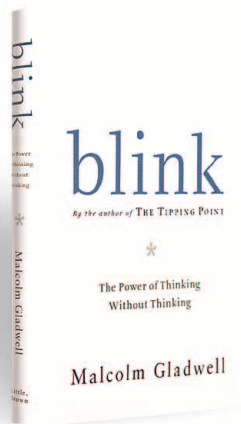




Executive Book Summaries®

FILE: LEADERSHIP



By Malcolm Gladwell

The Power of Thinking Without Thinking

BLINK

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Blink is about how we think without thinking, about choices that seem to be made in an instant — in the blink of an eye — that actually aren't as simple as they seem, and about those instantaneous decisions that are impossible to explain to others.

Blink reveals that great decision makers aren't those who process the most information or spend the most time deliberating, but those who have perfected the art of "thin-slicing" — filtering the very few factors that matter from an overwhelming number of variables.

In his landmark bestseller, The Tipping Point, author Malcolm Gladwell redefined how we understand the world around us. Now, in Blink, he revolutionizes the way we understand the world within by exploring the decisions made by experts in museums, sales, sports, the military and the high-speed world of the New York Mercantile Exchange.

Drawing on cutting-edge neuroscience and psychology, and displaying all of the brilliance that made The Tipping Point a classic, Blink changes the way you understand every decision you make.

Never again will you think about thinking the same way.

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What You'll Learn In This Summary

- ✓ How unique but learnable skills can empower human perception and understanding.
- ✓ Why some people are brilliant decision makers.
- ✓ Why some people follow their instincts and win, while others end up stumbling into error.
- ✓ How our brains really work — in the office, in the classroom and in the marketplace.
- ✓ Why some snap decisions have better results than those we agonize over.
- ✓ How some of the best decision makers utilize the theory of thin-slicing to their competitive advantage.
- ✓ Why snap decisions are so important.
- ✓ How training and practice can affect our ability to make the right decision.
- ✓ How to read minds by watching facial movements.

BLINK

by Malcolm Gladwell

— THE COMPLETE SUMMARY

The Statue That Didn't Look Right

In September 1983, an art dealer by the name of Gianfranco Becchina approached the J. Paul Getty Museum in California. He had in his possession, he said, a marble statue dating from the 6th century B.C. It was what is known as a kouros — a sculpture of a nude male youth standing with his left leg forward and his arms at his sides. There are only about 200 kouros in existence, and most have been recovered badly damaged or in fragments from grave sites or archeological digs. But this one was almost perfectly preserved. It stood close to 7 feet tall. It had a kind of light-colored glow that set it apart from other ancient works. It was an extraordinary find. Becchina's asking price was just under \$10 million.

Core Sample Findings

The Getty moved cautiously. It took the kouros on loan and began a thorough investigation. A geologist from the University of California named Stanley Margolis came to the museum and spent two days examining the surface of the statue with a high-resolution stereomicroscope. He then removed a core sample from just below the right knee and analyzed it using an electron microscope, electron microprobe, mass spectrometry, X-ray diffraction and X-ray fluorescence.

The statue was made of dolomite marble from the ancient Cape Vathy quarry on the island of Thasos, Margolis concluded, and the surface of the statue was covered in a thin layer of calcite — which was significant, Margolis told the Getty, because dolomite can turn into calcite only over the course of hundreds, if not thousands, of years. In other words, the statue was old. It wasn't some contemporary fake.

The Getty was satisfied. Fourteen months after its investigation of the kouros began, it agreed to buy the statue. In the fall of 1986, the statue went on display for the first time.

A Problem

The kouros, however, had a problem. It didn't look right. The first to point this out was an Italian art historian named Federico Zeri, who served on the Getty's

Thin-Slicing Defined

A critical part of rapid cognition is known as "thin-slicing." Thin-slicing refers to the ability of our unconscious mind to find patterns in situations and behavior based on very narrow slices of experience. In the theory of thin slices, a little bit of knowledge goes a long way. Thin-slicing is part of what makes the unconscious so dazzling.

