching a *fight, flight, or freeze* response. That means we might hit back (fight), run away (flight), or stand still as we try to work out the nature of the threat (freeze). In the case of the truck, the strategy that saved your life was mostly "flight"—jumping back—perhaps accompanied by a little "freeze," as you try to work out what the heck's going on. If you found yourself shouting something spicy at the truck, you'd be adding a dash of "fight" to the mix, too.

This defensive response is a good example of the brain's powerful automatic system taking control. Here, it's not just affecting our perception or choices, as I described in the last section; it's driving our immediate actions as well. How it does that is actually an extension of something that happens every day. When we're rousing ourselves in any way—getting ourselves ready to start work in the morning, or

getting ready to make a comment in a meeting—our nervous system pumps hormones called adrenaline and noradrenaline through our bodies. At moderate levels, these hormones help us feel awake and alive, sharpening our brain's motivation and focusing our attention to enable us to rise to the challenge of the commute or the conference call.

But as soon as a situation feels outside our control, our brain and adrenal glands push much higher levels of adrenaline and noradrenaline into our system, as well as boosting a third hormone called cortisol that's slower-acting but longer-lasting.[14] And this flood of chemicals turns our state of readiness into something edgier. Our breathing accelerates and our heart pounds, to drive maximum amounts of oxygenated blood into our muscles. Our eyesight even becomes more tunnel-visioned, to give us laser-like focus on the threat at hand. "Bring it on," our bodies are saying. "We're ready to fight, flight, or freeze, to defend you against this dastardly threat."

The survival circuits that drive this emergency response include a part of the brain called the *amygdala*. It's constantly on the lookout for things that are uncertain, ambiguous, or novel, including potential threats in our environment, and it's sensitive enough to react to something as mildly worrying as a picture of a frowning stranger.[15] And if our amygdala picks up anything of serious concern, the fight-flight-freeze reaction gets triggered. All this happens more quickly than we can consciously think—which is critical when a split second can save us, like when we're about to be run over by a truck.

This kind of rapid response is impressive. But there are a couple of challenges with the way our survival circuits leap diligently to our defense. First, their speed often comes at the expense of accuracy. It's as if they have a mantra of "better safe than sorry." So if a black shadow in the corner of the room looks like a close enough approximation of an intruder, your defenses will spring into action. It's only *after* this unconscious knee-jerk response that the more sophisticated part of your brain fills in the finer details—at which point it becomes clear that the black blob is the family pet and not a burglar. You feel silly, and you laugh. But you're still breathing hard.

The second challenge is that when you're threatened, your brain powers up for that defensive response by shifting resources away from its sophisticated-but-slower deliberate system. Dialing down the part of your brain responsible for existential reflection is helpful if you're being chased by a tiger on the savannah. But if the "threat" you're fac-

ing is one that requires a thoughtful approach rather than a footrace—perhaps it's criticism from a customer or a deadline that's moved unexpectedly—it's not great that you've just taken your strongest cognitive skills offline. In fact, Amy Arnsten, a professor of neurobiology at Yale, recently discovered that falling into defensive mode impacts the intellect more severely than previously suspected. She found that exposure to even fairly mild negative stress can significantly reduce the amount of activity in the brain's prefrontal cortex, where most of the deliberate system's work gets done.[16]

Are You Threatening Me?

And that brings us to the reason that it's useful to understand how the brain's defensive mode operates: we've escaped the rough-and-tumble of our ancestors' lives on the savannah, but our survival circuits are still working just as hard to protect us in today's polished professional world. Our brain reacts just as quickly to personal affronts and workplace indignities as it does to genuine physical threats. So our fight-flight-freeze defenses can be triggered when someone takes too long to return a text message or when a colleague shows signs of disapproval. We can choke (freeze) when challenged, dissemble or tune out (flight) when we're feeling out of our depth, or snap (fight) at people when we're feeling let down.[17] (I'll talk in more detail later in the book about the types of workplace "threats" that tip most of us into defensive mode; you'll find a handy checklist in Chapter 9.)

And with professional threats, just as with physical threats, our survival circuits can get it wrong. That person near the coffee machine who's frowning in your direction might be annoyed at you because he thinks you cut in line. Or maybe not. Perhaps he just realized he's late to a meeting—but by now you're glowering back at him. Your brain is so busy diverting energy toward "defending" you that you only recognize a few seconds too late that he's the new finance director who could be helpful to a project of yours. What a shame you didn't engage him in friendly conversation. (Survival Circuits 1, Deliberate System 0.)

So that's the conundrum for us in the workplace. Thank goodness we have this defensive system keeping us safe from genuine life-or-death threats—but when it's active, we're not thinking expansively. Just when we want to behave like our most evolved selves, such as in the middle of a delicate or complex situation, our brain can sometimes

have us behave more like a cornered animal. We can blame defensive mode for most of our "oh no" (or if you prefer, "oh ****") moments at work, those times when we realize we've done something a little ill-judged. Flaming emails and turf battles would be a lot less common without it.

