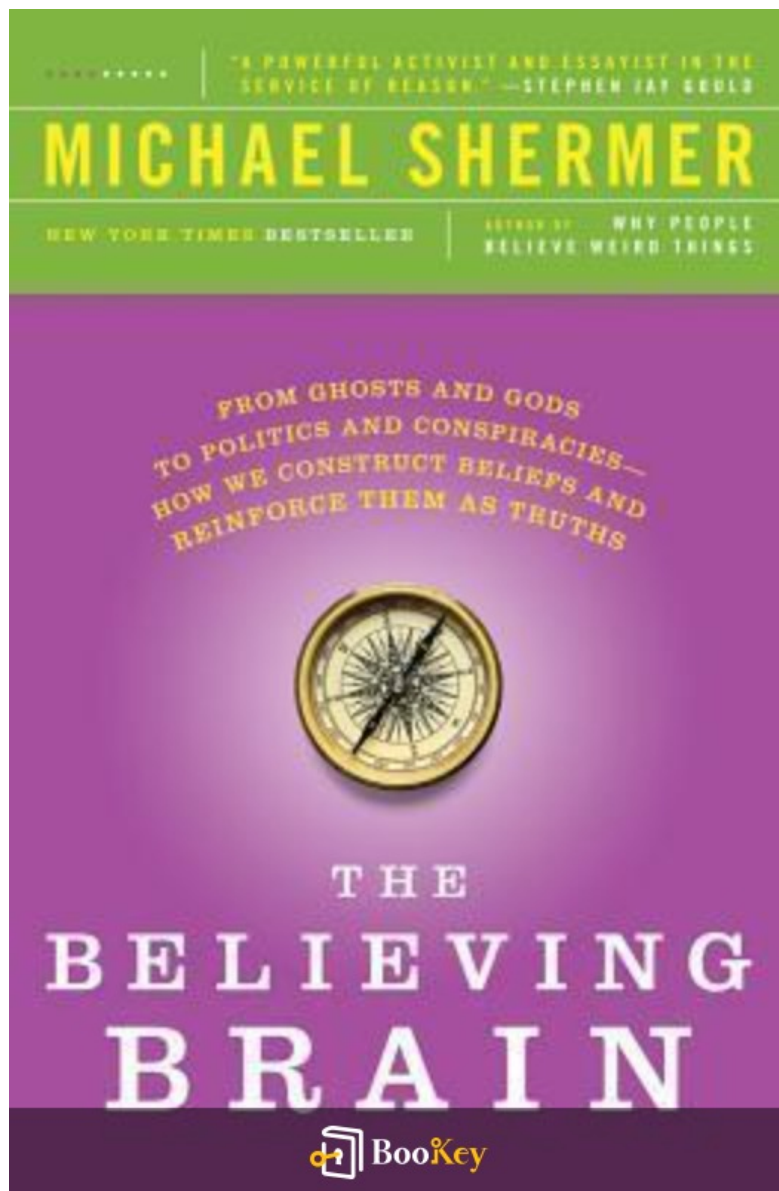


The Believing Brain PDF

Michael Shermer



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About the book

Book Summary: "The Believing Brain" by Michael Shermer

In his thought-provoking book, **The Believing Brain**, Michael Shermer, a prominent skeptic and author, embarks on an exploration of human cognition that reveals the complexities of belief formation. He investigates the reasons why individuals adopt certain beliefs, often irrespective of their validity or evidence.

Key Themes:

- **Interdisciplinary Approach:** Shermer integrates insights from neuroscience, psychology, and social sciences, emphasizing that belief creation is largely instinctual rather than a purely logical endeavor.
- **Cognitive Biases:** The brain's predisposition to establish beliefs first and then seek affirming evidence highlights our inherent biases, prompting a reevaluation of how we interpret the world around us.
- **Engaging Narrative:** Through a blend of intriguing personal stories and solid empirical research, Shermer challenges readers to reflect critically on the nature of their convictions.

Impact:

The Believing Brain is not just an analysis of belief systems; it invites readers to foster a sense of curiosity and skepticism about the very principles that underpin their understanding of reality. It's a compelling read for

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anyone looking to deepen their insight into the psychology of belief.