This is the way that our unconscious works: It is sifting through the situation in front of us, throwing out all that is irrelevant while we zero in on what really matters. The truth is that our unconscious is really good at this, to the point where thin-slicing often delivers a better answer than more deliberate and exhaustive ways of thinking. Thin-slicing is not an exotic gift. It is a central part of what it means to be human. We thin-slice whenever we meet a new person, have to make sense of something quickly or encounter a novel situation.

board of trustees. When he was taken down to the museum's restoration studio to see the kouros in December 1983, he found himself staring at the sculpture's fingernails. In a way he couldn't immediately articulate, they seemed wrong to him.

Evelyn Harrison, one of the world's foremost experts on Greek sculpture, was next. What did Harrison see? She didn't know. In the very first moment of seeing the

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The Statue That Didn't Look Right

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statue, all Harrison had was a hunch, an instinctive sense that something was amiss.

A few months later, Thomas Hoving, the former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, was taken down to the Getty's conservation studio to see the statue as well. Hoving always makes a note of the first word that goes through his head when he sees something new, and he'll never forget what that word was when he first saw the kouros. "It was 'fresh' — 'fresh,'" Hoving recalls. And "fresh" was not the right reaction to have to a 2,000-year-old statue.

Cold Feelings

When George Despinis, the head of the Acropolis Museum in Athens, took one look at the kouros he blanched. "Anyone who has ever seen a sculpture coming out of the ground," he said, "could tell that that thing has never been in the ground." And later, Georgios Dontas, head of the Archeological Society in Athens, saw the statue and immediately felt cold. "When I saw the kouros for the first time," he said, "I felt as though there was a glass between me and the work."

Further investigations revealed more questions about the statue's authenticity. Now, in the Getty catalog, there is a picture of the kouros, with the notation "About 530 B.C., or modern forgery."

When Federico Zeri, Evelyn Harrison, Thomas Hoving and Georgios Dontas — and many others — looked at the kouros and felt an "intuitive repulsion," they were absolutely right. In the first two seconds of looking — in a single glance — they were able to understand more about the essence of the statue than the team at the Getty was able to understand after 14 months.

This summary is about those first two seconds. ■

The Locked Door: The Secret Life of Snap Decisions

Here is a critical fact about the thoughts and decisions that bubble up from our unconscious. Snap judgments are, first of all, enormously quick: They rely on the thinnest slices of experience. They are also unconscious. Snap judgments and rapid cognition take place behind a locked door. We are not very good at dealing with the fact of that locked door. It's one thing to acknowledge the enormous power of snap judgments and thin slices but quite another to place our trust in something so seemingly mysterious.

Our world requires that decisions be sourced and foot-

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Snap Decisions in Sports

Vic Braden, one of the world's top tennis coaches, has noticed something during his many years of working with some of the world's best athletes. He has asked many of these professionals questions about why and how they play the way they do, and invariably he comes away disappointed. "Out of all the research that we've done with top players, we haven't found a single player who is consistent in knowing and explaining exactly what he does," Braden says. "They give different answers at different times, or they have answers that simply are not meaningful." One of the things he does, for instance, is videotape top tennis players and then digitize their movements, breaking them down frame by frame on a computer so that he knows, say, precisely how many degrees Pete Sampras rotates his shoulder on a cross-court backhand.

An Inability to Describe How We Behave

One of Braden's digitized videotapes is of the tennis great Andre Agassi hitting a forehand. The image has been stripped down. Agassi has been reduced to a skeleton, so that as he moves to hit the ball, the movement of every joint in his body is clearly visible and measurable. The Agassi tape is a perfect illustration of our inability to describe how we behave in the moment. "Almost every pro in the world says that he uses his wrist to roll the racket over the ball when he hits a forehand," Braden says. "Why? What are they seeing? Look," — and here Braden points to the screen — "see when he hits the ball? We can tell with digitized imaging whether a wrist turns an eighth of a degree. But players almost never move their wrist at all. Look how fixed it is. He doesn't move his wrist until long after the ball is hit. He thinks he's moving it at impact, but he's actually not moving it until long after impact. How can so many people be fooled?"

