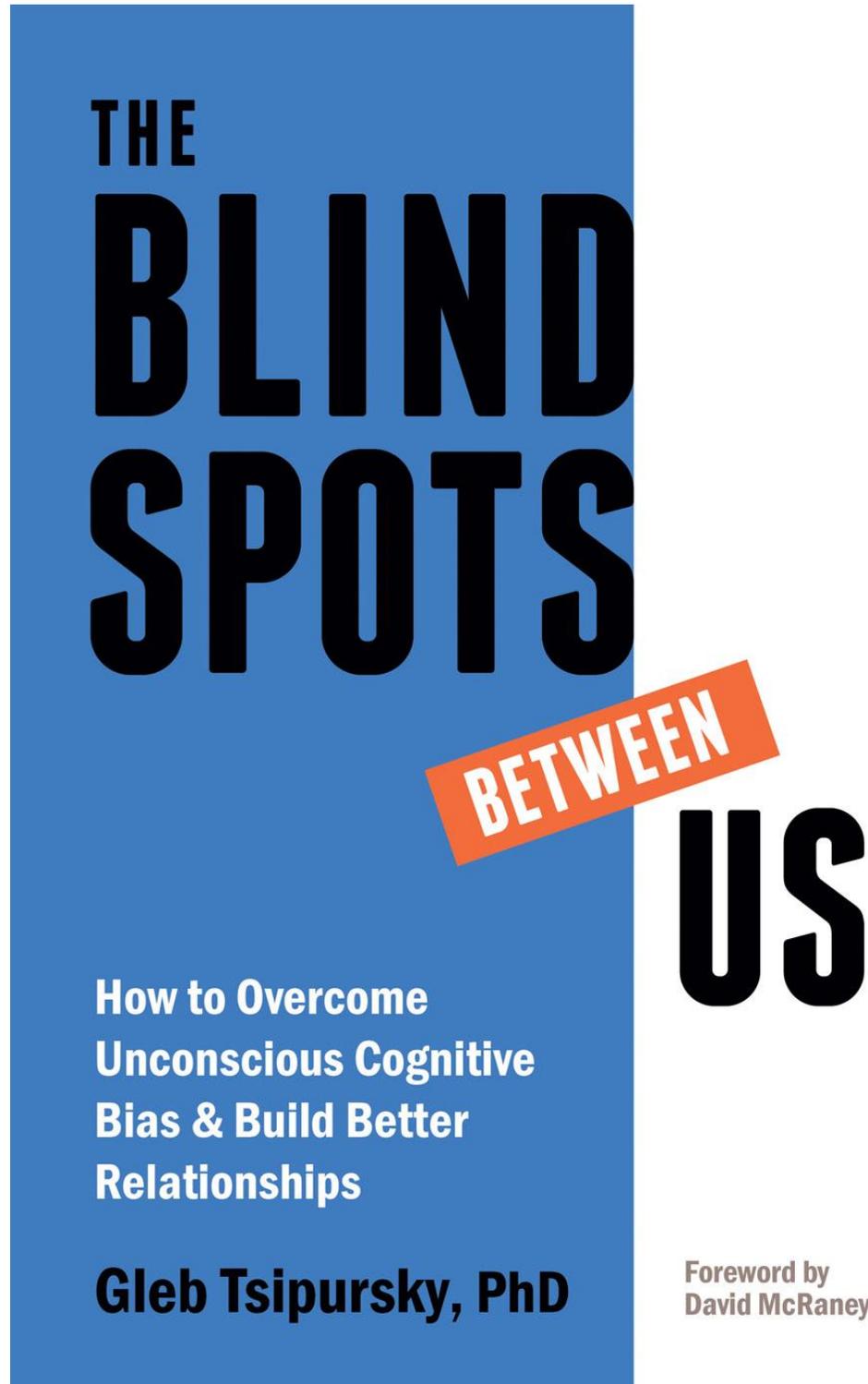


Media Interview Questions and Answers for [*The Blindspots Between Us: How to Overcome Unconscious Cognitive Bias and Build Better Relationships*](#) (New Harbinger, 2020), by Dr. Gleb Tsipursky. To arrange an interview, email Gleb@DisasterAvoidanceExperts.com or call 614-407-4016.



1. How did your own background and experiences lead to your intentional approach to relationships?

It actually began in my childhood. We're constantly told to go with our gut, trust our heart, and follow our intuition in our relationships.

