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Your Brain On Uncertainty - Transcript

[Speaker 1]

In the 80s, there was a drug prevention commercial that showed an egg, and the announcer said, this is your brain. Then the egg gets cracked and dropped into a hot frying pan and the narrator says, this is your brain on drugs. Is it just me or does everybody's brains feel like an egg sizzling in a frying pan lately?

My guest today is Shefali Mehta. Shefali is an economist and statistician who specializes in strategy and decision-making. That fried egg feeling, it isn't your fault.

It's your brain on uncertainty. Want to know what you can do about it? Stay tuned.

Welcome to Charity Therapy, a podcast from Birken Law about building better nonprofits. I'm your host, Jess Birken.

Holly, thanks for being here.

[Speaker 2]

Thank you, Jess. I'm really excited and yes, I have to say, when you and I first started talking, it was actually a very specific question I had to help a nonprofit. Obviously, that's your specialty.

It was great that out of that, we came to the fact that we're both coming up on different sides of how do you support the nonprofits even more so when we're dealing with all these issues. I think I shared more about that decision-making under uncertainty work, which it's funny. People are always like, what does an economist do?

What is a strategist? They seem very fluffy and I realized I can at least explain what I've done for 20 years is I help folks, anyone, leaders, others think through how do you make decisions under uncertainty in different circumstances.

[Speaker 1]

There should just be tons of call for your consulting business right now. We have a lot of uncertainty going on. One of the things that I have found so interesting during this time as we sit here, it's June 9th, 2020, the things that are happening to our brains when we are under this much stress, and everything just seems so uncertain right now.

I'm wondering if you can share a little bit about the brain science, what is happening to us?

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, absolutely. I actually started off in neuroscience. That's what I planned to do my whole life, but I was a 17-year-old.

I'm a great 17-year-old making life decisions. I suddenly pivoted to economics, and I always missed it. Yeah, I know.

My parents are still like, we're very confused. Economics is not neuroscience, but I think I stayed really connected and the reason was I actually see those two being really closely connected. One explains how we behave and looks at systems kind of externally as we understand things and seeing the neuroscience is really focused on how we work biologically.

What I find really fascinating on the neuroscience side, and it's helped me to understand, when we make decisions, they happen in different parts of our brain. You'll hear people talk about frontal lobe and executive decision-making and that's really where frontal lobe is really supporting a lot of your high-level reasoning, really a lot of your executive functioning, decision-making, so really just bringing together information, helping you critically think through things. What is interesting is your emotional brain, I heard that called the limbic system, and you do make decisions there as well.

What I found fascinating is I learned early in my career is as we deal with different levels of uncertainty or different levels of risk, which is really important for most economists, where your brain is processing the information and how it's dealing with it is actually moving around as well.

[Speaker 1]

Some decisions get made from the frontal lobe and some decisions get made from somewhere else, is what you're saying.

[Speaker 2]

Absolutely, and so you can think of it almost like an example where if you are kind of day-to-day, you're dealing with uncertainty all the time, right? You're running your business, you're

talking to clients, you have your family, and you know there's like unknowns there all the time. Most of those are ones you expect, right?

Yeah, like what are we going to have for dinner tonight? Suddenly like somebody calls and says, oh I can't make it to this meeting or something shifts, right? Those are, they happen, but you're kind of used to that happening.

[Speaker 1]

Are those frontal lobe uncertainty decisions?

[Speaker 2]

In the sense that it's like a known uncertainty for you and I think it's less emotional, right? I mean unless, you know, this is where I think it gets fuzzy and this is actually where a neuroscientist would look, you know, should be jumping in, but from here's my understanding is that, you know, if you don't have emotion, like you're making them pretty clearly, you know how to deal with them, whether it's like what am I making for dinner or a client just rescheduled or, you know, my kids have a question.

You're kind of used to it. You almost expect it to happen, and you don't have like a toolkit in the way you deal with that uncertainty.

[Speaker 1]

That's the classic rational actor. Yes.