Ted Williams' Blind Spot

Braden found the same problem with the baseball player Ted Williams. Williams always said he could look the ball onto the bat, that he could track it right to the point where he made contact. But Braden knew from his work in tennis that that is impossible. In the final five feet of a tennis ball's flight toward a player, the ball is far too close and moving much too fast to be seen. The player, at that moment, is effectively blind. The same is true with baseball. "I met with Ted Williams once," Braden says. "I said, 'Gee, Ted. We just did a study that showed that human beings can't track the ball onto the bat. It's a three-millisecond event.' And he was honest. He said, 'Well, I guess it just *seemed* like I could do that.'"

The Locked Door: The Secret Life of Snap Decisions

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noted, and if we say *how* we feel, we must also be prepared to elaborate on *why* we feel that way. That approach is a mistake. If we are to learn to improve the quality of the decisions we make, we need to accept the mysterious nature of our snap judgments. We need to respect the fact that it is possible to know without knowing why we know and accept that — sometimes — we're better off that way. ■

The Storytelling Problem

On a brisk spring evening not long ago, two dozen men and women gathered in the back room of a Manhattan bar to engage in a peculiar ritual known as speed-dating. At the beginning, they mingled awkwardly, clutching their drinks, and then the coordinator of the evening called the group to order.

Each man would have six minutes of conversation with each woman. The women would sit for the duration of the evening against the wall on the long, low couches that ringed the room, and the men would rotate from woman to woman, moving to the next woman whenever the coordinator rang a bell signaling that the six minutes were over. The daters were all given a badge, a number and a short form to complete, with the instruction that if they liked someone after six minutes, they should check the box next to his or her number. If the person whose box he or she checked also checked his or her box, both daters would be notified of the other's e-mail address within 24 hours.

Everyone Is Smart

Speed-dating has become enormously popular around the world over the last few years, and it's not hard to understand why. It's the distillation of dating to a simple snap judgment. Everyone who sat down at one of those tables was trying to answer a very simple question: Do I want to see this person again? And to answer that, we don't need an entire evening. We really need only a few minutes. When it comes to thin-slicing potential dates, pretty much everyone is smart.

But suppose we were to alter the rules of speed-dating just slightly. What if we tried to look behind the locked door and made everyone explain his or her choices? We know, of course, that that can't be done: The machinery of our unconscious thinking is forever hidden. But what if we forced people to explain their first impressions and snap judgments *anyway*? That is what two professors from Columbia University have done, and they have discovered that if you make people explain themselves,

something very strange and troubling happens. What once seemed like the most transparent and pure of thin-slicing exercises turns into something quite confusing.

Behind the Locked Door

The professors found that when they compare what speed-daters say they want in a preliminary questionnaire with what they are actually attracted to in the moment, those two things don't match. This can be confusing. A speed-dater has an idea about what she wants in a man, and that idea isn't wrong. It's just incomplete. The description that she starts with is her conscious ideal: what she believes she wants when she sits down and thinks about it. But what she cannot be as certain about are the criteria she uses to form her preferences in that first instant of meeting someone face to face. That information is behind the locked door.

We have, as human beings, a storytelling problem. We're a bit too quick to come up with explanations for things we really don't have an explanation for. ■

The Dark Side of Thin-Slicing

What makes thin-slicing possible is our ability to very quickly get below the surface of a situation. But what happens if that rapid chain of thinking gets interrupted somehow? What if we reach a snap judgment without *ever* getting below the surface?

Part of what it means to take thin-slicing and first impressions seriously is accepting the fact that sometimes we can know more about someone or something in the blink of an eye than we can after months of study. But we also have to acknowledge and understand those circumstances when rapid cognition leads us astray.

