

HOW
TO
GET THE
THINGS DONE

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How Your Mind Really Works

How is it that your mind is capable of handling new situations you've never previously encountered? How do you solve a problem you've never solved before? Is this just the magic of consciousness, or is there an underlying process — or algorithm — your mind uses behind the scenes to deal with the unique experiences you encounter each day? And if there is a process, how can you use it to improve your ability to think?

Computers are still very inflexible at solving problems they've never seen, but your mind is not nearly so limited. Without much difficulty you can converse with someone you've never met before, read and understand something you've never read before, or navigate a shopping mall you've never visited before.

Your ability to handle new situations goes way beyond behaviour though. You can solve a problem entirely in your mind, even without taking any direct action. Sometimes you're aware of the process, and sometimes it happens unconsciously, but either way there's a purely cognitive aspect to human intelligence that's independent of behaviour.

I think you'd agree that when trying to solve a new problem, the solution arises when you reach a certain level of understanding, even before you've taken any action. When a new insight, decision, or perspective is attained, the action steps may be very straightforward. Certainly for some problems the physical implementation remains difficult, but that's usually because there are remaining sub-problems that haven't yet been solved at a cognitive level. For example, you may come to the awareness that the solution to your relationship problems is to break up with your current partner, and on one level that may in fact be a solution. However, before you can implement that solution, you must solve a myriad of sub-problems such as how and when you'll inform your partner, who will move out, and so on.

A problem-solving exercise

Let's consider a simple, real-world problem, with the goal of gaining insight into the key aspects of human intelligence. This exercise should be fairly easy for you.

Suppose I tell you I just moved into a new house, and I have a problem. The lighting in my new home office is too dim. What can I do to fix this? (This is an actual problem I must solve.)

Pause for a moment to think about how you'd solve this problem. When you have an idea of how you'd solve it, continue reading. I'll wait...

OK, good. Even though the problem is very simple, and the preferred solution may seem obvious, there are many ways to solve it. Perhaps the simplest solutions would be to install brighter light bulbs or add more lights. But other valid solutions include selecting a different room for my home office or outsourcing the problem to a professional lighting expert. And for every solution, there are more sub-problems to be solved, such as which specific lights and/or bulbs to buy, how many to buy, where to put them, where to buy them, how much to spend, etc. But we're not really interested in the specific solution you came up with but rather the mental process you used to get there.