Well, That Explains a Lot

But, as ever, there's some good news here. Once you know that the brain's protective instinct is what lies behind a lot of dysfunctional behavior, life can be a lot easier.

For a start, a colleague's inexplicable bad behavior usually makes more sense if we know that we're observing a fight-flight-freeze response. By asking ourselves which "threat" might be causing the reaction, we may be able to improve the situation, rather than making things worse by reacting angrily and amplifying the threat still further. We'll explore this in depth in Part III, on relationships.

And the same goes for ourselves. It's hugely helpful to be able to spot when our own brain is in defensive mode. We can't always stop our instinctive reaction from playing out, but we can notice the signs that it's taking place and try to pinpoint exactly what it is we're reacting to. This self-awareness is the first step toward reengaging our brain's deliberate system and getting back to being at our best. And developing more understanding of the threats we're most sensitive to—our most common "hot buttons"—gives us a much better chance of quickly getting back onto an even keel. I'll explain more about how you can do that later in the book—in Part III, again, but also in Part IV, on handling challenging tasks, and in Part VI, on staying cool in the face of provocations.

Discovery Mode: Seeking Out Rewarding Experiences

Noticing what's going on is always the first step in extracting yourself from defensive mode. But as well as becoming more adept at recognizing when and why we're triggered, there's one more thing we can do to improve our response to stressful challenges. It involves engaging another network in our brains, one known as the reward system.

While our defensive system looks out for threats to our safety and sanity, our reward system constantly scans the environment for poten-

tial treats—including not only primal rewards necessary to survival, like food and sex, but also subtler rewards, like praise and pleasure. Whenever our brain's reward system spots something potentially appealing, it sends us chasing after it like a Labrador retriever after a tennis ball, by releasing neurochemicals (including dopamine and endorphins) that trigger feelings of desire and pleasure in us. Those "I want" and "I like" sensations motivate us to seek out whatever promises to be rewarding, and they put us into an anticipatory, exploratory mental state. This is what I call *discovery mode*.

We can think of discovery mode and defensive mode as being at opposite ends of a spectrum labeled the "discover-defend axis." And when we address workplace challenges from the discovery end of the axis, rather than the defensive end—that is, when we feel rewarded rather than threatened—we handle them better. That's because in discovery mode, our survival circuits aren't freaking out, so they're not launching a fight-flight-freeze response, which means our deliberate system is able to stay fully online. As a result, we have more mental resources to handle whatever the day requires from us. Instead of being simplistic and black-and-white in our thinking, we're able to remain thoughtful and flexible as we roll with the punches. And sure enough, research shows significant correlations between people being in a positive mood and being able to solve tough analytical puzzles.[18] This isn't to suggest that we should ignore any problems that arise, of course—that's not what discovery mode is about. The point is that we're going to be able to think more clearly about those problems if our brains are not on the defensive.

So how can you move away from the defensive end of the axis when you're handling everyday workplace challenges? The answer is to look for potential rewards in the situation you're facing. If you can tempt your brain's reward system with something valuable, you're more likely to be able to respond to a tough situation with the benefit of all your "discovery mode" intelligence.

These Are a Few of Our Favorite Things

There's an art to finding the right kind of reward at times of stress or tension, of course. Primal rewards like food and sex aren't generally available or appropriate in the middle of our most difficult conversations at work. We know that money excites the brain's reward system,

but research suggests that the neurological effects of financial gains are short-lived.[19] Besides, a bonus is hardly likely to drop into your lap every time you're feeling uptight. Luckily, there are more reliable rewards out there for us, if we choose to look for them.

Humor, for example. Suppose you're in a stressful meeting, you can feel the tension rising, and the entire group seems to be in defensive mode. Some people start to make barbed comments (fight), while others keep their heads down (freeze) or step out to take "an urgent call" (flight). But then one of your colleagues makes a witty comment, and everyone laughs. It's a small reward, but it's enough to puncture the tension, which is a sign that everyone has moved back toward discovery mode. As people reengage their brain's deliberate system, progress suddenly feels possible.

One reason that shared humor is powerful is that it tends to make us feel more connected to other people. And social rewards are candy for the human brain. Just think about how good it feels to be respected, appreciated, and treated fairly. We're extraordinarily sensitive to signals that we belong, probably because historically we needed the support of our tribe to survive on the savannah.[20] In fact, social neuroscientists like UCLA's Matt Lieberman have found that our brains respond to signals of belonging in a way that's very similar to more primal rewards.[21] So praise and recognition—even when it's just a simple "job well done" comment—can help to keep us in discovery mode, even when we're in the deep end at work.