My parents fully believed this tragically common advice. Unfortunately for them, their gut often disagreed with each other. For example, my mom liked nice clothing, so she'd go out and buy a \$100 sweater. My dad was kind of a cheapskate, so when she came home, he'd yell at her that "no sweater should cost over \$20." Then they'd go at it, yelling at each other and bringing up past hurts. Those fights really impacted me when I was a kid.

The worst fight, however, had to do with a financial decision by my dad. He was a real estate agent and had a variable income, since he worked based on commissions. There was about a six-month period where he got lucky and made a great deal of money. However, he hid the money from my mom, and told her he made very little money (he probably didn't want her to spend it on sweaters). He used that money to buy a small apartment and leased it out. When she found out, the result was a huge, big blowout fight. Her trust in him was broken, and she kicked him out. He had to live in that apartment that he bought for a few months, until they eventually reconciled. Still, the broken trust was never fully repaired.

In that period, I lived with my mom, and saw my dad rarely. It was a really tough time for me, and showed me that the way my parents made relationship decisions didn't work well. Those fights by my parents showed me what not to do, instead making me determined to find a better way to make decisions in my relationships. Unfortunately, there was no quality education available on making good decisions, in relationships or in other life areas, in school or in college.

So I decided to research this area. I pursued a PhD focusing on decision-making in historical settings at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and later taught as a tenure-track professor in Ohio State University's Decision Sciences Collaborative. I developed an expertise in the cognitive neuroscience and behavioral economics of decision making, and now serve as the CEO of the boutique consulting, coaching, and training firm Disaster Avoidance Experts. This company helps organizations and leaders make the wisest decisions, in their relationships and other areas.

2. If trusting our heart, going with our gut, and following our intuition in relationships is such a bad idea, why do so many relationship gurus encourage this approach?

I'm deeply frustrated, saddened, and angered when I see great relationships ruined because someone bought into the toxic advice of going with their gut. Perhaps they returned home from

a Tony Robbins seminar and started to follow their instincts and behave like their “authentic selves,” shooting themselves—and their relationships—in the foot.

Such advice is meant to make you feel good and appeal to your ego. “Trust your instincts” feels very comfortable to us, and we tend to choose what’s comfortable rather than go outside of our comfort zone and choose what’s truly good for us, even if it’s uncomfortable. Sadly, gurus who tell people what they want to hear and what makes them comfortable get paid the big bucks, while experts who speak uncomfortable truths usually get ignored. As marketers say, “You can’t go wrong telling people what they want to hear,” and people want to hear what’s comfortable for them, which is why people embrace it, and why gurus like Robbins get paid megabucks to dispense it.

Regrettably, our gut reactions are adapted for the ancient savanna, not the modern world. Following our intuition leads to terrible decisions in the modern environment. For the sake of our relationships, we need to avoid following our primitive instincts and instead be civilized about how we address the inherently flawed nature of our minds.

What would you intuitively rather hear: someone describing delicious, delightful, delectable dozen donuts or someone sharing about how to maintain your physical fitness? “Go with your gut” is the equivalent of the dozen donuts of relationship advice. Sure, the box of dozen donuts contains more calories than we should eat in a whole day. However, our gut wants the donuts instead of the healthy but less intuitively appealing fruit platter of not going with our intuitions. The choice that is most appealing to your gut is often the worst decision for your bottom line, just like the donuts are much more intuitively desirable than a fruit tray, but are the worst choice for your waistline. Too often, we choose an attractive dessert (or a relationship decision) that we later regret.

Unfortunately, many unscrupulous actors in the food industry are trying to feed us as many empty calories as they can stuff into our mouths for the sake of profit despite the tragic consequences to our health, and oppose health research showing the danger of doing so. Similarly, some very powerful relationship gurus have made their careers out of claiming that we should follow our guts regardless of the horrendous consequences for our profits. Fearing for their own livelihoods, they rail against any hint of research-based relationship advice about distrusting our intuitions. I hope you’d fire your personal trainer if they told you to eat a dozen donuts over fruit. Sadly, no relationship guru is afraid of being fired for telling you to follow your heart.

At least, not yet. Perhaps this interview will make them scared.

3. What are cognitive biases and how do they influence relationship decisions?

Cognitive biases are the mental blindspots that result from how our brain is wired. Scholars in cognitive neuroscience and behavioral economics have found over 100 cognitive biases, and

more are discovered all the time. Our evolutionary heritage traces back to our life in small tribes in the savanna environment and reliance on our reflexes to survive. We had to be able to overreact to the presence of a perceived threat in order to make it. It proved more helpful to jump at 100 shadows than fail to jump at one saber-toothed tiger — and we are the descendants of those people evolutionarily selected for jumping at shadows. Similarly, we had to judge quickly whether someone was a member of our tribe or not.