[Speaker 2]

Information comes in, you consider the facts, and you make a logical decision, and what's interesting is I don't even know how many people consciously even realize those are all uncertain situations, right? If you think about each one, that's not a given. There's a probability distribution around it, but like you said, you feel like you can be a rational actor because you're comfortable with those, that level of uncertainty.

Okay. Then the next thing that happens is what happens is it starts to get a little goofier. So, you know, you come home, and there's an ostrich in your living room.

Your brain was not expecting that one, and it's not to say you didn't expect. You know that there's folks living in your house. Something could be uncertain, but the level to the uncertainty goes out the door when it's something like that, so at that point, lots of other things take place, and this is what we start talking about when, you know, your amygdala really kicks in, and the amygdala is part of your limbic system, and it is where a lot of your, like, you know, that emotional response is happening, but it's also your, like, threat response, so if you think of how we evolved over time, we needed to be on alert. That was our safety evolutionary mechanism, so your amygdala is making sure if there's, like, a threat, so you walk in the living room.

There's an ostrich, so your amygdala is kicking in going, whoa, this is not only is it unexpected. Unexpected also means higher threat. It's unexpected to an extent you don't know how to deal with, right, or you don't even recognize, right, because you haven't necessarily had that interaction, so these are the fight-or-flight responses.

Exactly, so the amygdala response is your fight-or-flight. Interestingly, a couple years ago, I saw folks are calling, they also added a third one, fight, flight, or freeze, which I think the freezing really applies to our interactions, like, in the business world and that when we're in situations of conflict and that we tend to, so everyone kind of has a call, but do you know yours? Like, do you know if you fight, fight, or freeze?

[Speaker 1]

It depends on the situation, but I definitely am more of a fight response, but I'm not, like, an aggressive, like, advocate lawyer where I fight for things. It's just my response is, like, fix it. How do we fix it?

I need to come up with a solution right now instead of ignoring it, freezing, or just running away from the issue or quitting. I'm, like, I tear, like, tear it, dig it, and, like, figure it out.

[Speaker 2]

That's cool. I actually would have guessed that about you, so I'm happy I guessed that right. I'm also similar, right?

No, for sure. I will, I actually have to be careful because, and this is where it's about managing that. You know it as a first step and then going, you do, so if your natural predisposition is to fight, when you're in those periods to also help your brain find some space and to be able to work through it, but this happens to all of us.

This is actually what's really fascinating. This is how humans, this is how we're built, and I think a lot of us don't realize this is what's happening constantly in the background with every single decision, every action we're doing. Our brain is going through this balance and trade-off and processing continually.

[Speaker 1]

I can see where sometimes my fight response, my, like, I'm going to fix it, dig in, get to the solution, is not, you know, it's not always, like, appropriate. Like, it might not be the right emotional response. Like, the person that I'm working with might just need me to listen to them, or I might need to allow things to cool off more before I charge in with a solution, so sometimes those decisions can definitely, like, get you in trouble.

[Speaker 2]

Absolutely, and I can speak to that intimately as well. When there are moments where actually the right thing would have been to pause, and it's really interesting, so again, it goes, like, what's happening in your being thoughts? If you look, there's some great articles about this that have been published, and everywhere from, like, Harvard Business Review to lots of peer-reviewed journals, and I think I just saw one recently in CNBC about don't respond to your amygdala when you're looking at the market, because it's dancing, and you don't know how to respond, but really what's happening is, like, there's a line from the HBR article, was active amygdala also immediately shuts down the neural pathway to our prefrontal cortex, so we become disoriented in a heated conversation, so that is actually a part of what's happening.

You've read Daniel Kahneman's, he's written the Nobel Prize a couple years ago, I guess, but he's a behavioral economist about thinking fast, thinking slow, and the whole idea of, like, there are points where you're intentionally slowing down your thinking, and there are other times that, like, your unconscious kind of automated system takes over, and so that's partly what's happening. You're in a heated conversation. You're naturally going into fight mode, and then it's going, how do you get yourself out of it, right, is really important, and a lot of it has to do with you're trying to get your brain to calm down, and so all these things from taking a pause, breathing, is incredible for that, and I think it's something that, really, we know it, but we forget to do it as often as we should, and it can actually physically force your decision almost out of your limbic system, like, out of that paralyzed or fighting moment.