Taking Care of the Customer

Being a successful salesperson is a task that places extraordinary demands on the ability to thin-slice. Someone you've never met walks into your place of business. Some people are insecure. Some are nervous. Some know exactly what they want. Some have no idea. Some know a great deal about your product or service and will be offended by a salesperson who adopts a patronizing tone. Some are desperate for someone to take them by the hand and make sense of what seems to them like an overwhelming process. A salesperson, if he or she is to be successful, has to gather all of that information — figuring out, for example, the dynamic that exists between a husband and a wife, or a father and a daughter — process it and adjust his or her own behavior accordingly, and do all of that within the first few moments of the encounter.

Most salespeople see someone, and somehow they let

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The Dark Side of Thin-Slicing

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the first impression they have about that person's appearance drown out every other piece of information they manage to gather in that first instant.

The best salespeople try to be more selective. They try to pick up on whether someone is confident or insecure, knowledgeable or naive, trusting or suspicious — but from that thin-slicing flurry the successful salesperson tries to edit out those impressions based solely on physical appearance.

But if those impressions are happening outside of awareness, how on earth do you fix it? The answer is that we are not helpless in the face of our first impressions. They may bubble up from the unconscious — from behind a locked door inside of our brain — but just because something is outside of awareness doesn't mean it's outside of control.

Our first impressions are generated by our experiences and our environment, which means that we can change our first impressions — we can alter the way we thin-slice — by changing the experiences that comprise those impressions. ■

For additional information on a subconscious height bias, go to: <http://my.summary.com>

Harnessing Thin-Slicing

Taking rapid cognition seriously — acknowledging the incredible power, for good and ill, that first impressions play in our lives — requires that we take active steps to manage and control those impressions. We must confront the consequences of first impressions and snap judgments. Sometimes we are successful, sometimes we are not. The following examples provide us with critical lessons on how we can better understand and come to terms with the extraordinary power of thin-slicing.

The Structure of Spontaneity

Once, out of curiosity, Paul Van Riper, a Marine who served in Vietnam, consultant Gary Klein and a group of about a dozen Marine Corps generals flew to the Mercantile Exchange in New York to visit the trading floor. Van Riper thought to himself, I've never seen this sort of pandemonium except in a military command post in war — we can learn something from this.

After the bell rang at the end of the day, the generals went onto the floor and played trading games. Then they took a group of traders from Wall Street across New York Harbor to the military base on Governor's Island and played war games on computers. The traders did brilliantly. The war games required them to make

decisive, rapid-fire decisions under conditions of high pressure and with limited information, which is, of course, what they did all day at work. Van Riper then took the traders down to Quantico, put them in tanks, and took them on a live fire exercise. To Van Riper, it seemed clearer and clearer that these “overweight, unkempt, long-haired” guys and the Marine Corps brass were fundamentally engaged in the same business — the only difference being that one group bet on money and the other bet on lives.

Traders and Generals

“I remember the first time the traders met the generals,” Gary Klein says. “It was at the cocktail party, and I saw something that really startled me. You had all these Marines, these two- and three-star generals, and you know what a Marine Corps general is like. Some of them had never been to New York. Then there were all these traders, these brash, young New Yorkers in their 20s and 30s, and I looked at the room and there were groups of two and three, and there was not a single group that did not include members of both sides. They weren't just being polite. They were animatedly talking to each other. They were comparing notes and connecting. I said to myself, These guys are soul mates. They were treating each other with total respect.”

Improvisation comedy is a wonderful example of the kind of thinking that this summary is about. It involves people making very sophisticated decisions on the spur of the moment, without the benefit of any kind of script or plot. What is so compelling and terrifying about improv is the fact that it appears utterly random and chaotic. It seems as though you have to get up onstage and make everything up, right there on the spot. But the truth is that improv isn't random and chaotic at all. Improv is an art form governed by a series of rules, and everybody attends lengthy rehearsals to practice abiding by those rules.