Those who did so most successfully survived and thrived, and so did their children. In the modern day, following our evolutionary gut reactions can lead to many systematic and predictable dangerous judgment errors that devastate our relationships. They range from having the wrong reflexive behavior in reaction to a perceived relationship slight to discriminating unfairly against people who we perceive to not be members of our tribe. Similarly, many mental habits we learned as children don't serve us well as adults, yet we still retain them. Other reasons for cognitive biases result from inherent limitations in our mental processing capacities, such as our difficulty keeping track of many varied data points. No wonder some people have trouble remembering anniversary dates!

People are suffering relationship disasters daily because they fall into cognitive biases. The resulting misconceptions, misunderstandings, and mistakes result in severely damaged or completely broken relationships with their romantic partners, friends, families, and work colleagues, as well as within community groups and civic and political engagements. Cognitive biases also undermine our society as a whole. Some of the worst excesses of polarization and hatred stem from the consequences of failing to watch out for and address these blindspots between us.

4. You share a powerful story in the book about a mental blindspot that causes many relationship conflicts, called the “illusion of transparency.” Can you describe this bias, and share the story?

Can do! The story was of two casual acquaintances of mine who went on a date together, George and Mary.

While they were out on the date, George thought it was such a great date. Mary was so understanding and interested, what a wonderful listener! George told Mary all about himself. He felt that Mary truly got him, unlike so many other women he dated. She really cared! As they parted for the night, they agreed to schedule another date soon.

The next day, George texted Mary to arrange their next date. Mary didn't text back. George waited for a day, then sent Mary a Facebook message. George noticed that Mary saw the message, but she didn't reply. He sent her an email in a couple of days, but Mary maintained radio silence. Eventually, he gave up trying to contact her. What a disappointment! George thought. Just like all those other women. I can't believe I was so wrong about her!

Why didn't Mary write back? Well, she had a different experience than George on that date. A polite and shy introvert, she felt overwhelmed from the start of the date with George's extroverted and energetic personality. As Mary listened to George talk about his parents, job, and friends without asking her about herself, she thought "Why would I date someone who overwhelms me like that?" She politely listened to George, not wanting to hurt his feelings, and told George she'd go out with him again, with absolutely no intention of doing so.

I learned about the widely diverging viewpoints of Mary and George because I knew both of them as casual acquaintances. George started complaining to people around him, including me, about Mary's refusal to respond to his messages after a date that he thought went very well. George felt that he was genuinely sharing and Mary did wonderful listening.

I privately asked Mary what happened from her perspective and she told me her side of the story. Mary told me that she kept sending nonverbal signals of her lack of interest, but George failed to catch the signals. Mary perceived him as oversharing and herself as behaving politely until she could leave.

Now, you might see it as problematic for Mary to avoid responding to George's texts. Still, there are many "Marys" out there who behave this way due to a combination of shyness, politeness, and conflict avoidance in their personality. In turn, there are many "Georges" whose extroversion and energy impede their ability to read nonverbal signals.

Both George and Mary fell into one of the most common judgment errors that cause misunderstandings between us: the "illusion of transparency." The illusion of transparency leads to us greatly overestimate the extent to which others perceive our feelings and thoughts. It's one of several biases that cause us to feel, think, and talk past each other, harming our personal, professional, and civic relationships.

5. You describe how cognitive biases lead to discrimination in our society. Can you elaborate more on that?

Our brains cause us to make incorrect attributions all the time, leading to discriminatory judgments about individuals and groups alike due to tribalist impulses. One cognitive bias that's especially important is called the ultimate attribution error. This mental blindspot describes how if we observe certain negative characteristics about a group of people who we feel aren't part of our tribe, we attribute those negative characteristics to the internal traits of the group, as opposed to external circumstances. For example, if you never wear baseball hats, and then you notice that all people who wear baseball hats litter, then you tend to believe that baseball hat-wearers are inherently litterbugs.

For a more serious example, let me share something that happens often when organizations often bring me in as a speaker on diversity and inclusion. When I share in speeches that black

Americans suffer from police harassment and violence at a much higher rate than white people, some participants (usually white) occasionally try to defend the police by claiming that black people are more violent and likely to break the law than whites. They thus attribute police harassment to the internal characteristics of black people (implying that it is deserved), not to the external context of police behavior.