[Speaker 1]

Right now, we have so much going on. We're in the middle of this coronavirus pandemic. All of the economic impacts, and people are out of work and worrying about their businesses, and then add to that all of the protests and rioting.

I mean, there's just a lot that's going on that feels like people have layers upon layers of uncertainty right now.

[Speaker 2]

Yes, that is very true, and that makes it even more difficult. You take this very basic process that's happening all the time, and then you add on just level upon level. It's not even just uncertainty.

It's a catastrophic risk, right? The problem that comes back just on an individual level is that just puts so much more pressure on your brain as it's trying to navigate it to the point where you can feel paralyzed. You can get stuck.

You can make otherwise irrational decisions and suboptimal decisions, which I think we're watching a lot of that happening, and from otherwise people, we might actually think are fairly rational, so a lot of it's, how do you kind of start with yourself? How do you get yourself into a better place in the face of such extreme uncertainty?

[Speaker 1]

So let's say I'm a manager at a nonprofit. I'm a program manager, or I'm a board member, and first of all, I might be working remotely, or I might be unemployed, and I've got my family to deal with. I've got my kids home from school.

I'm watching the news. I've got a curfew potentially today that I didn't know about until five minutes ago, and then I'm going to go to my board meeting and try and figure out how to run an organization or make critical decisions right now. That is a lot for people to have to do, and I know that definitely, like in my practice, I am seeing people who I otherwise know are functional having a real hard time even with seemingly small decisions.

Either they're overreacting and sort of conflicts are spiraling out of it, or just like, do we fundraise right now? Do we not fundraise right now? Do we cancel everything?

Do we leave our things scheduled for October? There's just so much coming at people running nonprofits and other businesses or their lives right now. What sort of tactically can people do to get themselves in a state where when you're walking into that board meeting or you're walking into your first Zoom meeting of the day, you can be in a good place to be a leader, make good decisions?

[Speaker 2]

It all comes back to how do you get your brain to calm down? How do you get it to kind of release some of that emotion so that it can start to shift and not be in that state? So really, a couple of things that it comes to is one is the best thing you can do is really, really taking care of your body and your brain.

So I'm actually Jane, 2000 millennia of ancestry of Janes, and we're really very similar to Buddhism, like mindfulness, being present. But there is a reason for that. That breathing and that mindfulness really helps your brain to move this decision making.

So one of the most powerful things you can do on like, easy thing you just talked about you walking into a new meeting, you're switching between meetings. It's actually a trick a coach taught me a while ago is just pause and breathe, like breath deeply consciously, don't look at anything else or think of anything else. That act of focusing on your breath is enough to help your brain start to reset.

That's a quick one, you should be doubling down on that self, like all that health stuff, like sleeping well, drinking lots of water, staying, you know, staying really healthy and nutritious. And I think this is this is what's tough, because in those moments of stress is when we're often

less likely to do the things that we know are good for us. So that first bucket is just really doubling down on things that help us stay healthy and trying things.

I know some people are a little skeptical about breathing and meditation and that however you come to the bottom line is you're helping your brain.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, it's just science.

[Speaker 2]

It's it is actually just science. I always say, when I drive spill nuts, I'm like, we're a bunch of cells and chemicals. I mean, it's amazing what the cells and chemicals do.

But that's what we come down to, right? So understanding how those cells and chemicals work together. The second major big thing that you can do is actively reduce the stressors coming in.

So there is not a ton of help that comes when you're watching that much TV when you're on social media that way when you're kind of, I think there are times that we might be having discussions with folks that we don't have to have or, or at least in a way that we don't have to have. So actively filtering out and limiting and stopping that from coming in. So I don't even have cable, I do go online, I'll read in certain areas, and I'll read news.