Other powerful rewards come from deeper inside ourselves. Extensive research by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, at the University of Rochester, has shown that having a sense of autonomy and personal competence is profoundly motivating.[22] It turns out that we perform better, and feel better about ourselves, when we feel in charge of at least some aspects of what we're doing—whether that's in the goals we set for ourselves, the way we work, or the purpose behind our effort.

Finally, our brains also find it rewarding to learn new and interesting things—even if it's just office gossip. George Loewenstein, a neuroeconomist at Carnegie Mellon who has investigated the phenomenon of curiosity, has found that merely getting answers to questions visibly activates the reward system in people who are lying in a brain scanner.[23]

Throughout the book I'll talk more about ways you can summon these social, personal, and informational rewards to keep you out of

defensive mode and enable you to stay focused, smart, and adaptable in the face of workplace challenges. As well as using these Jedi mind tricks for yourself, I'll also show you how being generous in doling out brain-friendly rewards to colleagues can improve the quality of all your interactions (Part III) and communications (Part V). And in Part VII, we'll see how to weave these rewards into an everyday strategy for boosting your energy at work.

Things to know about the discover-defend axis:

- You're constantly moving along a discover-defend axis in your daily life, as your brain scans for threats to defend against and rewards to seek out and discover.
- In *defensive mode*, you become less smart and flexible, as your brain devotes some of its scarce mental energy to launching a fight-flight-freeze response to a potential "threat"—leaving less energy to power your brain's deliberate system. Defensive mode can even be triggered by small personal slights.
- In *discovery mode*, you're motivating yourself with rewards: a social sense of belonging or recognition; a personal sense of autonomy, competence, or purpose; or informational rewards that come from learning or experiencing new things.
- To be at your most resourceful in handling workplace challenges, it helps to become adept at recognizing when you're sliding into defensive mode. Refocusing attention on potential rewards in the situation at hand can also help to reengage your deliberate system and shift you back into discovery mode.

THEME 3: THE MIND-BODY LOOP

There's one more theme that comes up frequently throughout this book: the constant interplay between our bodies and our minds.

On one level, we know there's a link between our mental and physical state. I've already talked about the way that stress can set our heart pounding. We can admit that it's hard to think clearly in the seconds

just after we've painfully stubbed a toe. We're all aware that being sleep-deprived makes it harder to be patient and witty. And so on.

But in practice, we often behave as if there's no link between our physical health and mental functioning—at least, not enough to seriously affect our achievements at work. We catch ourselves saying "I don't have time to take a break right now" or "I'll exercise once I'm through this busy patch," acting as though physical refueling were a luxury rather than a way to boost our performance.

In reality, decades of research suggest that the way we treat our body has a huge effect on the way our brain performs, thanks to the way it affects the brain's blood flow, the balance of its neurochemicals, and the degree of connectivity between different brain regions. As a result, studies have found we can reap immediate intellectual and emotional dividends from investing in exercise and sleep, or even from taking a moment to breathe deeply, smile broadly, and stand a little taller. In just about every section of the book, from Part I through Part VII, I'll show you exactly how these kinds of physical adjustments can support you in achieving your goals. But here's a preview of the main mind-body themes.

Sleep

Being sleep-deprived makes it difficult for our brain's deliberate system to perform its daily miracles. A tired brain devotes less blood to the prefrontal cortex, where most of the deliberate system lives. That makes it hard for us to respond intelligently to the unexpected, think up new ideas, or stay calm under stress. Skimping on sleep also dents our ability to remember and learn anything new, because sleep is central to the brain's ability to convert the day's experience into long-term memories.[24] (As one CEO I know put it, going short of sleep is like forgetting to save a document that you've worked on all day.)

What's the definition of "sleep-deprived"? It differs from person to person. But the vast majority of us need between seven and nine hours of sleep to function at our best.[25] As Harvard professor of sleep medicine Charles Czeisler says, "We now know that a week of sleeping four or five hours a night induces an impairment equivalent to a blood alcohol level of 0.1 percent."[26] Which is to say, it impairs your cognitive abilities as much as being drunk does. As Czeisler puts it, "We would

never say, 'This person is a great worker. He's drunk all the time!' Yet we continue to celebrate people who sacrifice sleep."

So if we're looking for ways to make our brains run more effectively, doing whatever we can to prioritize our sleep has to be high on the list. It's one of the surest ways to increase our control over whether or not we have a good day. So I'll revisit the scientific evidence on the effects of decent sleep on cognitive performance and emotional resilience, in Part IV and Part VI, respectively, along with practical advice on how to get your full quota.

