

fail to achieve. At heart we are still tribal members around the campfire, learning from the stories of others and driven by the need to belong. Don't underestimate the refined nature of your social brain and its ability to affect the way you think and act.

◀ important brain fact 3: *your brain is easily scared*

› Most of what drives your behavior is governed by the principle that your brain is a survival tool. And the way that it has found to be most effective at guaranteeing your survival is through the threat and reward mechanism. Put simply, your brain will cause you to move away from threats and move towards rewards. Imagine you are walking along a dark forest path and you notice something in the distance shaped in a coil. Your brain will send out chemicals to trigger your flight response, before you've even had time to determine if this really is a snake or just a coil of tree debris. It is only after a few moments of heightened attention and examination that you can overcome this automatic response and calm your brain down with the information that all is well and the threat is not real.

Along with other animals, we share this automatic response through a part of the brain called the amygdala. The threat response is not only triggered by situations of physical survival. We now live in a time when threat is interpreted in social situations, work situations and our general environment.

As a survival mechanism, your brain is more highly attuned to threat than it is to reward. While it wants to move towards reward, it gives more attention to threat. It's only logical that we would have evolved to examine a threat closely and not turn away from it until we are sure it is not going to cause us danger. On the other hand, we experience a short period of satisfaction from reward, then we move on. No wonder lasting happiness seems so elusive!

But because neuroplasticity means that what you focus on grows, it can be very easy to slip from a normal state of threat alert to one of threat obsession. Have you ever noticed that your daily TV news and newspapers are filled with bad news and potential threats? Your brain tells you to pay attention and check if there are dangers that can directly affect you. And this threat alert will also tell you to keep watching, and come back again tomorrow and the next day ...

The habit of noticing threat more obviously than reward means that we often give more energy to the very things we wish to avoid, rather than cultivating the pleasant things that we would like to grow. It can make you give up your dreams, rather than take a chance on something that appears risky. It can hold you back from the perfect opportunity. It can make you assume the worst case scenario is the most likely.



› At the school reunion, Bill told us a story from early in his career when he was a senior policy adviser with the government. He was leaving for home one night after putting in a 12-hour day. His manager caught him on the way out, asking him to come to her office early the next morning. Bill spent the rest of the night sweating on it, because he had recently thrown his hat into the ring for a promotion and he was really suspicious they weren't going to give him a fair run. All night he went over different ways that the conversation could go, and it was all very negative.

By the next morning he had worked himself into a state. When he walked into his manager's office his heart was beating fast. She started to tell him that he had not been given the promotion and Bill got very defensive, bringing

up every situation where he felt he hadn't been supported. His boss told him to settle down. The reason he hadn't got the promotion was that there was a more important role that they thought Bill was ready for, if he wanted to give it a go. It was definitely the prize role in the area and Bill had always wanted it. He felt very stupid and wondered how it had unravelled so badly.

Bill's hyper-vigilant amygdala sensed a threat when his boss requested a meeting with him. His brain quickly began formulating ways to deal with the threat—and fast! By the time he had stewed over and over his threat story, he was convinced that he was going to be treated unfairly. As soon as he heard something that sounded threatening, his brain released the chemicals that moved him into fight mode. He was still embarrassed about his reaction years later, and was just grateful that they still gave him a chance.

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› the five fears

Your brain's threat response is as old as the human race. Because it evolved to deal with a life so different to that which many of us face today, you could almost call it outdated. As your survival tool, it still does a number of things that made a lot of sense in the lives of our ancestors. But the unfortunate side effect is that many of these default threat responses hinder your efforts to thrive. Now your brain searches not just for direct threats to your physical safety, but it is alerted by many common experiences that have been linked over time to your physical survival.

Consider these common fears that are triggered by the brain's threat response to perceived threats deeply wired in the human brain.

Common Threats	The Five Fears
The threat of making a mistake—leaves you at risk of becoming vulnerable, weakened or rejected	Fear of Failure
The threat of the unknown—leaves you at risk of being unable to survive when conditions change	Fear of Losing Control
The threat of rejection—leaves you at risk of being left to fend for yourself and being denied the benefit of safety in numbers	Fear of Standing Out
The threat of scarcity—leaves you at risk of not having enough resources to survive	Fear of Missing Out
The threat of being held responsible—leaves you at risk of being rejected or becoming vulnerable	Fear of Facing the Truth

While you may not identify with all of these fears and you may not feel like they dominate your life, they have a way of influencing your actions in very subtle ways. For example, I'm not a control freak but I know that my fear of losing control stopped me recently from attending a friend's party. She wanted to do something different and arranged for us all to jump on a bus that would take us on a mystery tour to many exciting destinations. No expense was spared and I have no doubt she would have done a magnificent job organising the day. But all I could think was *I won't be able to come home in my own time. Will there be bugs, will I get sunburned, will I have to do something embarrassing? If there are winding roads I'll get travel sickness ...* And of course I convinced myself not to go. I came up with a nice excuse and no-one was surprised. They know this is not my sort of thing.

