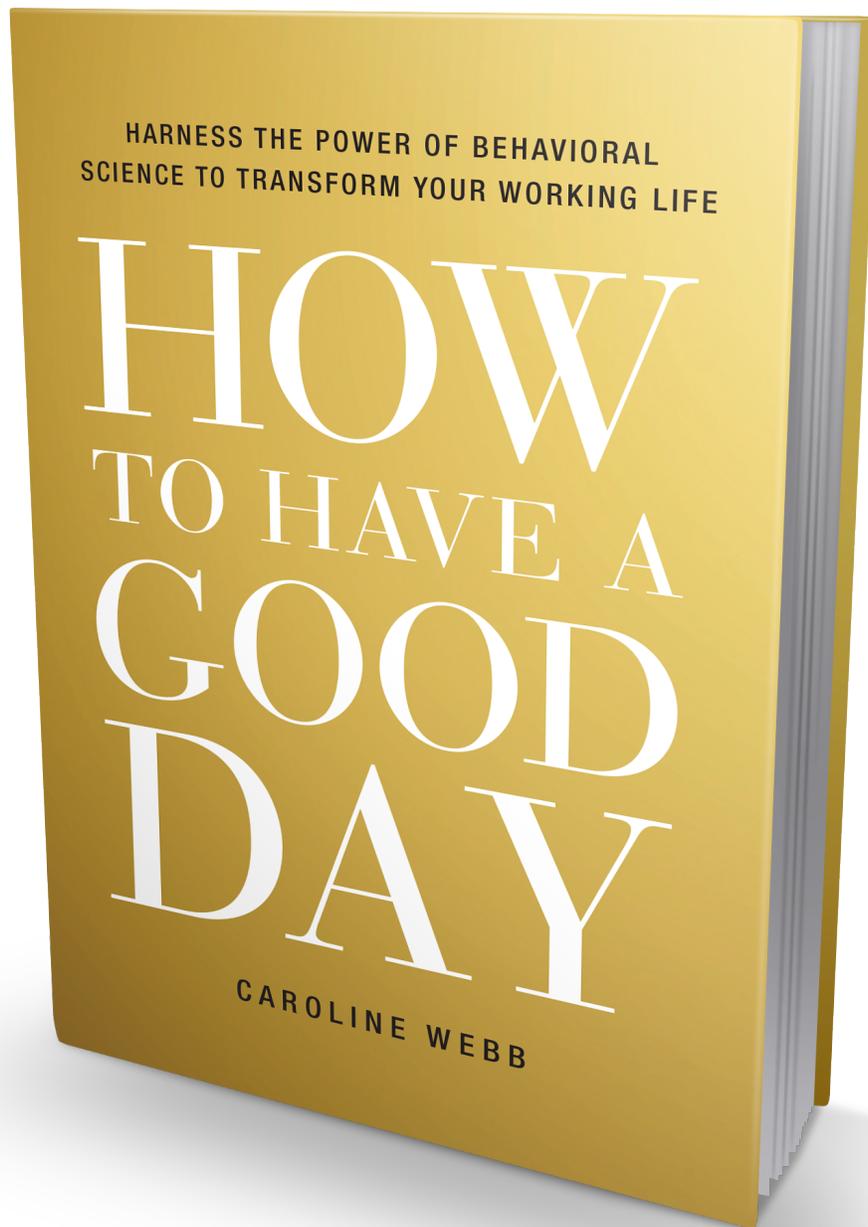


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ONE

## Choosing Your Filters

We so often cruise through our busy days on autopilot, rolling from task to task without pausing to stop and think. We work hard and do our best, and we're glad if it all works out to our liking. Sometimes luck is on our side, and sometimes it isn't. "That's just life," we might tell ourselves.

But I'd like to make the case that we can do better than that, thanks to an important aspect of the way our brain makes sense of the world: the fact that we consciously notice only a small selection of what's actually happening around us, and filter out the rest. Because the things that get through the filters are strongly influenced by the priorities and assumptions we take into the day, that gives us a huge opportunity. It means that with a few minutes of mental preparation—involving a quick check and reset of those priorities and assumptions—we can shift the way we experience the day, making it more productive and enjoyable. This mental preparation is a process that I call *setting intentions*, because it's about being more intentional about your approach to the day.

Before I talk about a quick daily intention-setting routine for you to try, let me explain why the reality we experience is so dependent on our filters.

### OUR SUBJECTIVE REALITY

As we learned in *The Science Essentials*, our brain's deliberate system (responsible for reasoning, self-control, and planning) has only so much attention to give to our complex world. So as we go through the day, our automatic system prioritizes whatever seems most worthy of the deliberate system's attention, while screening out anything that

doesn't seem important. This filtering happens without us being aware of it, and it's central to our brain's ability to cope with the complexity of the world. But this selective attention also leaves us experiencing an incomplete, subjective version of reality—one that may or may not serve us well.

