

To make Medium work, we log user data. By using Medium, you agree to our [Privacy Policy](#), including [cookie policy](#). ×

You have 2 free stories left this month. [Sign up and get an extra one for free.](#)

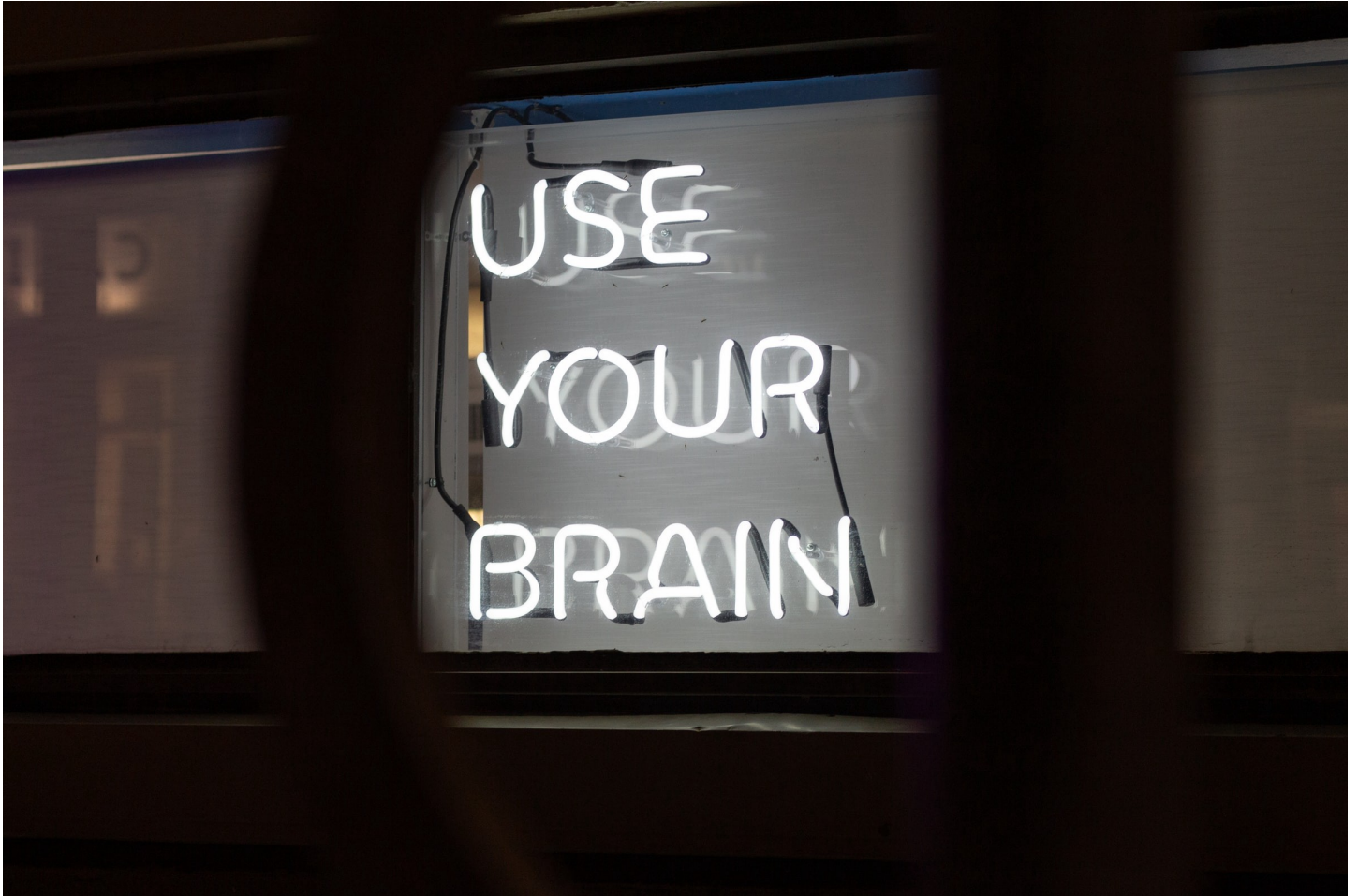


Photo by Jesse Martini on Unsplash.

