

## Chapter 7

**Hindsight Bias**

Hindsight bias is a type of memory distortion. It is the tendency to look back and see events that have already occurred as having been more predictable than was actually the case

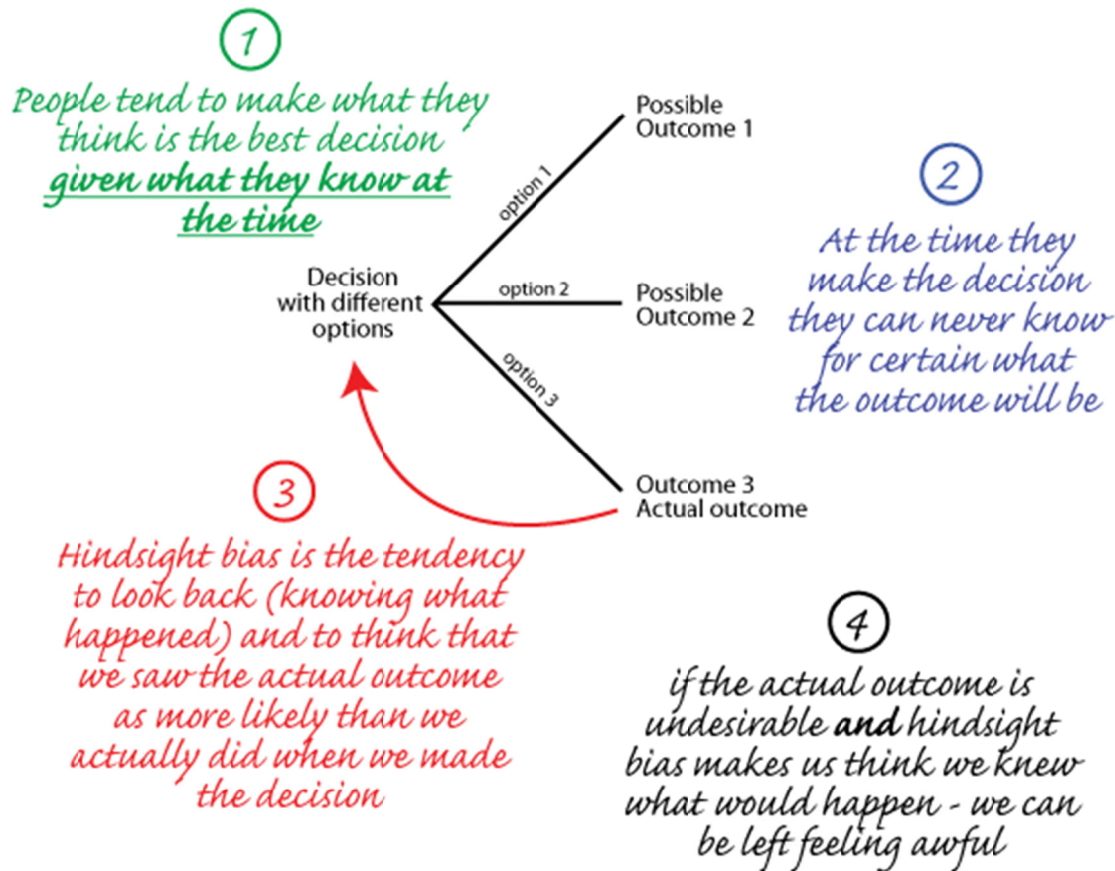
Hindsight bias can make us believe that we knew something at the time even if the evidence indicates we didn't. If this leads us to think we made a bad decision it can result in strong feelings such as guilt or shame

Typical hindsight bias (after-the-event) thoughts are:

*"I knew it all along..."*

*"I must have realized... so why didn't I..."*

Life is a series of decisions. Every decision we make can lead to multiple outcomes, or different possibilities. At the time we make a decision we can't possibly know the outcome for certain



## How Hindsight Bias Interrupts The Grieving Process

Hindsight Bias is a form of deluded thinking. Hindsight bias occurs when in response to a trauma we have experienced, we blame ourselves for decisions we made that may or may not have caused the trauma.



For example, some years ago a friend of mine purchased a different brand of dog food for her dog, after the brand she routinely purchased was no longer in stock at the store. Well it turned out that the brand of dog food she purchased had been tainted with some deadly chemicals, which led to her dog becoming ill and passing away. It was only after the dog had passed away that a recall was issued by the brand. She habitually blamed herself for days for purchasing the dog food, despite myself and other friends informing her that there was no possible way she could have known that the dog food was tainted.

Hindsight bias is a form of deluded thinking because it leads us to believe that we had some measure of control over a tragedy we experienced, based on what we have come to learn about the facts, after the fact. Even though there was no way we could have known that such an incident could have occurred, given we were in the dark about certain facts.

