

Spinning class, the scarcity heuristic, and me

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I go to a spinning class a couple mornings a week, and it's hard. Sometimes my quads burn and I don't feel like spinning anymore. So over time I've developed some psychological tools that help me keep my head down and get the most out of my morning workouts.

One of these tools is based on the so-called "scarcity and value heuristic." Heuristics are the mind's automatic, hard-wired habits. They are ancient and powerful and, for the most part, unrecognized. The scarcity heuristic is the brain saying, if something is rare, it must be good. The value heuristic says, if I really desire something, it must be scarce. These closely entwined heuristics reinforce each other in a kind of cycle, shaping all sorts of judgments and life decisions.

Sometimes heuristics are irrational traps, and other times they are indispensable short-cuts. The trick is to recognize them and use them in the right way. So, for example, when I really feel like dogging it at spinning class, I engage in some self-talk that goes something like this: This is 45 minutes out of the entire day, and 45 minutes is all you get. In an hour you will be at your desk, where you'll stay for most of your waking hours. You'll be envious of the joggers outside in the middle of the day. It's very unlikely that you'll get more gym time once this 45-minute opportunity has ended, so treat it like gold.

Or some variation on that. Gold is a good example of the scarcity heuristic, because we value it entirely based on its rarity. You can't build a skyscraper with it, or stay healthy by inhaling it. We need to think of exercise in the same way: The "supply" of spinning time is severely limited by our busy schedules, so we should be hoarding the little we have and really enjoying it.

Notice that all I need to do to make the scarcity heuristic work to my advantage is talk to myself. Heuristics may be hard-wired into our neurons, but that doesn't mean we are powerless in their sway. Self-talk about the scarcity heuristic makes it relevant—and gives it power in our everyday choices.

Sometimes we have to trump the power of our heuristic mind, or channel it. Consider the "default heuristic." This heuristic basically says: It takes a lot more energy to make a decision than not to make one, so unless there is a compelling reason to change, punt. Stick with the status quo; don't change horses. It's a very powerful cognitive mechanism, but even so you can change your default position, with a little insight and effort.

I use this heuristic in my wellness routine as well. Woody Allen once said that 80 percent of the business of life is just showing up. So some years ago, after many failed attempts at fitness, I made a vow to go to the gym every day. Just "show up"—nothing more. I found a reasonably convenient gym so that wasn't an obstacle, then started putting on my sweats every morning and showing up. If I exercised, great, but if I didn't, that was okay too. I would make an appearance.

And you know what? I never once showed up without doing something—even if it was just stepping on the Stairmaster for 20 minutes. And it was almost always more, just because I was there, and why not? I was already sweaty. What I had done, without even realizing it at the time, was to change my brain's default position. Nowadays, choosing *not* to head to the gym is what takes the effort.