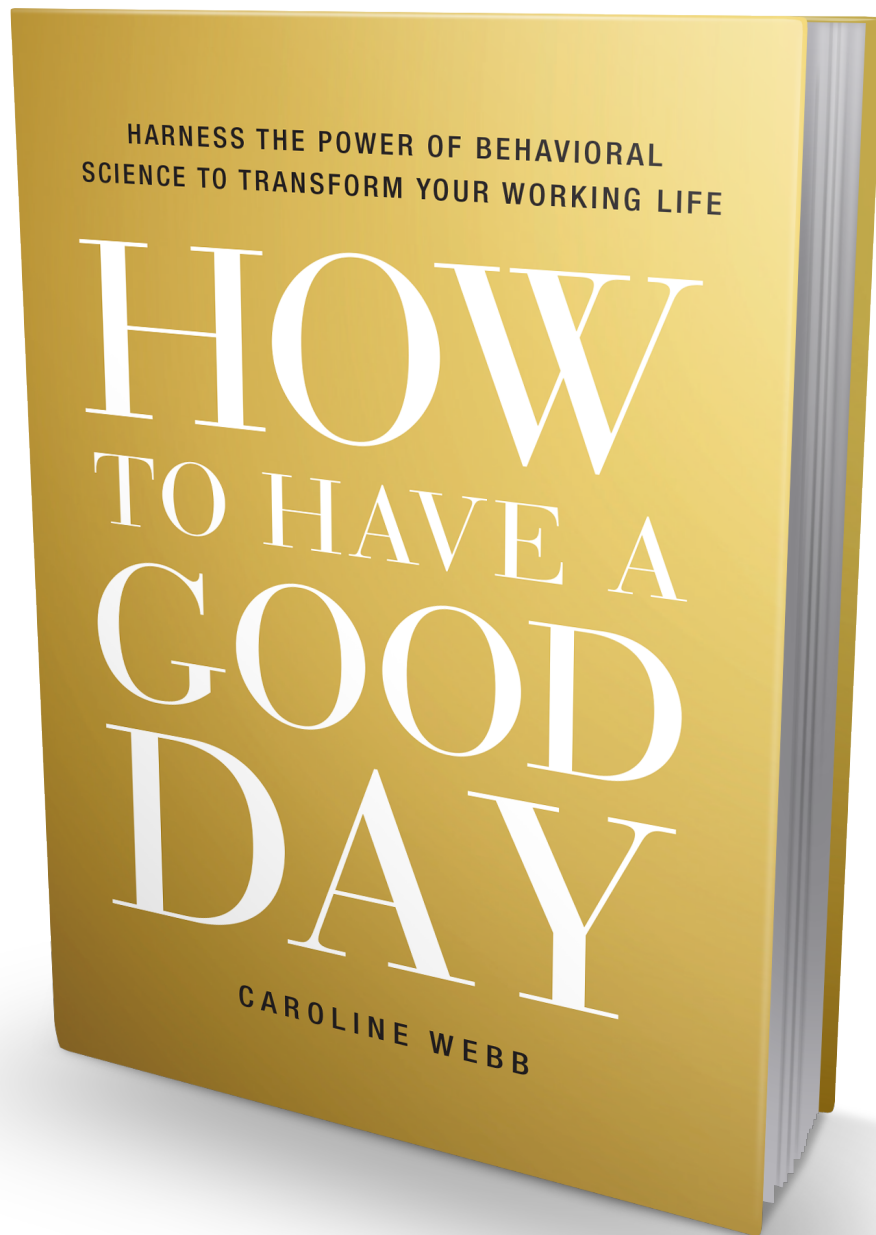


Excerpt from **How To Have A Good Day**



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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 any-thing 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.

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Daniel H. Pink, Author of When and Drive



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.

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