



Mind the trap

Often there's a tendency to fill the gaps of memory with our own narrative, but this can sometimes be an unhelpful habit

What are the first words that come to mind when trying to describe someone who's telling lies? Insincere, unfair, dishonest? Although lies and honesty are normally thought of as being at odds with each other – and saying the opposite is likely to raise some eyebrows – could it be that they're not always at the opposite ends of the spectrum after all?

Confabulation is a term that comprises the two – it's what the mind does when trying to make sense of the events in the surrounding world, which results in an 'honest lie'. If this wasn't enough of a surprise, it also seems that these 'lies' appear in communication between people more often than expected.

What's a confabulation?

To fully understand the term, it's important to begin by noting the weight it carries in a medical setting. First used as a technical term by the German neurologists Karl Bonhoeffer, Arnold Pick and Carl Wernicke in the early 1900s, confabulation is used in the context of memory disorders.

In medical terms, it's a symptom when a person fills in any gaps in memory with false information, in psychology, it's seen as an error in recollection, as a result of which fabricated events are created. This is different from lying, as a person who confabulates is unaware of the information being false and sincerely believes it's true.

Research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work and author Brené Brown suggests that confabulation affects everyone and can be used as a more regular term to describe a lie that's told honestly. This means that confabulations might impact your daily interactions more

often than you think. These honest lies happen every time you try to explain behaviours of the people around you by making up a narrative. For example, do you remember a time when a colleague failed to respond to your morning greeting and you were quick to judge it was because they didn't like you? Or an occasion when you were interrupted during a meeting and you told yourself it was because your ideas weren't good enough? Perhaps a neighbour didn't even look at you when crossing paths and you were convinced it was because of that loud music the night before? All of these are examples of confabulations.

You honestly believed all these explanations to be true when you were telling them to yourself or others – however, they were most likely lies. The colleague was daydreaming about that first cup of morning coffee, your contribution during the meeting sparked a brilliant follow-up idea and the neighbour was rushing to get home on time and didn't notice anyone.

Confabulations outside of its medical meaning can often be influenced by a psychological bias called a confirmation trap. In simple terms, this is one of the games that the mind plays when it looks for evidence to confirm existing beliefs or views instead of seeking reasons why they might be wrong. This bias is so strong that it can make you focus only on the evidence that reinforces these existing beliefs, blocking out anything that denies them, without you even realising that something is being overlooked. Research shows that even when the counterevidence is pointed out, a confirmation trap makes it very hard to change your opinion.

Turn the page to learn more about the confabulation trap





Why is this important?

These honest lies that you might be telling yourself and the confirmation trap that the mind has prepared for you are likely to be reinforcing those false, often self-limiting beliefs that can affect your work, relationships and, as a result, overall wellbeing. Just pause for a moment to think about how many misunderstandings or conflicts you would have avoided by not engaging in a likely false narrative of the mind. How many opportunities might you have taken if it wasn't for that self-defeating belief you thought you saw confirmed repeatedly.

By being aware of what the brain is capable of, you can start challenging these mind games when they happen, instead of believing a false reality. American psychologist and author Raymond S Nickerson highlights the extent of the confirmation trap's influence on the mind in his research paper on the subject, saying that if there was one aspect of human reasoning 'that deserves all attention above all others, the confirmation bias would have to be among the candidates for consideration'.

Confirmation bias is a trap with no hope to escape from unless you are aware of its existence and pay attention to it, as only then can you start looking for ways to overcome it.

It's comforting to believe that the surrounding world can always be fully understood and correctly interpreted at all times by looking at it through your own lens. It feels good to be right and know it all, as that's exactly what the mind loves the most – clarity and a full story for any situation.

However, these stories and any gaps in between are likely to be filled in with confabulations – honest lies that you might be telling yourself and others, that either lack evidence or are based on subjective evidence created by a mind that's trapped in a confirmation bias. Luckily, you can choose to escape these mind traps by being mindful and following a few of the tips outlined on the right.

Words: Egle Grigaliunaite

HOW CAN YOU ESCAPE THE TRAP?

Awareness is the first step towards more objective thinking, which is free from the honest lies and the confirmation trap, which the mind finds so comforting. From here, you can take one step further and practise self-reflection by trying to do the following...

- **Pause.** Take a moment to think about the stories you tend to tell yourself, can you recognise any patterns? Is there anything those stories have in common? Be aware that any reoccurring themes are likely to be honest lies you tell yourself consistently, that only serve to reinforce any existing self-limiting beliefs.
- **Think factually.** Every time you notice your mind engaging in a narrative trying to explain behaviours or reactions of those around you, try to focus on the facts. Ask yourself questions such as:
 - What do I know for sure?*
 - What am I making up?*
 - Why am I making this story up despite there being no factual evidence?*
- **Practise not knowing.** If there's no factual information to support a story you're telling yourself, don't be afraid to admit there's something you're not certain about or can't explain. Similarly to thinking factually and asking yourself to reflect on things you know for sure, take the opposite angle and use words such as:
 - I am not sure about this.*
 - What I don't know for sure is...* can be a particularly useful phrase when practising not knowing.
- **Ask questions.** If you have any concerns about something that's said or the way someone behaves around you, voice your questions instead of jumping to conclusions that are likely to be a result of a trapped mind. These questions won't come across as confrontational if you focus on a situation in question based on the facts rather than your assumptions or emotions. Opening these questions with the following phrases can be particularly useful:
 - Am I right to believe this?*
 - Do I understand this correctly?*
 - Am I correct to think that?*
- **Be curious.** Acknowledging that your way of perceiving the world around you is just one of the 7.8 billion ways to perceive it will enable you to keep an open mind and learn new ways of looking at things. Learning to be open to new perspectives will challenge a confirmation bias and empower you with an open mind rather than a trapped one.

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