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About the author

Profile: Michael Shermer

- Name: Michael Shermer
- Profession: Science Writer, Historian of Science
- Role: Founding Publisher of Skeptic Magazine

Education:

- Doctorate: History of Science, Claremont Graduate University
- Master's Degree: Experimental Psychology, California State University, Fullerton

Career Overview:

Michael Shermer has committed a significant part of his career to exploring belief and skepticism. As an adjunct professor at Chapman University, he shares his expertise while also authoring a wide array of books that address human cognition, belief systems, and the complex relationship between science and society.

Contributions:

Shermer is a staunch advocate for scientific skepticism and critical thinking. His work challenges pseudoscience, encourages rational inquiry, and enhances public understanding of scientific principles. His influential efforts

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have established him as a respected figure among modern intellectuals.

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1. Introduction: Understanding the Relationship Between Belief and the Brain

In examining the intricate relationship between belief and the brain, Michael Shermer delves into the fundamental mechanisms that govern how we form beliefs and how these beliefs can solidify into convictions, often irrespective of empirical evidence. Belief is a powerful construct, deeply embedded in the human experience, shaping actions, guiding decisions, and influencing perceptions of reality. At its core, the exploration of belief encompasses both psychological and neurological dimensions, revealing how our brains are not only wired to believe but are also susceptible to the myriad elements that can shape our beliefs over time.

Shermer begins by establishing that the human brain is inherently predisposed to believe. This predisposition can be traced back to our evolutionary past, where the ability to make quick judgments—often based on limited information—was essential for survival. For instance, early humans had to quickly assess threats in their environment; believing in the existence of a prowling predator based solely on a rustle in the bushes could mean the difference between life and death. This instinctual response illustrates how human cognition evolved to favor belief as a way to navigate an often uncertain and dangerous world.

As we move beyond evolution, Shermer highlights that our beliefs are also

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shaped by personal experiences and the narratives we construct around them. The brain's neural pathways reinforce certain beliefs through cognitive biases and heuristics, which are mental shortcuts that aid in processing information. One such cognitive bias is confirmation bias, which leads individuals to seek out and interpret information in a way that confirms their pre-existing beliefs, rather than challenging them. For instance, a person who believes in a particular conspiracy theory may actively seek out articles and data that validate this belief while ignoring a wealth of contradictory evidence. This not only showcases the brain's processing tendencies but also highlights how easily we can become ensnared in echo chambers—surrounded by homogenous beliefs that further entrench our initial convictions.

Moreover, Shermer discusses the neurological underpinnings associated with belief formation. Neuroimaging studies have shown that when individuals encounter information that supports their beliefs, there is increased activity in the brain's reward centers, releasing dopamine and creating a pleasurable sensation. Conversely, when confronted with contradictory evidence, these same individuals may experience discomfort or anxiety, eliciting a cognitive dissonance that can lead to either an alteration in belief or a defensive rationalization to maintain their original stance.

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Another critical aspect of Shermer's introduction is the exploration of memory's role in belief. Our memories are not static; instead, they are reconstructive, meaning that we can inadvertently alter them each time we recall them. This reconstructive nature can lead to instances where individuals confidently assert the accuracy of memories that may be distorted or even fabricated. For example, many people recall witnessing events like the moon landing or significant historical occurrences with a sense of certainty, despite the potential fallibility of their memories. This phenomenon indicates that beliefs are not solely products of logic and rationality but are also influenced by subjective experiences and memory biases.

Furthermore, Shermer emphasizes the social dimensions of belief formation—the influence of groups, communities, and cultural narratives in forming what we hold to be true. Individuals often align their beliefs with those of their social circles or cultural backgrounds, driven by a desire for acceptance and belonging. This leads to a collective reinforcement of beliefs within social groups. A vivid example is how religious beliefs often propagate within familial or social contexts, where children adopt the beliefs of their parents or peers, solidifying a belief system that might lack scientific basis but is richly supported through cultural ritual and shared experience.