How Not to Be Stupid, According to a Top Stupidity Researcher



Jessica Stillman

Sep 10 · 4 min read ★

Even if you've never heard of University of Michigan psychologist David Dunning, you are no doubt intimately familiar with the concept that bears his name. It's called the Dunning-Kruger effect, and it says that while the competent are often plagued with doubt, the incompetent tend to be blissfully sure of their excellence.

To make Medium work, we log user data. By using Medium, you agree to our [Privacy Policy](#), including [cookie policy](#). ✕

they're awesome.

This idea explains so much real-world behavior that it has become justifiably famous as the go-to explanation for the idiocy we all suffer in our day-to-day lives. But in a great interview with Vox's Brian Resnick, Dunning explains that his work isn't just a handy label for your most annoying office mate (or most hated politician).

The Dunning-Kruger effect, he insists, suggests ways all of us can be both a little less dumb and a little less oblivious to our stupidity.

1. Lean on other people.

The most essential lesson of Dunning's work isn't that other people are bad at judging their own competence; it's that we're *all* terrible at our assessing our skills. The Dunning-Kruger effect "is a phenomenon that visits all of us sooner or later. Some of us are a little more flamboyant about it. Some of us aren't. But not knowing the scope of your own ignorance is part of the human condition," Dunning explains.

We're all susceptible to stupidity and overconfidence. One way to start correcting for that is to lean more on other minds. Groups are less likely to be dumb than individuals.

"A lot of the issues or problems we get into, we get into because we're doing it all by ourselves. We're relying on ourselves. We're making decisions as our own island," Dunning says. "If we consult, chat, schmooze with other people, often we learn things or get different perspectives that can be quite helpful."

2. Imagine the worst-case scenario.

Optimism has its place in life but not, apparently, when you're trying to make a truly smart decision. Then gloom and neurosis will serve you better, according to psychology. "Ask yourself where you could be wrong if the decision is an important one. Or how can your plans end up in disaster? Think that through — it matters," Dunning instructs.

3. Think in probabilities, not certainties.

Want to get better at predicting the future and therefore making better decisions today? Give up on black-and-white, yes-or-no style thinking, and instead try to think in

To make Medium work, we log user data. By using Medium, you agree to our [Privacy Policy](#), including [cookie policy](#). ×

This tip comes “from the work of [University of Pennsylvania psychologist] Philip Tetlock and his ‘superforecasters,’” Dunning notes. Tetlock has found that “people who think not in terms of certainties but in terms of probabilities tend to do much better in forecasting and anticipating what is going to happen in the world than people who think in certainties.”

4. Know what’s a fact and what’s an opinion.

Back in grade school, some teacher probably had you do an exercise where you separated fact from opinion. “This picture is beautiful” is an opinion. “Barack Obama was born in America” is a fact. These days, according to Dunning, more and more of us are forgetting this essential distinction. If you want to be a little smarter, you need to remind yourself that some questions aren’t open for personal interpretation.

“If you survey Democrats and Republicans right now, of course they differ in terms of their priorities for the country and their theories of where we should take the country. But they also differ in what they think the country is. They really differ in terms of ‘Is the economy doing well?’ ‘What’s the record of the Obama administration?’ ‘Did the stock market go up or did it go down?’” Dunning tells Resnick.

But “these are factual questions,” he stresses. You don’t get to have an opinion. All you get to do is look up the right answer.

5. Get better at saying “I don’t know.”

Looking up these facts is dead simple these days thanks to Google. The tricky part isn’t the research, it’s the psychology. Before you go and look for information, you first have to admit you don’t already know that information. That takes intellectual humility, and humans aren’t always awesome at humility.

“People seem to be uncomfortable about saying, ‘I don’t know.’ That’s one thing we’ve never been able to get people to do,” Dunning admits.

But while psychology might not have found the right lever to nudge us toward humility, it is in the power of each individual to choose to actively remind ourselves of the limits of our knowledge. Do that and you’ll instantly be smarter.

To make Medium work, we log user data. By using Medium, you agree to our [Privacy Policy](#), including [cookie policy](#). ✕

[Intelligence](#) [Psychology](#) [Dunning Kruger](#) [Humility](#) [Learning](#)

[About](#) [Help](#) [Legal](#)

Get the Medium app

