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## Mastermind: how to think like Sherlock Holmes

**This book by psychologist Maria Konnikova will probably not help you solve murders but will help you think, focus, remember and make decisions better**

Conan Doyle's hero has again proved his enduring appeal with the recent Robert Downey Jr films, the BBC's *Sherlock* and CBS's *Elementary*. Conan Doyle's books continue to sell and be downloaded. We all know that Holmes is a detective second to none – and indeed the template from which so much crime fiction has derived. But his insights into the human mind rival his greatest feats of criminal justice.

In this very readable book, Konnikova shows that Sherlock Holmes offers more than just a way of solving crime. It is an entire way of thinking. He is an ideal model for how we can think better than we usually do, as a matter of course. His explanations, methodology and approach to thinking predict psychology and neuroscience findings of a hundred years later. The book is a clever, engaging way to summarise the latest ....on the mind.

### The Holmes way of thinking

In a nutshell, the Holmes method is: clarify the objective, evidenced-based observation and insight; understand and frame the problem; hypothesise (or imagine); test and decide; and repeat. When all around him people are either lost for what to do, or else jumping to conclusions, Holmes insists on starting at the beginning: observe, gather facts, be objective.

When he hypothesises he does so informed by the evidence. He investigates all lines of enquiry. "When you have eliminated all other lines of enquiry, the one that remains, however improbable, is the one." He also knows that times keep changing – he operates in a very real world. So you have to update your facts, and maybe revisit your hypotheses.

He is deliberately sceptical and inquisitive towards the world. Nothing is taken at face value. Everything is scrutinised and considered. This is not the instinctive way our minds are built to work, so we need to build new habits and skills.

### Thinking fast and slow

Psychologists agree that our minds operate on a two-system basis. One is fast, intuitive, reactive – it doesn't require much conscious thought and is a 'status quo' autopilot. The other is slower, more deliberate, more thorough, but also harder work and doesn't step in unless necessary. If we are too busy, or stressed, we may keep something in our mind marked as true, without ever having taken the time to verify it. Our mental capacity is too limited to think deeply about the millions of pieces of data that cross our path every moment. And verification is one of the first things that we do without.

# Brief

Holmes has learnt when and how to control the switch into conscious mode – which takes mindfulness (a constant presence of mind and staying in the here and now), motivation and a lot of practice.

## **Managing memory**

Holmes said, “A brain is like an empty attic. Stock it with such furniture as you choose.” Recent research on memory, retention and retrieval supports this analogy. Our brains are wired for quick judgements with back roads and short cuts that simplify the task of taking in and evaluating the endless inputs our environment throws us every minute of the day. If we notice and remember everything, our world would become too complex too quickly.

Holmes is much more deliberate than most of us in choosing to remember what is most likely to be useful – what scientists call the motivation to remember. It is easier to remember something later, if you decide it is important when it originally occurs. Of course you cannot always know now what you might decide later is important. There are ways to practice how to do this better - the Holmes way. He aims to be much more conscious of what is most likely to be important later – and just as importantly, all the myriad of things that he does not need to remember.

## **Avoid jumping to conclusions**

Holmes shows how we can rewire our mind to avoid those instant reactions that prevent a more objective and thorough judgement of our surroundings. It's called the *effect heuristic*: how we feel effects how we think. A happy and relaxed state makes for a more accepting and less guarded world-view. If you meet someone and they are pleasant, attractive and charming, you will automatically be more likely to feel positive about what they say. If we are in a grumpier frame of mind, we are more likely to find fault with things.

Tests have also shown that the easier it is for us to recall something, the more confident we are in its applicability and truth. If it sounds new or alien, we are more guarded and less instinctive. Holmes can teach us to be more sceptical.

## **Increasing attention and focus**

Attention is a limited resource. Paying attention to one thing will be at the expense of another. We cannot focus on many things at once and expect to function at the same level as it would were we to focus on just one. Or at least we have to do things in an order, one thing at a time, rather than all at the same time. Or worse, we will have no focus and all will be but degrees of noise.

Holmes chooses to focus on only the most essential things at any one moment, excluding all others. He is very good at deliberately shutting out distractions, getting rid of people who are going to divert him, or deliberately going to places where he can work uninterrupted.

## **Knowing when to step back, be mindful and even meditate**

As Watson remarks: “One of the most remarkable characteristics of Sherlock Holmes was the power of throwing his brain out of action and switching all this thoughts to lighter things whenever

he convinced himself that he could no longer work to advantage.” It can seem counterintuitive to step back from a problem. It is a tough thing to do. But psychological distance helps reflection, improves cognitive performance, improves self-control, and leads to decisions that stand the test of time.

Distraction isn't always a bad thing. After a walk – especially in natural surroundings - we are better at solving problems and persist longer at difficult tasks. Holmes is no monk (although he did spend time in Tibet in mid career when he disappears for two years after faking his death at the Reichenbach falls). But he knows that meditation is an exercise to clear your mind, to provide the quiet distance for imaginative, integrative thinking. Research has shown that even with as little as 10 minutes a day of meditation can cause neural changes and improved imaginative capacity.

Holmes also chooses when to smoke a pipe, play the violin or go out to the opera to refresh his mind. And he is very deliberate about when he does this.

## **Creating good habits, breaking bad ones**

It's good to keep learning: it keeps our minds sharp and alert. Here's the odd thing: the more we've learned, the more powerful the urge to make it habit. Habit is the brain's way of ensuring we do not have to think hard about everything we do. We can switch into autopilot. We need habit as it frees us to think of broader, more strategic issues. On the other hand, habit is close to mindlessness – and it stops us thinking.

The other challenge is this: the more we know, the more likely we are to overestimate our own ability – and to underestimate the force of events beyond our control. It is why CEOs have been shown to become overly optimistic about the value of deals, and underestimate the risks, the more experience they have with mergers and acquisitions. We tend, unfortunately, to be under-confident on easy problems and over-confident on difficult ones

Holmes knows this well. He chooses habits (like the violin and pipe smoking) that do not interfere with his work, and keeps on learning across a range of subjects to avoid overconfidence. The Holmes approach to education is to keep challenging yourself and questioning your habits.

## **It is never too late to learn from Holmes about using your brain**

As Konnikova reports, studies have shown that even the elderly can reverse signs of cognitive decline *that has already occurred*. Even if we've been lazy all our lives, we can make a substantial difference and reverse damage that has already been done, if only we apply ourselves and remember Holmes's most enduring lesson:

1. Know yourself and your environment
2. Observe – Carefully and Thoughtfully
3. Imagine – Remembering to Claim the Space You May Not Think You Need
4. Deduce – Only from What You've Observed and Nothing More
5. Learn from Your Failures Just as You Do From Your Successes.

# Brief

**Stonecourt view:** this is a sensible, short book that takes all the best known thinking about our minds, and packages it in an easy-to-read form that feels much more fun than academic. There is no new thinking here, but a great way to learn or refresh. If you are fan of the original Sherlock Holmes books, this is an added bonus as Konnikova writes with passion for her subject.

Konnikova urges us all to find our inner Sherlock Holmes and make more of our minds. This is very timely advice in our complex and unpredictable world.