Ultimately, the introduction sets the stage for a deeper investigation into the

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nature of belief, how it operates within the confines of the human brain, and the broader implications this has for understanding our world. Shermer's exploration of belief transcends just a personal lens; it invites readers to critically evaluate the beliefs that govern their own lives and the societal structures that encourage certain belief systems over others. By unpacking these concepts, he prepares the ground for a more profound discussion on cognitive dissonance, evidence, and the persistent challenge of questioning our beliefs. Such inquiry not only fosters a greater understanding of ourselves but champions a collective embrace of skepticism and scientific inquiry—a necessary endeavor in navigating the complexities of the modern world.

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2. Chapter 1: The Nature of Belief: How Our Minds Are Wired to Believe

In "The Believing Brain," Michael Shermer delves into the complex interplay between belief and the human mind, exploring the very essence of how and why we believe what we do. The chapter begins with the assertion that our brains are inherently wired for belief, a trait that has significant implications for understanding human behavior, decision making, and even the evolution of culture and society.

Shermer argues that belief is a fundamental aspect of human cognition, arising not merely from rational thinking but from an intricate blend of evolutionary, neurological, and social factors. The capacity to believe enables human beings to navigate a world filled with uncertainty and potential danger. From an evolutionary perspective, early humans benefited from the ability to trust their instincts and the information gathered from their environment, which often manifested in beliefs about the world around them, including the existence of dangers or the presence of allies.

One of the central points in this chapter is the concept of the brain as a pattern-recognition machine. Our cognitive faculties are designed to identify patterns and make sense of the chaos that surrounds us. For instance, when we see a shadow in the woods, our brains quickly analyze the situation and may conclude it is a predator lurking in the bushes. This rapid assessment,



while not always accurate, could mean the difference between life and death, driving our ancestors to err on the side of caution by assuming threats where none exist. This innate predisposition to find meaning and impose order has led to the formation of various beliefs, including those concerning the supernatural and existential questions about life.

Shermer also highlights the dichotomy between optimistic and pessimistic belief systems. While optimistic beliefs can encourage resilience and lead to productive action, pessimistic beliefs can cause paralysis and detrimental behavior. An illustrative example of this is seen in the realm of health beliefs. People who hold optimistic beliefs about the effectiveness of vaccines are more likely to get vaccinated, thus protecting not only themselves but also contributing to herd immunity. Conversely, those who harbor fears or negative beliefs around vaccination, often fueled by misinformation, may choose to abstain, jeopardizing public health in the process.

The chapter further dives into why people hold onto beliefs, even in the face of contradictory evidence. Cognitive psychology demonstrates that once a belief is formed, it's incredibly challenging to alter. This phenomenon is often referred to as belief perseverance. For example, in the realm of climate change, despite overwhelming scientific evidence outlining human impact and the reality of rising temperatures, many individuals continue to espouse



skepticism. This can be partly attributed to the psychological need for consistency in one's beliefs and identity; admitting a belief is wrong can result in cognitive dissonance, leading to discomfort that many prefer to avoid.

In a broader context, social and cultural factors play a crucial role in shaping our belief systems, as Shermer points out. Beliefs are often reinforced through group dynamics and cultural narratives, as individuals seek validation and cohesion within their communities. For example, religious beliefs can create tightly-knit communities where shared rituals and ideologies foster a sense of belonging and identity. This collective support can further entrench specific beliefs, making them more resistant to change.

In sum, Chapter 1 of "The Believing Brain" establishes a foundational understanding of how our minds are wired for belief, driven by neurological, evolutionary, and cultural imperatives. Shermer's exploration of these themes sets the stage for a deeper investigation into the intricate mechanisms of belief formation, the challenges posed by cognitive dissonance, and how these beliefs can shape individual and collective behavior in profound ways.

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3. Chapter 2: The Role of Cognitive Dissonance in Forming Strong Beliefs

Cognitive dissonance is a fundamental psychological concept that explains the mental discomfort experienced when an individual holds two or more contradictory beliefs, values, or ideas. In "The Believing Brain," Michael Shermer delves into how this dissonance not only shapes our beliefs but often strengthens them, creating a paradox where the human mind prefers to cling to a belief despite contradictory evidence.