But they are too polite to point out I'm just threatened by the thought of losing control!

These common threats and fears are not the only mindsets that can stand in your way. We each have our own wiring created over our lifetime. These assumptions, attitudes, expectations, habits and preferences can combine to hold you back, so understanding your own mind is crucial.

> you're a mind gardener

You're a mind gardener. This is so important we are going to say it again. **You are a mind gardener.** Every moment of every day you cultivate your mind whether you realise it or not. There is no moment in your life, since the day you were born, that you have not been a mind gardener. We're not saying that you are a mind gardener if you like this book or decide to try some of the ideas we suggest. We're saying that even if you don't want to be one, you are. Because it is your every thought, action and experience that wires, shapes, moulds and refines your brain and shapes your life.

That's pretty significant. Because every part of your life is determined by your brain. And you can choose to let it happen in the generally unconscious way that many of us bumble through life, or you can wake up, get conscious, and design your mind garden. But either way you are, and will always be, a mind gardener.

< the unconscious mind gardener

> Let's face it, most of us are on autopilot most of the time, for most of our lives. And for most of life's experiences, you probably get away with it. We're not saying that every little activity you do requires conscious reflection and choice. Your brain is designed so you don't have to do this. It learns routine activities and allows you to repeat them so you don't have to waste vital energy relearning something you've already done before. The sequence of movements

when you clean your teeth can be repeated blindfolded. But let's flip this on its head. Every time you do an action on autopilot, you train your brain to **not** pay attention. This is the silent deadly trick of the brain that goes unnoticed. That everything you do, intentional or not, can become a habit for your brain.

Your husband, wife, mother, father, daughter, son, best friend, boss, colleague, bus driver, shop owner ... every one of them is mind gardening right now. It's easy to say 'well, I can see that I'm a mind gardener when I do a yoga class or read a book'. But here's the rub. You probably do more to cultivate the habits in your mind the moment you leave the yoga class or put down the book. Because your brain continues to absorb your experiences, play with your thoughts, slip into habitual mindsets, judge, criticise, ruminate and chatter. And when this activity of mind continues in the background untended, the garden of your mind grows.

What you give attention to grows. Your attention is the sun and the rain showering down on the plants in your mind garden. A thought dropped into your mind by a stranger's comment is a seed that becomes nothing without your own attention dwelling on the thought and encouraging it to take root.



› Amanda has long had a habit of interpreting every situation in her life as negative. From the driver in front who does not move over quickly enough, to the smell of the neighbour's BBQ floating up to her balcony, it is like her brain zeros in only on the information in that situation that can be turned into a 'bad' story.

A weed had propagated over many years in her brain. Her mother had the same pattern, and being exposed to her viewpoint and reactions to the world during her formative years had wired Amanda similarly. The weed does not need

much more than the occasional watering now and then. It is like a strangler vine, squeezing the life out of any rising flowers or saplings of happiness, and making it impossible to see positive and happy situations that really do exist around her.

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Weeds are hardy plants and the negative thoughts in your mind have this characteristic. They are clever at sourcing the nutrients they need in your brain and have developed long and far-reaching root systems. This enables them to sprout far and wide and appear in unexpected places. How often have people who struggle with weight loss found that the weight has fallen off not through diet, but because they have finally addressed a weed that took root in their mind many years ago?

While weeds find their place and grow well when the garden is most ignored, it seems that the positive and happy plants that we would prefer to grow in our mind are much more vulnerable and require more active tending and cultivation. This is because of the brain's prioritisation of threat over reward. It is important to remember the challenge that this presents, because when your threat response is triggered, fears are likely to rise up and steer you off the path of the well-lived life without you even noticing.

< what's your garden like?

> What would someone proclaim when they first see your mind garden? Would they see fields of happy thoughts that have taken root and propagated kindness, love, gratitude and cheer? Or would they find creeping vines of worry, stress, and anxiety intertwined with negativity? Maybe they would find open fields with diverse pockets of curiosity, adventure, creativity and wonder; or orderly rows of logic with repeated patterns of sensibility.

Now that you understand the very basics of the brain and its wiring, let's delve more deeply into some of the common obstacles on life's journey. We will explore the five fears that have their origins in primitive times, when the ability to sense threats was a survival imperative. You may identify with one of them strongly or perhaps relate to an element in a few of them. Although they are labelled 'fears' you may not relate to them as something you are consciously afraid of. But rest assured they will be at play somewhere in your behaviour. You may also have some unique mindsets that will come to light as you read this book. Either way it's time to conquer the fears that are holding you back from a life well lived. And the first step is to understand them a little bit more.