In reality—as I point out in my response to these folks—research shows that black people are harassed and harmed by police at a much higher rate for the same kind of activity. A white person walking by a cop, for example, is statistically much less likely to be stopped and frisked than a black one; at the other end of things, a white person resisting arrest is much less likely to be violently beaten than a black one. In other words, statistics show that the higher rate of harassment and violence against black Americans by police is due to the prejudice of the police officers, at least to a large extent.

However, I am careful to clarify that this discrimination is not necessarily intentional. Sometimes, it indeed is deliberate, with white police officers consciously believing that black Americans deserve much more scrutiny than whites. At other times, the discriminatory behavior results from autopilot processes that the police officer would not consciously endorse, and is an implicit bias. Interestingly, research shows that many black police officers have an unconscious prejudice against other black people, perceiving them in a more negative light than white people when evaluating potential suspects. This implicit bias carried by many, not all, black police officers helps show that such prejudices come—at least to a significant extent—from internal cultures within police departments, rather than pre-existing racist attitudes before someone joins a police department.

Such cultures are perpetuated by internal norms, policies, and training procedures, and any police department wishing to address such bias needs to address internal culture first and foremost rather than attributing racism to individual officers. In other words, instead of saying it's a few bad apples in a barrel of overall good ones, the key is recognizing that implicit bias is a systemic issue and that the structure and joints of the barrel need to be fixed.

The crucial thing to highlight is that there is no shame or blame in implicit bias, as it's not stemming from any fault in the individual. This no-shame approach decreases the fight or flight defensive response among reluctant audiences, helping them hear and accept the issue. With these additional statistics and discussion of implicit bias, the issue is generally settled. Still, from their subsequent behavior, it's clear that some of these audience members don't immediately internalize this evidence. It's much more comforting for their autopilot system to believe that police officers are right and anyone targeted by police deserves it; in turn, they are highly reluctant to accept the need to focus more efforts and energy on protect black Americans from police violence due to the structural challenges facing these groups.

The issue of implicit bias doesn't match their intuitions, and thus they reject this concept, despite extensive and strong evidence for its pervasive role in policing. It takes a series of subsequent

follow-up conversations and interventions to move the needle. A single training is almost never sufficient, both in my experience and according to research, and I say this as a trainer, so I'm making a statement that goes against my wallet! The lack of willingness to acknowledge prejudice by police is an example of the ultimate attribution error going the other way, where people don't want to acknowledge that groups they like might have some negative characteristics.

6. Let's say you notice someone else believes something clearly false and behaves irrationally due to cognitive biases. How would you respond?

When someone denies a clearly observable fact supported by clearly observable evidence, it's very likely that an emotional block is in play. That applies to social and cultural issues, such as falsely claiming that all terrorists are Muslims or believing that vaccines cause autism, and everyday life issues, such as a business leader failing to acknowledge uncomfortable facts about a company's performance or your grandma denying her vision is so bad that she shouldn't drive. If you pressure them by presenting the facts, they will very likely experience your efforts to correct their misconceptions—however well intended—as an attack. They will respond with their fight or flight instinct, either arguing back or shutting down and ignoring you.

Instead, use a research-driven methodology to help correct the other person's failure to see reality clearly. An excellent way to do so is a five-step approach I devised, tested, and use extensively, which can be summarized under the acronym EGRIP, and stands for emotions, goals, rapport, information, and positive reinforcement.

Let's say you're faced with someone who endorses both vigilante violence and heavy-handed policing toward Muslims, saying "Not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims." This is clearly incorrect. An FBI study that evaluated terrorism in the US between 1980 and 2005 (which included 9/11) discovered that Muslims committed only 6 percent of all terrorist attacks.

Step 1: Emotions

If someone denies clear facts, you can safely assume that it's their emotions that are leading them away from reality. You need to deploy the skill of empathy, meaning understanding other people's emotions, to determine what emotional blocks might cause them to deny reality.

In this case, it's relatively easy to figure out the emotions at play through making a guess based on what research shows about what more conservative people who support persecuting Muslims value: security. You can confirm this guesstimate through active listening and using empathetic curiosity to question the person about their concerns about Muslims. The person would likely share extensively about fears of all Muslims being potential terrorists, explaining the desire to lash out at them based on a commitment to defend our society.