Shermer begins by establishing that cognitive dissonance occurs when people's actions conflict with their beliefs, leading to feelings of tension and anxiety. This state of unease compels individuals to attempt to restore consonance between their beliefs and behaviors. To alleviate this discomfort, people might adjust their beliefs, change their behaviors, or rationalize inconsistencies in various ways.

One of the quintessential examples that Shermer presents is related to smoking. Smokers often know that smoking is harmful to their health. However, many might alleviate the dissonance they feel when engaging in this unhealthy behavior through justifications such as, "I only smoke a few cigarettes a day," or "My grandfather lived to be 90 and smoked all his life." Here, the act of smoking conflicts with the belief that one should maintain good health, resulting in dissonance. To regain mental balance, smokers



either downplay the risks associated with smoking or emphasize the exceptions to the rule, demonstrating how cognitive dissonance can lead individuals to hold strong, yet flawed, beliefs.

Shermer elaborates on how cognitive dissonance is not inherently negative; it is, in fact, a necessary cognitive mechanism that can lead to personal growth and changed beliefs when confronted with new evidence. However, it can also lead to a stubborn adherence to beliefs, particularly when those beliefs are tied to an individual's identity or social groups. For instance, a person deeply ingrained into a certain political ideology may resist changing their viewpoints despite evidence presenting alternative perspectives. Instead of accepting conflicting information, they might selectively expose themselves only to data and narratives that affirm their preexisting beliefs. This selective exposure is a coping mechanism to minimize dissonance, ultimately resulting in more rigid belief systems.

Furthermore, Shermer points to the phenomenon in cults and extreme groups where cognitive dissonance plays a vital role in solidifying beliefs. Members of cults often face disconfirmation of their beliefs but resolve this dissonance through group reinforcement. When faced with contradictory evidence, such as a failed prophecy, cult members may double down on their beliefs, often identifying the disconfirming evidence as part of a wider conspiracy against them. This not only strengthens their commitment to the group but enhances



their communal bonds, making it increasingly difficult to disengage from these beliefs later.

The concept of cognitive dissonance also extends into the realm of consumer behavior. For example, someone who purchases an expensive car may experience dissonance if they later find that it has numerous reviews highlighting its flaws. To reconcile the emotional investment made in the purchase, the individual may downplay the negatives and instead focus on the car's aesthetics or status symbol, reinforcing the belief that they made the right choice.

Through various illustrations and studies, Shermer articulates that cognitive dissonance serves as a critical force in belief formation and maintenance. While it can lead individuals toward rationalization and an entrenched stance on deeply held beliefs, it can also offer pathways for re-evaluating those beliefs when openness to new experiences and evidence prevails. The challenge lies in recognizing the dissonance and being willing to confront the beliefs that define our identities, social circles, and worldviews.

Ultimately, Shermer underscores that understanding cognitive dissonance is crucial for navigating the complexities of belief formation. By acknowledging the mechanisms behind our belief systems and the emotional investments that accompany them, individuals may enhance their critical

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thinking and, potentially, embrace a more scientific outlook in their approach to beliefs.

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4. Chapter 3: Evidence, Reason, and the Challenges of Disbelieving Beliefs

In Chapter 3 of "The Believing Brain," Michael Shermer delves into the complex interaction between evidence, reasoning, and the often formidable challenge of confronting long-held beliefs. At the heart of this discussion is the recognition that even in the face of contradicting evidence, deeply ingrained beliefs can be remarkably resilient. Shermer argues that this tenacity is rooted not only in the cognitive mechanics of our brains but also in the emotional, psychological, and social factors that are intertwined with our belief systems.

One of the fundamental ideas presented in this chapter is that our brains are naturally predisposed to form beliefs quickly and easily. This predisposition serves an evolutionary purpose, allowing individuals to make swift decisions that can enhance survival in uncertain environments. However, once these beliefs are established, they become rigidly anchored, making it challenging to overturn them with new evidence or rational arguments. Shermer illustrates this phenomenon by discussing the concept of "belief perseverance," a cognitive bias that leads people to maintain their beliefs even when they are faced with conflicting information.

