

J. Lehrer. 10 Ways to Be a Better Thinker. Retrieved from [www.realsimple.com](http://www.realsimple.com)

I call it the “leather couch problem,” but it happens to me every time I have to purchase something expensive. I’ll be standing in the furniture store, contemplating my sofa options—do I want the chestnut cotton or the black suede sectional?—when I’m suddenly seized with anxiety. What if I choose the wrong one? Beads of nervous sweat gather on my forehead; Ikea is not a fun place to have a mild panic attack.

Although I take my consumer choices seriously, I have always had a knack for making the wrong ones. I was the guy with the outmoded TV and the ill-fitting jeans; I ordered badly at restaurants.

This recurring problem is what first led me to investigate the talents and the limitations of the human brain. Could I teach myself to make better choices? And what about the other things the brain is responsible for—creativity, willpower, deduction? Could I make my brain do more than it was already doing? Turns out, I could. Here are some principles of better thinking that you can apply to get more from your mind, every day.

**1. Tap your emotions.** Our conscious thoughts are only a fraction of what’s going on in our brains. At any given moment, the unconscious is taking in vast amounts of information that we’re not even aware of and processing it all very quickly. Based on its conclusions, the brain generates emotions. So don’t disregard that subtle feeling telling you to avoid the salmon special. Your personal supercomputer is trying to tell you something.

**2. Don’t think under pressure.** It was one of the worst moments of my life: I was 12, playing peewee basketball, and my team was trailing by a point. If I sank two free throws, we would win. I missed. Twice. Instead of relying on the part of my unconscious that’s like a trained autopilot (it had learned how to shoot baskets through years of backyard practice), I analyzed the details of my shots, using brain areas that had no idea how to get a ball through a hoop. Once we’ve taken the time to develop any skill (and it always takes time), we should trust our instincts.

**3. Consider alternative points of view.** Professional poker players often use a simple trick when they suspect another player of bluffing: They think about how the player would act if he or she weren’t bluffing. The brain naturally filters the world to confirm what it already believes (which is why conservatives watch Fox News and liberals watch MSNBC). But this habit is limiting and dangerous; you could be fixating on the wrong answers.

**4. Challenge your preferences.** Like presumptive beliefs (see no. 3), your supposed likes and dislikes can limit your mind. I used to be a bit of an expensive-wine snob. But then I did a blind taste test of wines from different price ranges and discovered what scientists have since confirmed: There is no correlation between the price of a bottle and how much you’ll enjoy it.

By figuring out what you truly like—be it cheap wine or fancy shoes—you can enjoy life, not to mention spend more wisely.

**5. Take long showers.** Studies show that moments of insight often arrive when you're not aware that you're thinking of the problem, such as during a warm shower or a long stroll. This is because insights are typically generated by a rush of high-frequency gamma-band neural activity in the brain's right hemisphere, and a mind is better able to tune in to that hemisphere when it is stress-free.

**6. Be skeptical of your memories.** In recent years, scientists have demonstrated that human memories are surprisingly dishonest. The act of recalling an event (say, your eighth birthday party) changes the structure of that memory in the brain. Details are tweaked; the narrative is altered. The more you think about it, the less accurate your recollection becomes, and the less reliable it is as a basis for making any kind of conclusion. (So maybe you shouldn't hire a clown for your kid's party after all.)

**7. Don't expect to diet and finish the crossword.** It turns out that the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for willpower and cognitive thought, is a rather feeble bit of flesh and easily depleted. In a telling study, people who were asked to remember a seven-digit number and then offered a snack were much more likely to choose chocolate cake over fruit salad than were those who were asked to remember a one-digit number. The first group's self-control "muscles" were exhausted! It's important to realize that you can do everything—just not all at once.

**8. Study your mistakes.** One common trait of successful people is their willingness to focus on their fumbles. Even when they do well, they insist on looking at what they could have done better. Such perfectionism might not be a recipe for happiness, but it's a vital component of learning, since brain cells figure out how to get things right by analyzing what they got wrong.

**9. Go ahead and daydream.** Forget efficiency. Scientists have discovered that daydreaming is an important tool for creativity: It causes a rush of activity in a circuit known as the default network, which connects different parts of the brain and allows the mind to make new associations. The daydreaming brain is actually in overdrive.

**10. Think about thinking.** Metacognition, as this is known, is a crucial skill. Many scientists argue that the best predictor of good judgment isn't intelligence or experience; it's the willingness to engage in introspection. The brain is like a Swiss Army Knife, full of different tools. When picking out a couch, we can trust our emotions, but we should rely on the rational brain when scrutinizing the fine print of a mortgage. Unless you think about which mental tool is best suited for the task at hand, you could end up flustered, even sweating, in the sofa aisle at Ikea.