Step 2: Goals

Next, establish shared goals for both of you, which is crucial for effective knowledge sharing. With the person showing anti-Muslim prejudice, you could talk about how you both want security for our society. Likewise, you want to establish that they both want to commit to the facts, no matter where they lead us, as you both want to avoid deceiving yourselves and thus undermining your safety and security. This would be a good time to bring up a personal commitment to truthfulness through taking the Pro-Truth Pledge (at <http://ProTruthPledge.org>) and asking your conversation partner to hold you accountable to the facts. Doing so would help raise your credibility.

Step 3: Rapport

Third, build rapport. Using the empathetic listening you did previously, a vital skill in promoting trusting relationships, you would echo the other party's emotions and show that you understand how they feel. If possible, share a personal story where you felt such emotions to help them viscerally appreciate your emotional understanding. In the case of the person with anti-Muslim sentiments, you would echo their fear and validate their emotions, telling him it's natural to feel afraid when we see Muslims committing terrorism, and it's where your gut reaction goes as well. You can share a story from your experience when you learned about a terrorist act committed by Muslims, describing how learning about it made you feel.

Step 4: Information

Now, move on to sharing information. Here is where you can give the facts that you held back in the beginning. Before sharing facts, it helps to point out that our emotions lead us astray. Try to use a contextual example based on the setting. For instance, you could point to a large pack of cookies, saying that we might be tempted to indulge in junk food due to our instincts, but doing so would harm our health, so we need to moderate our instincts for the sake of our health goals.

Then, you can move on to the facts about Muslims and terrorism. Here's where you can bring up the FBI study on Muslims and terrorism. Also, you can use probabilistic thinking to address safety concerns. For example, you can point out that there were eight terrorist acts in the US motivated in part by Islamic beliefs in 2016, with nine terrorists in total. There are about 1.8 million Muslim adults in the US. Thus, there's a one-in-two-hundred thousand chance that any Muslim would commit a terrorist act in a given year. That's like picking out a terrorist randomly from the number of people in several football stadiums. From a policing perspective, you can highlight that focusing efforts on surveilling Muslims will make us less secure by causing us to miss the actual terrorists. In addition, you can note that the FBI praises Muslims for reporting threats. Anti-Muslim vigilantism or government policies to police Muslims in a heavy-handed manner will make Muslims less likely to report threats. In fact, anti-Muslim political rhetoric by prominent US politicians is already being used to recruit terrorists in the US. You can point out that more anti-Muslim rhetoric and government policies will only result in more materials to recruit terrorists.

The key here is to show your conversation partner, without arousing a defensive or aggressive response, how their current truth denialism will lead to them undermining the shared goals you both established earlier.

Step 5: Positive Reinforcement

If you successfully carried out the steps described above, without inspiring a defensive or aggressive fight-or-flight response, the person is almost guaranteed to move—at least a little—toward facing reality. At this point, you'll want to offer positive reinforcement for their orientation toward the facts, a research-based tactic of altering the intuitive emotional habits of the autopilot system. Effective positive reinforcement will not only help the other party stick with their new position on the matter of disagreement, but also make it more likely for them to update their beliefs toward the truth faster in the future.

With the anti-Muslim person, if you're successful, the person would agree that anti-Muslim policies and vigilantism seem unwise if we want to have more safety, regardless of how we intuitively feel. The person would acknowledge that our society would be more secure if we are more tolerant and inclusive toward Muslims, even if our gut reactions make you uncomfortable with this recognition. You can then support this person—without being condescending—by saying that it's tough to make such uncomfortable realizations. You can share how you came to a similar perspective when learning about statistics on Muslims and terrorism from FBI studies, sharing your own surprise and discomfort. You can praise the person for the broader principle of being willing to face emotionally uncomfortable facts, saying that many people wouldn't be able to make this difficult belief update.

7. How can you tell to which cognitive biases you are most vulnerable?

Fortunately, we can learn to spot situations where our gut reactions are likely to make mistakes due to cognitive biases and correct these errors, because these mental blind spots are systematic and predictable. I'm not saying it's easy, as doing so involves building up a series of mental habits, many of which you might not have right now.

You can learn how to do this through debiasing. Debiasing is the subfield of cognitive neuroscience and behavioral economics that focuses on noticing and overcoming the kind of cognitive biases that lead to devastating consequences for our decision-making.

One of the best ways to debias yourself is to pause before any daily decision and see where your gut reactions are taking you. Then, look at the list of the most dangerous cognitive biases, namely the 30 that are listed in the book. See which of them aligns best with your intuitions to learn about which cognitive biases are most likely to steer you astray.