Obviously, it's a good thing that our automatic system filters out things that are truly unimportant. Otherwise we'd be obsessively counting carpet fibers or getting mesmerized by the ingredients of our lunch, making it hard to get anything done. The downside, however, is that even potentially useful things can be tagged by our automatic system as "unimportant." For example, if we're intently focused on checking our messages, our automatic system might decide it's not worth diverting some of our attention toward understanding a question we've just been asked by a colleague. When she raises her voice and finally breaks through into our consciousness with a "Hey, did you hear me?" we might apologize and swear we hadn't heard her before. And we'd be technically correct. We *didn't* hear her—not consciously, anyway.

Now, we can't switch off our automatic system's filtering function—by definition, it's automatic. But we *can* adjust the settings, by being more proactive in defining what our brain sees as "important" each day. If we do that, we can affect what our conscious brain gets to see and hear. It's one of the most powerful ways to steer our day toward the reality we'd most like to experience.

### On Autopilot, What Does Our Brain Treat as "Important"?

Our automatic system uses several selective attention rules to decide what's important enough to bring to our conscious attention and what should be filtered out. If we can understand how some of those rules work, we have a better chance of hacking into the system and adjusting its settings.

The first thing to know is that if we've got a task that we're consciously prioritizing, our automatic system will make sure we see anything directly relevant to that specific task, and it will tend to blank out anything that seems off topic. *Anything?* "Surely," you're saying, "if something striking cropped up in front of us, off topic or not, we'd see it, wouldn't we?" Well, an enormous amount of research suggests we might not.<sup>1</sup> Take this recent study, for example. Psychologist Trafton Drew and colleagues at Harvard's Visual Attention Lab asked some

experienced radiologists to look closely at a bunch of medical images to spot abnormalities. The radiologists were given a stack of genuine lung scans to work with, some of them with sadly genuine nodules. But the last image was different: it showed a picture of a gorilla inserted inside the lung. (The researchers were paying wry homage to the original gorilla/basketball experiment described in *The Science Essentials*.) Astonishingly, 83 percent of the radiologists failed to spot the gorilla, although the image was forty-eight times the size of the average lung nodule. Even more remarkable is the fact that the Harvard researchers used an eye-tracking device that showed that most of the radiologists looked directly at the gorilla—and yet they still didn't notice it.<sup>2</sup> It's not that they saw it and discounted or forgot about it. Their brains simply didn't consciously register the ape. In other words: because they weren't actually looking for it, they didn't see it.

This type of selective attention is what scientists call *inattentional blindness*—that is, we see what we've decided merits our attention, and we're remarkably blind to the rest. So the priorities we set for ourselves really matter.

We don't even have to be deeply focused on a task to encounter inattentional blindness. In fact, as soon as we have something on our mind, we become much more attuned to anything related to that concern and less attuned to everything else. In one study that was conducted by psychologist Rémi Radel in France, where mealtimes matter, volunteers who'd been forced to skip their lunch went on to see food-related words more clearly and quickly in a word-recognition test. That is, the hungry people noticed the word "gâteau" more readily than "bateau."<sup>3</sup> (If the researchers had taken their volunteers out on a boat, they might have seen "bateau" even faster than "gâteau.") Our automatic system will generally prioritize information that resonates with anything that's top of mind for us.

Even our attitude can play a part in setting the perceptual filters we apply to the day. Joseph Forgas and Gordon Bower, professors at the University of New South Wales and Stanford, respectively, conducted an experiment designed to put volunteers into a slightly good or bad mood by giving them random positive or negative feedback about their performance on a minor test they'd just taken. After that, the volunteers were given some descriptions of fictional people to read. Those descriptions were carefully calibrated to be neutral: the volunteers could easily interpret the subjects as being either energetic or chaotic, calm

or boring, depending on their reading of the text. And what did Forgas and Bower find?<sup>4</sup> That their happier volunteers were significantly more likely to see the people described in a positive light, compared with the volunteers they'd deliberately put into a funk. And it's not just interpersonal judgments that are affected by our mood. Another research team found that sad people perceived a hill as being significantly steeper (and saw scaling it as a less pleasant prospect) than people who were feeling more upbeat.<sup>5</sup>

So it really *is* possible to get up on the wrong side of the bed. Our perceptions of the world can be strongly influenced by our starting point, good or bad, because our brain's automatic system makes sure that we see and hear anything that resonates with our conscious priorities, our top-of-mind concerns, and even our mood. Meanwhile, it downplays everything else.