Exercise

Just as Czeisler is spreading the word about the benefits of sleep, John Ratey is doing the same for exercise. A clinical psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School, Ratey has spent much of the past decade summarizing and publicizing evidence on the link between exercise and mental function.[27]

It's powerful stuff. Research shows that even a single session of aerobic exercise immediately improves our intellectual performance, giving us faster information processing and reaction time, more effective planning, better short-term memory performance, and more self-control.[28] It enhances all the functions of the brain's deliberate system, in other words. Correspondingly, Bristol University researchers found that on days that people exercised before work or did something active during their lunch break, they were far better able to concentrate and handle their workload.[29] Exercise also boosted people's mood and motivation (by 41 percent) and their ability to deal with stress (by 27 percent).

Why is exercise so immediately helpful to us? Partly because it increases blood flow to the brain. But it also stimulates the release of the neurotransmitters dopamine, noradrenaline, and serotonin, which serve to boost our interest, alertness, and enjoyment. That's why Ratey is fond of saying that exercise is "like a little bit of Ritalin and a little bit of Prozac," and why your head feels clearer and your concerns less burdensome after exercise.[30] Furthermore, research suggests that the majority of those cognitive and emotional benefits accrue after as little as twenty minutes of moderate daily activity.[31] So even a fast walk at lunchtime can make a real difference to your mojo.

Mindfulness

The practice known as mindfulness is another clear bridge between brain and body. For some of you, the word might conjure up an image of meditating monks in colorful robes. But mindfulness is a distinctly mainstream practice these days, used by organizations as diverse as Google and the U.S. Army to improve the performance and resilience of their people. They're responding to scores of studies suggesting that mindfulness enhances our analytical thinking, capacity for insight, ability to focus, self-control, sense of well-being, energy, and emotional resilience.[32] This laundry list covers just about everything that seems useful in an average day, and it sounds almost too good to be true. But it's possible to see tangible changes on brain scans of volunteers before and after learning how to practice mindfulness: improved connectivity between different parts of the brain's deliberate system, and reduced reactivity in the survival circuits when faced with negative stimuli. Which means more time in high-functioning discovery mode, less time in defensive mode. And that's what underpins the impressive laundry list.[33]

But what *is* mindfulness? At its heart, the practice is simply this: you pause, focus your attention on observing one thing, and calmly return your attention to that point of focus if your attention drifts away. *Pause, focus, return*—for anything from a few seconds up to twenty minutes or more. When deciding what to observe, people often focus on their own breathing, since it's always available and doesn't cost a thing. (No robes or mats required.)

Much of the research on the effects of mindfulness has focused on people who have attended multiweek courses in "mindfulness-based stress reduction," "meditation," or "focused attention." But researchers are also finding that people can get results from practicing mindfulness for as little as five minutes a day—something that's easy to fit into our hectic, got-to-get-things-done life.[34] In fact, Ellen Langer, Harvard psychology professor, would argue that it's not even a question of taking minutes out of your day. She says that mindfulness can be simply an attitude, one where you slow down and "notice new things" in whatever you're doing throughout the day.[35] I'll show you ways to exploit the benefits of this kind of bite-sized mindfulness throughout the book, before revisiting the topic in more depth in Part VI.

Striking a Pose

Finally, perhaps the most surprising way to use our body to improve our mind stems from research showing that there's a two-way feedback loop in the nervous system that connects our brain and body. The mental-to-physical side of this flow is familiar to us; for example, we know that when our minds are relaxed and happy, we tend to breathe and smile more easily. But it also goes the other way. When we slow our breathing and make ourselves smile, our brain appears to interpret that as a signal that we *should* feel relaxed and happy, and it duly creates that state of mind for real. The same thing is true for confidence, too. When we mimic the physical actions we might associate with being an alpha male or female—such as standing up taller, squaring our shoulders, making bold gestures—our brain sees that as a sign that we are genuinely in control, and responds accordingly.

These "fake it till you make it" findings are useful to us, since they suggest it's possible to use our bodies to reverse-engineer the state of mind we want. They're not a replacement for the other advice in the book, but I'll show you how they can make a nice addition to your daily toolbox when you're seeking to boost your confidence and energy (in Parts V and VII, respectively).

Things to remember about the mind-body loop:

- The way you treat your body has a direct, immediate impact on your brain's performance, affecting both its cognitive and emotional functions.
- Specifically, your brain's deliberate system performs far better when you've had enough sleep, some aerobic exercise, and a few moments of mindfulness.
- Mimicking the physical actions associated with feeling happy, confident, and relaxed appears to tell your brain that you *are* in fact happy, confident, and relaxed, creating a self-fulfilling loop.

SUMMARY

My description of these three themes—the two-system brain, the discover-defend axis, and the mind-body loop—represents a tiny fraction of the knowledge that behavioral scientists have amassed in recent decades. But together, they cover some of the concepts I've found most useful in coaching people to be at their best, because they speak directly to what it takes for us to be smart and effective in handling the challenges of working life. Now let's get into the heart of the book, and see exactly how to apply these big ideas to create the components of a really good day.