But I make sure because I know the way that especially the way that we serve the like television news to people are almost entirely at odds with what you're thinking brain needs to function. You don't need your brain to have things thrown at it at repetition at a heightened state of awareness, like alertness, always like breaking news. That's horrible for your poor amygdala.

It's trying to help you like, suss out and filter what is a true threat. If CNN tells you everything is a true threat, that's not going to help you, right?

[Speaker 1]

I mean, it's almost like if you picture, you know, TV and social media is like you're walking down a hallway, and somebody just pops up and throws a rock at you every 10 seconds. And you're constantly trying to like to react to all of those micro threats. I know for me, just going through all of this time right now, like I deleted Facebook from my phone, I didn't delete my account.

But it was just so tempting to just bathe in, you know, the social media environment where people are having petty arguments. And yeah, I don't have cable, and I don't, I don't watch the news. I like to read it through an app on my phone.

So it's a very contained experience, just to cut down on the amount of like talking heads screaming at me.

[Speaker 2]

Oh, no, those are great. You're doing all the things that really help. You know, I very similarly, I use social media more and more now, especially for my business, because that is a great way for me to reach out to people.

But I have, I don't have the apps on my phone, I actually check it as infrequently as possible. So maybe only a few times a week, if I can, I don't actually follow. I'm very careful about who I follow.

They tend to be scientists, thinkers, right? So we, I really have shifted the way that I interact and what I allow my brain to get.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, so I mean, double down on taking care of your body, good food, sleep, resting, do deep breathing, slow, deep breaths, periodically, just to help get your brain into a restful state. And then cutting out the stressors, turn off the TV, turn off your phone, you know, read a book, like you don't need to watch six hours of news every day, you know, the world is crazy right now.

[Speaker 2]

There is a third bucket that's really important. I just wrote this article through my blog about called the value of community and actually go into the idea of like, one of the things that's missing for a lot of us right now is we are cut off from our communities. And that in itself is a stressor, right, to not have that.

But there's actually a flip side of this is how do you cut through some of this uncertainty? It's actively seeking out certain engagements and interactions. So the other thing you can do that helps a ton is reaching out to certain people, reaching out to people you may not have reached out to before, reaching out to certain people to talk about things.

One of the things that can really help, especially when it comes to decision making, so I can take a really specific example. When everything that's been happening, people are like, well, what is COVID actually doing? And I'm a statistician.

My brain works like that. Everything I see, like I literally walk around, I just see like probably distribution curves over things. Like I see everything in equations and formulas.

And so the way that I look through things and I'm probably why I don't, you know, I didn't have an emotional response to COVID itself was, okay, well, it's a virus. I know things about viruses. Let me call people who know things about viruses.

So I would talk to friends who are like immunologists and biologists and various doctors and various countries and then statisticians. And, you know, as I talked to people and I read about it, you're taking the emotion out by the act of doing it, right? You're actually putting, I'm putting actual information in.

So whether it's statistical information, whether it's immunology, it's really going, okay, here's what we know. And here's what we don't know. However, I also understand the science behind it and that.

So, but the act of reaching out to people in itself was hugely helpful and it brought you out of it. And the act of seeking information to essentially what you're doing is you're supplanting your emotions with actual information that's legit and real and you're learning in the process and hopefully expanding your network. So the third one's probably the hardest one actually of the, I don't know, it depends on the person, any three, any of those three, they can go all there, but they work really well together.

And that's, I mean, that's part of why I reach out to you. I'm like, I have questions, and I know Jess can answer them and you did. And that immediately by itself takes a lot of the uncertainty out of the equation, right?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. Like it's okay to call in your support squad when times are tough for sure.

[Speaker 2]

Oh my God. Call in your support squad and expand your support squad. This is actually a great time to expand that support squad as well.

[Speaker 1]

I love that. So what is kind of like, what's the silver lining here? Like if you're able to do this and manage your stress and you're able to like to get everything in your brain functioning, what's the upside?