Repetition and Structured Practice

The game of basketball provides an apt analogy. Basketball is an intricate, high-speed game filled with split-second, spontaneous decisions. But that spontaneity is possible only when everyone first engages in hours of highly repetitive and structured practice — perfecting his or her shooting, dribbling and passing, and running plays over and over again — and agrees to play a carefully defined role on the court.

This is the critical lesson of improv as well, and it is also a key to understanding the camaraderie between the New York traders and the Marine Corps generals: *spontaneity is not random*. How good people's decisions are under the fast-moving, high-stress conditions of rapid cognition is a function of their training, rules and rehearsal. ■

Verbal Overshadowing

Allowing people to operate without having to explain themselves constantly enables rapid cognition. Here is a very simple example of this:

Picture, in your mind, the face of the waiter or waitress who served you the last time you ate at a restaurant, or the person who sat next to you on the bus today. Any stranger whom you've seen recently will do. Now, if you were asked to pick that person out of a police lineup, could you do it? You probably could.

Unconscious Cognition

Recognizing someone's face is a classic example of unconscious cognition. We don't have to think about it. Faces just pop into our minds. But suppose you were asked to take a pen and paper and write down in as much detail as you can what your person looks like. Describe her face. What color was her hair? What was she wearing? Was she wearing any jewelry? Believe it or not, you will now do much worse at picking that face out of a lineup. This is because the act of describing a face has the effect of impairing your otherwise effortless ability to subsequently recognize that face.

The Brain's Two Hemispheres

The psychologist Jonathan W. Schooler, who pioneered research on this effect, calls it verbal overshadowing. Your brain has a part (the left hemisphere) that thinks in words, and a part (the right hemisphere) that thinks in pictures, and what happened when you described the face in words was that your actual visual memory was displaced. Your thinking was bumped from the right to the left hemisphere. When you were faced with the lineup the second time around, what you were drawing on was your memory of what you *said* the waitress looked like, not your memory of what you *saw* she looked like. And that's a problem because when it comes to faces, we are much better at visual recognition than we are at verbal description. ■

Insight Puzzles

Dr. Schooler has shown that the implications of verbal overshadowing carry over to the way we solve much broader problems. Consider the following puzzle:

A man and his son are in a serious car accident. The father is killed, and the son is rushed to the emergency room. Upon arrival, the attending doctor looks at the child and gasps, "This child is my son!" Who is the doctor?

This is an insight puzzle. It's not like a math or a logic problem that can be worked out systematically with pencil and paper. The only way you can get the

Too Many Choices

Columbia University Professor Sheena Iyengar once conducted an experiment in which she set up a tasting booth with a variety of exotic gourmet jams at the upscale grocery store Draeger's in Menlo Park, Calif. Sometimes the booth had six different jams, and sometimes Iyengar had 24 different jams on display. She wanted to see whether the number of jam choices made any difference in the number of jams sold. Conventional economic wisdom, of course, says that the more choices consumers have, the more likely they are to buy, because it is easier for consumers to find the jam that perfectly fits their needs. But Iyengar found the opposite to be true.

Thirty percent of those who stopped by the six-choice booth ended up buying some jam, while only 3 percent of those who stopped by the bigger booth bought anything.

Why is that? Because buying jam is a snap decision. You say to yourself, instinctively, I want that one. And if you are given too many choices, if you are forced to consider much more than your unconscious is comfortable with, you get paralyzed. Snap judgments can be made in a snap because they are frugal, and if we want to protect our snap judgments, we have to take steps to protect that frugality.

answer is if it comes to you suddenly in the blink of an eye. You need to make a leap beyond the automatic assumption that doctors are always men. They aren't always, of course. The doctor is the boy's mother!

The Inverted Steel Pyramid

Here's another insight puzzle:

A giant inverted steel pyramid is perfectly balanced on its point. Any movement of the pyramid will cause it to topple over. Underneath the pyramid is a \$100 bill. How do you remove the bill without disturbing the pyramid?

Think about this problem for a few moments. Then, after a minute or so, write down, in as much detail as you can, everything you can remember about how you were trying to solve the problem — your strategy, your approach or any solutions you've thought of.