### **What Are Your Filters Doing to Your Reality?**

Now let's think about how we can apply this knowledge. Suppose you and I were sitting in the same room, participating in the same conversation. My priorities, concerns, and mood would shape my perceptions of what was going on, while yours would shape yours. As a result, it's entirely possible that I would miss things that matter to you, while getting hung up on things that don't register with you at all. With all this in mind, it's little surprise that my meeting with Lucas didn't seem like the pinnacle of my professional life, given my crankiness when I walked in. Meanwhile, of course, he had a blast. We're each living through our own private reality, a reality shaped by our hardworking automatic system's attempts to allocate our attention to the right things.

So what particular reality would you like your brain to pay a little more attention to? Take your next meeting. If your primary concern is to get your point across, you'll probably find yourself noticing every instance of being interrupted, and every moment of airtime that others take up. You'll probably lose some of the thread of the conversation, without realizing it, because you'll be focused on your desire to tell people what you want them to hear. You're not being willfully closed-minded; your automatic system is just efficiently prioritizing information that relates to your state of mind. Turn all this around, and the reverse is true, too. For example, if you instead decided to focus on finding new opportunities for collaboration or on hearing useful input

from your colleagues, chances are you'd discover more of *that*. As we change our intentions, our brain's filters change, and the facts can appear to change with them.

### SET YOUR INTENTIONS, SET YOUR FILTERS

The point behind all of this is clear: we miss a big opportunity if we simply let the day happen to us.

We *can't* control everything (there are different types of books for those who believe that's possible). But we *can* tweak the way our working hours feel, by being more deliberate in setting our perceptual filters. And that's where it helps to have an intention-setting routine, one that has us pay explicit attention to the priorities, concerns, and mood we're carrying into the day.

Here's an approach I like. It involves taking just a moment to look at something from three angles (each beginning with "A," conveniently):

- **Aim:** Think about each of the most important of today's activities—the people you'll meet, the work you'll do. What really matters most in making them a success? That's your real aim.
- **Attitude:** As you think about the upcoming workday, take a moment to notice and acknowledge the concerns that are dominating your thoughts or your mood. Do these concerns help you achieve your real aim—and if not, can you set them aside for now?
- **Attention:** Given your real priorities, where do you want to focus your attention? Figure out what you want to see more of, and then make sure you look out for it.

Most people I've worked with find it's ideal to think about these questions before the day gets under way, either in the morning or even the night before. But because the whole routine takes no more than a couple of minutes, it's never too late to set your intentions as you're flying from one thing to the next.

For example, how differently might my meeting with Lucas have gone if I'd taken a moment to consider the "three A's" just before walking into that conference room? I might have had these things in mind:

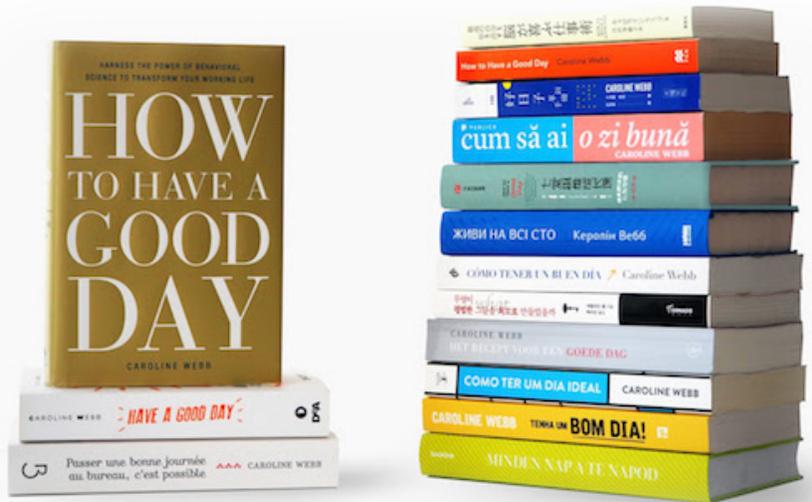
- ➔ **Aim:** “What really matters to me is to help the team get off to a strong start with our new clients, by encouraging a collaborative tone and helping everyone feel good about the prospect of working together.”
  
- ➔ **Attitude:** “I admit that I’m feeling grumpy and tired right now. I can’t make myself less tired. But I can decide to set aside my irritation at the way the project is set up, in favor of focusing on the real priority: making the team a success.”
  
- ➔ **Attention:** “I want to spot opportunities to help the team gel, by highlighting common ground in their ideas. I want to look for chances to inject warmth into the meeting.”

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## About Caroline Webb

Caroline Webb is an executive coach, author and speaker known for being one of the world's leading experts in using insights from behavioral science to improve professional life. Her bestselling book on that topic, *How To Have A Good Day*, has been published in 14 languages and more than 60 countries. She is also a Senior Advisor to McKinsey, where she was previously a Partner.

Tune in to Caroline's live video series:  
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