For example, I tend to be overly optimistic and risk-blind, suffering from the optimism bias in my relationships. Having learned that, I have instituted debiasing mechanisms to minimize the likelihood of making devastating relationship decisions due to this mental blindspot.

8. You've made a convincing case that we need to learn about cognitive biases to protect ourselves in our relationships settings. So what's the best way to learn about them so that we don't fall into these dangerous judgment errors?

Gaining awareness of a problem is the first step to solving it. Sounds obvious, right? However, getting rid of cognitive biases by learning about them is trickier than it might seem. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could just read an article or book, or listen to a speech or interview about these dangerous judgment errors, and voila, you're cured! It's not that easy.

Research demonstrates that just finding out about a cognitive bias doesn't have much impact on addressing this problem. Of course, learning about these mental blindspots is important. However, such knowledge is only helpful in overcoming the problem when the person can evaluate the harmful impact of these dangerous judgment errors on themselves: when they can feel the pain. Understanding the stakes gets people emotionally involved and bought into solving mental blindspots. After all, our emotions determine 80-90% of our thoughts, behaviors, and decisions, making such emotional engagement critically important for the hard work of fighting cognitive biases.

What, you're surprised that I call it "hard"? Defeating dangerous judgment errors involves changing our intuitions and gut reactions. Rewiring our habitual instincts is hard, and I mean hard. Remember when you learned to drive a car? Maybe this ages me, but I learned to drive back in the bad old days when we didn't have anti-lock brakes. So you had to learn to avoid slamming on the brakes when skidding on ice/snow/water and instead pump the brakes. It's very counterintuitive and hard to do, just as it's counterintuitive to do exercises and avoid eating that third glazed donut (the second is a-ok!).

Fortunately, cognitive-behavioral therapy provides a range of tools for doing so, which are outlined in my book.

9. You talk about developing "mental fitness" to overcome the dangerous judgment errors of cognitive bias. What is this mental fitness?

If you want to avoid disasters in your relationships, you'll need to put in some effort. No pain, no gain, right? What can be more important than improving your relationship decisions? The quality of our relationships is determined by the decisions we make every day. If you screw up these decisions, don't expect that you'll have the kind of relationships that you want and deserve.

Not what you hoped to hear? Here's something more hopeful. You'll be cheered by the fact that the strategies outlined in the book all come from research in neuroscience, psychology, cognitive-behavioral therapy and other disciplines that investigate how to debias cognitive biases. Addressing cognitive biases is a critically important form of mental fitness and developing these skills is like doing exercises for your mind, just like doing physical exercises to ensure physical fitness. So protect your mental fitness well and pay careful attention to implementing these skills.

Your mental fitness is much more important than bingeing on Netflix, scrolling through Facebook, or reading yet another depressing political news story. Choose carefully what you pay attention to, as what you focus on is what you lead yourself to become. The only things in life you can control are your thoughts, behaviors, and feelings, and even those far from perfectly (otherwise nobody would eat a whole bag of potato chips, not that I ever did that, of course). To develop these skills and rewire our automatic habits requires us to really want to do it, meaning invest strong emotions into change because we really dislike the current situation. To make that investment, it's critical for us to have personal buy-in for transforming our intuitions. Simply learning about the cognitive bias doesn't create such intense feelings.

However, identifying in a deep and thorough manner where that dangerous judgment error is truly hurting us – the critical pain points caused by these cognitive biases in our relationships – helps empower the strong negative emotions needed to go against our gut reactions. Yet even that is not enough, just like it wouldn't be enough to dislike strongly our body weight without a tangible plan to get fit through changing our diet and exercise regimen. And make no mistake, the work you need to do to become mentally fit is just as hard as the work required to make a drastic change for the better in your physical health.

10. Ok, I'm convinced we need to develop mental fitness to defeat cognitive biases and build the best possible relationships. What are the specific mental fitness techniques that are necessary for us to do so?

There are twelve specific debiasing methods that have been shown to be effective, through research in neuroscience, behavioral economics, and cognitive-behavioral therapy

1. Identify and make a plan to address dangerous judgment errors.
2. Delay decision-making.
3. Mindfulness meditation.
4. Probabilistic thinking.
5. Make predictions about the future.
6. Consider alternative explanations and options.
7. Consider past experiences.
8. Consider long-term future and repeating scenarios.

9. Consider other people's perspectives.
10. Use an outside view to get an external perspective.
11. Set policy to guide your future self and organization.
12. Make a precommitment.