When Schooler did this experiment with a whole sheet of insight puzzles, he found that people who were asked to explain themselves ended up solving 30 percent fewer problems than those who weren't.

In short, when you write down your thoughts, your chances of having the flash of insight you need in order to come up with a solution are significantly impaired — just as describing the face of your waitress made you

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Insight Puzzles

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unable to pick her out of a police lineup. (The solution to the pyramid problem, by the way, is to destroy the bill in some way — tear it or burn it.)

‘Paralysis Through Analysis’

With a logic problem, asking people to explain themselves doesn’t impair their ability to come up with the answer. In some cases, in fact, it may help. But problems that require a flash of insight operate by different rules. “It’s the same kind of paralysis through analysis you find in sports contexts,” Schooler says. “When you start becoming reflective about the process, it undermines your ability. You lose the flow. There are certain kinds of fluid, intuitive, nonverbal kinds of experience that are vulnerable to this process.”

As human beings, we are capable of extraordinary leaps of insight and instinct. We can hold a face in memory, and we can solve a puzzle in a flash. But what Schooler is saying is that all these abilities are incredibly fragile. Insight is not a light bulb that goes off inside our heads. It is a flickering candle that can easily be snuffed out.

Balancing Deliberate and Instinctive Thinking

There are two important lessons here. The first is that truly successful decision making relies on a balance between deliberate and instinctive thinking. Deliberate thinking is a wonderful tool when we have the luxury of time, the help of a computer and a clearly defined task, and the fruits of that type of analysis can set the stage for rapid cognition.

The second lesson is that in good decision making, frugality matters. Less is more. Overloading decision makers with information makes it harder, not easier. To be a successful decision maker, we have to edit.

Recognizing Patterns

When we thin-slice, when we recognize patterns and make snap judgments, we do this process of editing unconsciously. When Thomas Hoving first saw the kouros, the thing his eyes were drawn to was how fresh it looked. Federico Zeri focused instinctively on the fingernails. In both cases, Hoving and Zeri brushed aside a thousand other considerations about the way the sculpture looked and zeroed in on a specific feature that told them everything they needed to know. We get in trouble when this process of editing is disrupted — when we can’t edit, we don’t know what to edit, or our environment doesn’t let us edit. ■

For additional information on a firefighter’s ESP, go to: <http://mj.summary.com>

Market Research

Marketers have found that there is an inherent problem with trying to measure people’s reactions. The Edsel, the Ford Motor Co.’s famous flop from the 1950s, failed because people thought it looked funny. The Edsel started out ugly, and it’s still ugly.

By the same token, there are movies that people hate when they see them for the first time, and they still hate them two or three years later. A bad movie is always a bad movie.

Ugly or Different?

The problem is that buried among the things we hate is a class of products that are in that category only because they are weird. They make us nervous. They are sufficiently different that it takes us some time to understand that we actually like them. Maybe the word “ugly” is just a proxy for “different.” The problem with market research is that often it is simply too blunt an instrument to pick up this distinction between the bad and the merely different.

Market research isn’t always wrong, of course. When testing products or ideas that are truly revolutionary, most companies understand that in these cases, the first impressions of their consumers need interpretation.

We like market research because it provides certainty — a score, a prediction; if someone asks us why we made the decision we did, we can point to a number. But the truth is that for the most important decisions, there can be no certainty. It is the new and different that is always most vulnerable to market research. It is hard for us to explain our feelings about unfamiliar things. ■

Expert Testimony

The first impressions of experts, however, are *different*. This does not mean that experts like different things than the rest of us — although that is undeniable. When we become expert in something, our tastes grow more esoteric and complex.

Only experts are able to reliably account for their reactions. Our unconscious reactions come out of a locked room, and we can’t look inside that room. But with experience, we become expert at using our behavior and our training to interpret — and decode — what lies behind our snap judgments and first impressions. It’s much like what people do when they are in psychoanalysis: They spend years analyzing their unconscious with the help of a trained therapist until they begin to get a sense of how their mind works. All experts do this, either formally or informally.