We have a tendency to resort to hindsight bias because our decisions are based on our innate desire to achieve desired outcomes when we implement solutions to solve problems in our lives. So in the event that a decision we make leads to a tragedy, we feel more comfortable blaming ourselves instead coming to accept that the tragedy was out of our control.

Some people have difficulty coming to accept that we are powerless over external events, but that topic will be reserved for a different post.

<http://road2resolutions.com/hindsight-bias-interrupts-grieving-process/>

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### More on the Hindsight Bias

Or, consider Wohlstetter (1962) :

"It is much easier after the event to sort the relevant from the irrelevant signals. After the event, of course, a signal is always crystal clear. We can now see what disaster it was signaling since the disaster has occurred, but before the event it is obscure and pregnant with conflicting meanings" (p.387).

One consequence of the hindsight bias has to do with our reactions and judgements after a suicide.

Survivors of suicide (those who experience the death by suicide of someone close to them), including mental health professionals, often feel guilty because they feel that they should have been able to predict, and consequently to prevent, the suicide (Rudestam, 1977). They often say, "I should have known." But should they have? It is true that suicidal individuals often give indications that they are suicidal (Shneidman, Farberow, & Cabista, 1965), although these signs

may become meaningful only in retrospect. Also, there is a very high false-alarm, or false-positive, rate for these signs because of their high frequency and because of the relatively low rate of suicide, even among suicidal individuals. Therefore, it is probably not realistic to expect someone to be able to predict a specific suicide. However, survivors often persist in feeling guilty about their failure to have predicted, and hence to have prevented, the suicidal act (Cain & Fast, 1972).

One possible explanation for this guilt lies in a process that has been reviewed in the decision-making literature (Fischhoff, 1982). These studies indicate that, in hindsight, people say that they would have assigned a higher subjective probability to an event than they actually would have before the event. That is, given identical information before and after an event, the subjective probability that the person assigns to the event is higher after the event than before.

In one particular study, researchers presented subjects with one of 2 scenarios. The scenarios were of a troubled woman. In one condition, the last line read that the woman committed suicide. In the other scenario, there was no mention of suicide. Both groups were then asked numerous questions including: would you have expected that this woman would commit suicide or in the second version not told of the suicide, would you expect this woman to commit suicide. Other questions were asked as well that assessed their attitudes to family members of the woman.

Results showed the classic hindsight bias. Subjects who were given the complete story reported that they would have expected a suicide to occur more than did those who were just given the precipitating incident. Also, subjects who were told of the suicide, more than those who were not, thought that the sister (who was described as being there with the 13-year-old) should have been able to predict the suicidal act.

Goggin and Range (1984)

### **More on the Hindsight Bias: How it affects doctors who are asked to review how other doctors did.**

Psychiatrists, particularly forensic psychiatrists, may be asked to review cases in which a psychiatrist provided care to a patient in which there had been an adverse outcome such as suicide or violence. They are asked to provide an opinion about whether the treating psychiatrist properly assessed the risk of suicide or violence and met the standard of care in managing the patient's risk and in providing treatment. Psychiatrists who participate in case reviews do so in a variety of contexts, such as participation in medical review panels or serving as potential expert witnesses for an attorney or in administrative capacities that entail monitoring the quality of care provided by staff members. If the reviewing psychiatrist is of the opinion that the treating psychiatrist did not perform a proper risk assessment or did not meet the standard of care for managing risk, or both, the treating psychiatrist may be subject to disciplinary action or civil liability (e.g., malpractice suits). Therefore, it is crucial for those performing case reviews to minimize potential sources of bias when offering such opinions. This stance is consistent with the Ethics Guide lines for the Practice of Forensic Psychiatry put forth by the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law (AAPL) Because such case reviews are necessarily performed after the fact, one source of bias may be hindsight bias. Hindsight bias, also known as outcome bias, is the tendency for persons equipped with knowledge of an outcome to exaggerate their ability to predict the inevitability of the outcome. One who is subject to hindsight bias may

simplify, trivialize, and retrospectively criticize the decisions of the treating doctor without appreciating the contemporaneous difficulty of the decisions involved.

Findings in studies have demonstrated that physicians are susceptible to hindsight bias. In one of these studies, anesthesiologists experienced in case review were provided sets of clinical case scenarios with the same descriptive facts, but with adverse anesthetic outcomes randomly causing either temporary or permanent injury. The study revealed that anesthesiologists were more likely to rate care as substandard in cases in which they were provided data showing that the patient had sustained permanent injury, despite the cases' having identical descriptive facts. The study's authors concluded that knowledge of outcome influences anesthesiologists' retrospective judgments of appropriateness of care delivered by other physicians

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