Like what's the opportunity that we have from this craziness?

[Speaker 2]

I think there's a phrase that, I think this comes up a lot in Buddhism, there is no good or bad, there just is. And I always take that as like, if you always look at everything, everything kind of has an upside and a silver lining, even the most like desolate and despondent of situations. And for sure, the reason we started with that is as you get calmer, you can like take advantage of things, you can move on things.

And as I'm looking at it from the businesses and organizations I serve, think of who a lot of your clients are as well, there is an interesting opportunity. And I think for nonprofits, especially there are two areas you can really take time to focus on. And one of those is your strategy and your overarching vision.

There are a few things as like, I don't know, pivotal or driving change as when you have this level of disruption, right? And we have it. And so stepping back and going, what are we trying to do here?

What's our mission? What does that look like as things are changing? What does it mean for us to be impactful, like really doing?

And I think of strategies being both, it is the vision, and the implementation is really important, but looking at both of those together. And then the second is your operations and execution, because we all know this level of stress and disruption reveals a lot of breaks and cracks in our processes. So even if we knew something was wrong, well, we know it now for sure.

And there's a lot of, I think a lot of areas where they've really come to the surface, right? We've seen it in businesses, we've seen it on a societal level. So this is our incredible time to step back and go, how do we fix it?

How do we make these processes work? What should we be doing to buffer and create redundancies and really manage them?

[Speaker 1]

That is true. And it's like a really great, sometimes, especially nonprofits are afraid to make changes because it might upset someone or it's just different. And we've always done it this way.

So we don't want to risk something, nonprofits are risk averse generally. So what's kind of great about this time is that you can reframe a whole lot of things right now. And generally people are going to be okay with it because it's a time in which you restructure.

It's a time in which you move a new direction. It's a time in which you decide your system was broken and was disadvantaging certain people and you fixed it. It's a really good time to make a

decision, take a risk, be innovative, because nobody is going to be mad at you for trying something right now.

[Speaker 2]

Absolutely. Again, biologically, we're kind of made to, we're doing our best to keep things steady, right? Like everything is trying to kind of move to keeping it steady, not being disruptive.

Path dependency happens because we can get comfortable. It's something, again, that's being kind of reinforced. It takes disruptions for us to change.

So it's probably weird to hear this for a lot of folks, but this act of, this level of disruption and break and grief and reflection actually is often what's needed for us to change as a species. These types of disruptions, if you look through human history, are often what drives significant, massive change and systemic change, because that's what we need as a species. Yeah, that is so great.

Actually, I think that the people who are going to come out of this, outside of just random dynamics, it's going to be those people who are going, let's see what we can do and be innovative and be out of the box, but also just get our house in order. And I think this is probably one of the best times, if ever, to reach out and work with various experts and to shore up things and not be scared of that.

[Speaker 1]

Charlie, thank you so much for being here. If people want to connect with you and follow your work or learn more about what you do, where can they find you?

[Speaker 2]

Thank you so much for having me. This was fantastic. And yes, I would love to follow up with folks.

I'm always open to chatting. So we just relaunched our website. That's open-rivers.com.

And we have our journal through it. And I'm on LinkedIn. It's under my full name.

I'm on Instagram and Twitter. So I look forward to engaging with you. And if you have ideas, anyone out there for topics you want to see, hear more, we're always open to it.

[Speaker 1]

Alright, folks, that's our show. Be sure to follow me on Instagram or Twitter at Jess Birken. We want to hear from you.

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About the Author



Hi, I'm Jess Birken.

I'm the owner of Birken Law Office, I help nonprofits solve problems so they can quit worrying and get back to what matters most – The Mission. I'm not like most attorneys, I actually have an outgoing personality, and – like you – I like to think outside the box. Most of my clients are passionate and have an entrepreneurial spirit. I'm like that too. My goal is to help you crush it. Getting bogged down in the minutia sucks the joy out of the important stuff. My clients want to do the work – not the paperwork.

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