Whenever we have something that we are good at —

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Expert Testimony

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something we care about — that experience and passion fundamentally change the nature of our first impressions. This does not mean that when we are outside our areas of passion and experience, our reactions are invariably wrong. It just means that they are shallow. They are hard to explain and easily disrupted. They aren't grounded in real understanding. ■

The Naked Face

Whenever we experience a basic emotion, that emotion is automatically expressed by the muscles of the face. That response may linger on the face for just a fraction of a second or be detectable only if electrical sensors are attached to the face. But it's always there. The face has, to a large extent, a mind of its own. This doesn't mean we have no control over our faces. We can use our voluntary muscular system to try to suppress those involuntary responses. But, often, some little part of that suppressed emotion — such as the sense that I'm really unhappy even if I deny it — leaks out.

Facial Clues

We can all mind-read effortlessly and automatically because the clues we need to make sense of someone or some social situation are right there on the faces of those in front of us. There is enough accessible information on a face to make everyday mind reading possible. When someone tells us “I love you,” we look immediately and directly at him or her because by looking at the face, we can *know* — or, at least, we can know a great deal more — about whether the sentiment is genuine. Do we see tenderness and pleasure? Or do we catch a fleeting microexpression of distress and unhappiness flickering across his or her face?

We make these kinds of complicated, lightning-fast calculations very well. We make them every day, and we make them without thinking. Mind reading allows us to adjust and update our perceptions of the intentions of others. ■

Practice Makes Perfect

Our powers of thin-slicing and snap judgments are extraordinary. But even the giant computer in our unconscious needs a moment to do its work. The art experts who judged the Getty kouros needed to see the kouros before they could tell whether it was a fake. If they had merely glimpsed the statue through a car window at 60 miles per hour, they could only have made a wild guess at its authenticity.

Perhaps the most common — and the most important

— forms of rapid cognition are the judgments we make and the impressions we form of other people. Every waking minute that we are in the presence of someone else, we come up with a constant stream of predictions and inferences about what that person is thinking and feeling.

The Look of Love

When someone says, “I love you,” we look into that person's eyes to judge his or her sincerity. When we meet someone new, we often pick up on his or her subtle signals, so that afterward, even though he or she may have talked in a normal and friendly manner, we may say, “I don't think he liked me,” or “I don't think she's very happy.” We easily separate into parts the complex distinctions in facial expressions. If you were to see a man grinning, for example, with his eyes twinkling, you'd say he was amused. But if you were to see him nod and smile exaggeratedly, with the corners of his lips tightened, you would take it that he had been teased and was responding sarcastically.

If a woman were to make eye contact with someone, give a small smile, and then look down and avert her gaze, you would think she was flirting. If she were to follow a remark with a quick smile and then nod or tilt her head sideways, you might conclude that she had just said something a little harsh and wanted to take the edge off it. You wouldn't need to hear anything she was saying in order to reach these conclusions. They would just come to you in a blink.

Inferring Motivations and Intentions

This practice of inferring the motivations and intentions of others is classic thin-slicing. It is picking up on subtle, fleeting cues in order to read someone's mind — and there is almost no other impulse so basic and so automatic and at which, most of the time, we so effortlessly excel.

However, mind-reading failures happen to all of us. They lie at the root of countless arguments, disagreements, misunderstandings and hurt feelings. And yet, because these failures are so instantaneous and so mysterious, we don't really know how to understand them.

Mind-reading failures may sometimes fall into a kind of gray area, the middle ground between deliberate and accidental. They aren't always as obvious and spectacular as other breakdowns in rapid cognition. They are subtle and complex and surprisingly common.

Unconscious Thinking

Our unconscious thinking is, in one critical respect, no different from our conscious thinking: In both, we are able to develop our rapid decision making with training and experience. Mind reading, as well, is an ability that improves with practice. ■