



## 2. Memory & The Availability Heuristic

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### Video 2 - Memory & The Availability Heuristic - Transcript

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Hi, this is Katia. In the second video about heuristics, we will talk about memory and one type of heuristic called the availability heuristic.

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In the previous video, we played a game where you had to come up with exemplars of eight different categories as fast as you could. We noted that this kind of timed problem solving in decision making, when the resources are limited, is most likely to elicit heuristic reasoning. We also noted that the important question to ask is not what your answers you came up with, but rather why you came up with them.

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One possibility why is memory retrieval. Humanistic reasoning can use the cue of a given prompt, say color, breakfast, psychologist, athlete, and retrieve a specific memory that is easily accessible. For example, red might be the first color that came to mind because you had used a red pen earlier, or eggs and toast may be exemplar for breakfast, because that's the breakfast that you ate this morning.

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Freud might be the name of the psychologist that first came to mind, because you recently attended the lecture on psychoanalysis. Or perhaps you thought of Serena Williams first as the athlete because of a recent conversation you had about the best tennis player. All of these answers rely on a specific memory that you effortlessly and easily retrieved when given each of these prompts.

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You could even supply these answers without being aware that these are the memories that generated them.

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This is the availability heuristic. It involves basing decisions on the readily available information from memory. So we're talking about availability. But I want to bring to your attention an important distinction between accessibility and availability. In memory research in theory, we talk about memory encoding storage and retrieval. Those are the three main processes. Encoding is that initial formation of the memory.

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Storage is about having it available even when you're not actively thinking about it, and potentially over a long period of time. And retrieval is accessing that memory when you do actively think about it or use it to process other information. So if a memory is successfully encoded and stored, then it is available. And if it can also be activated or retrieved then it is accessible.

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So a memory can be available but not accessible. Don't know the other way around. Let's make this more concrete. You likely had this happen to you. You meet an acquaintance that you haven't seen in a while, you open your mouth to greet them, but to your horror, you can't think of their name, even though you can almost hear it in your mind.

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That kind of tip of the tongue experience is a great example of a memory that is available. In this case, you're even aware that you know their name. It's available somewhere in memory, but it is simply not accessible. Hopefully, now that you know this distinction between availability and accessibility, you can see that the availability heuristic is a misnomer in a sense, because this heuristic is all about the ease of accessibility.

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Moreover, accessibility is not all or nothing but graded. Some memories are very easily accessible. For example, important life events such as the birth of your child, or conceptual categories that are routinely used like cars or dogs, or social categories that are routinely used like children, age, or women or gender. and furthermore, cultural knowledge that is personally relevant to you.

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For example, for me as a Bulgarian, the celebration of Baba Martha, these are all memories that they're easily accessible. Other memories are less accessible or not accessible at all. For example, specific events that share context with many other events like who did the dishes last Thursday. Or knowledge that hasn't been retrieved in a long time, like the name of the capital of Greenland.

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So again, it's important to keep in mind that we can only talk about accessibility given the availability. The memory has to have been encoded and stored at some point. Otherwise, of course, it's not accessible. Let's look at a couple more examples. Here's a scenario. You're going out for the day, and as you leave the house, you need to grab a jacket.

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Which jacket will you wear? This is the kind of mundane, everyday decision that we make all the time without even realizing. Using the availability heuristic, you might remember hearing the forecast that it will rain. So you put on your jacket and good that you did because you needed to be outdoors all day and it was pouring. Another example.

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You're walking down the street, a stranger smiles and says hello and passing. What do you do? Do you say hi back? Or do you look away and pretend you didn't notice? Could your split second decision rely on the availability heuristic? Perhaps you greet them back because you remember the last time you were the first one to greet a stranger, and how awkward it felt when they ignored you.

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Or perhaps you had a negative experience where someone greeted you in the past. You hesitated, waited to respond, and they got upset and verbally aggressive. Again, it is not necessary that you consciously recall these instances from the past. You could activate these memories and they can guide your behavior now, even without your awareness. Here's an opportunity for you to practice your understanding and perhaps gain a little insight into your own decision making processes.

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Trace back to your day and think about all the split second decisions you made. Did any of them rely on the availability heuristic and how? This will be beneficial to you in at least two ways. First, it will let you practice identifying the availability heuristic and making sure you understand it as a concept and its relationship to memory, and also become aware of how prevalent this heuristic is and how much we rely on it on a regular basis.

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Now, let's come back to our initial discussion about heuristics as a mental shortcut and the positives and negatives that come with that. With all the examples given, hopefully you can see how relying on this type of reasoning can be really great because you can get to a good outcome quickly, efficiently and effortlessly. You didn't have to lay out all your jackets and make a spreadsheet of the pluses and minuses that go with wearing each one.

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Before you could get out the door. That particular example with the rain jacket illustrates how specific memories can be very relevant to decision making. If you didn't remember hearing the forecast, you might leave your house without the rain jacket or an umbrella and get soaked. Not the end of the world, but certainly not the best outcome either. Not to mention, most of the time we simply do not have the time or mental resources to deliberate

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every decision we face. Whether we like it or not, heuristic reasoning is a necessity. On the negative side with respect to memory specifically there are a lot of potential errors or oversimplification that may result from the availability heuristic. First, memories can be unreliable. Errors can happen during each of the processes that we mentioned earlier encoding, storage, and retrieval.

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This is very well documented in the memory literature. For example, the forecast that you recalled could have been the weekend forecast. You incorrectly remembered it to be relevant to that day when it wasn't. Secondly, the most useful memory may not be the most accessible or even available. Most of us don't tend to recall weather forecasts particularly easily even if we did see them, and many don't even encode this kind of information into memory.

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Finally, relying on a single memory may be misleading. It's pretty easy to see that in the jacket example that only that one piece of information could misguide you in your decision. More interestingly, in the greeting example, do you smile and say hi? Or do you put your head down and walk on, relying on only one specific memory could mislead you as well.

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There could be important differences between the current context of the encounter and the context of the prior encounter that you're recalling. For example, the neighborhood that you're in or the time of day, how many other people are on the street, and so on.

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I hope this was helpful. In the next video, we'll continue talking about heuristics and consider another type of heuristic and another reason why you may have come up with the list that you wrote. This next set of concepts might explain why there's usually quite a bit of overlap between different people's lists.