To elucidate these concepts, Shermer provides examples from various domains, such as the persistent adherence to conspiracy theories. Consider



the case of the belief in the conspiracy surrounding the 9/11 attacks. Despite extensive investigations and overwhelming evidence disproving various conspiracy theories—such as the involvement of a controlled demolition—the belief remains strong among certain groups. Shermer argues that rather than relying on logic and evidence, individuals often rely on emotional and social cues that reinforce their worldviews. This can create an echo chamber effect, where individuals surround themselves with information that aligns with their beliefs while actively dismissing or discrediting opposing viewpoints.

Shermer also emphasizes the role of cognitive dissonance in the challenges of disbelieving established beliefs. When faced with evidence that contradicts a strongly held belief, individuals experience a psychological discomfort known as cognitive dissonance. As a coping mechanism, they often resolve this discomfort not by changing their beliefs, but by rationalizing the evidence or finding ways to discredit it. For instance, in the realm of health and wellness, the belief in alternative medicine practices, such as homeopathy, is fraught with a lack of empirical support. Even when rigorous scientific studies fail to provide evidence of efficacy, many individuals continue to hold onto these beliefs, often citing personal anecdotes or the experiences of others as justification.

Another aspect of the challenges associated with changing beliefs is the

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social dimension. Shermer notes that many beliefs are not formed in isolation—they are social constructs that are reinforced within communities. Challenging an epistemological framework can effectively alienate individuals from their social groups, prompting them to double down on their beliefs to maintain their social connections. A pertinent example of this can be found in the context of climate change. Individuals who belong to socio-political groups that downplay the severity of climate change may cling to these beliefs more resolutely in the face of scientific consensus, as doing so not only affirms their worldview but also preserves their belongingness within their social circles.

Furthermore, Shermer underscores the importance of critical thinking and methodology in belief formation. He advocates for a scientific approach that encourages individuals to seek out evidence, analyze arguments logically, and remain open to changing their opinions based on new information. Yet, he acknowledges that this is easier said than done. Teaching individuals to approach beliefs with skepticism requires an understanding of the psychological roots of belief formation and a concerted effort to foster an environment where questioning and inquiry are encouraged.

In conclusion, Chapter 3 of "The Believing Brain" serves as a compelling examination of how evidence and reasoning often clash with the ingrained beliefs within us. Shermer illustrates the complex interplay between



cognitive biases, social pressures, and the emotional weight that beliefs can carry. Such understanding not only sheds light on why certain beliefs persist in the face of rational objections but also raises important questions about how we can cultivate a culture of skepticism and scientific inquiry in our own lives. As the chapter wraps up, readers are encouraged to reflect on the conditions needed for effective belief change in a world where belief often outweighs evidence.

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5. Chapter 4: Cultural and Social Influences That Shape Our Belief Systems

Chapter 4 of "The Believing Brain" by Michael Shermer delves into the intricate interplay between culture, society, and individual belief systems. Shermer argues that while the brain is naturally inclined to form beliefs, the specific content of those beliefs is heavily influenced by the cultural and social contexts in which individuals find themselves.

Cultural narratives, traditions, and norms provide frameworks through which people interpret their experiences and the world around them. For instance, in a collectivist society—where group harmony and community over individualism are prioritized—beliefs tend to be shaped by shared customs and communal values. Conversely, in more individualistic societies, personal beliefs may reflect a broader range of influences, encouraging the exploration of diverse ideologies and personal choices.

A classic example can be seen in the contrasting religious beliefs held by individuals from different cultural backgrounds. For instance, in Western cultures where Christianity dominates, individuals may grow up with a strong belief in a personal God and the importance of salvation. This belief can be reinforced by family traditions, societal norms, and religious institutions that uphold these views. However, in Eastern cultures with strong influences from Buddhism or Hinduism, beliefs may lean towards



concepts of reincarnation and karma, emphasizing a different understanding of existence and morality. Such contrasting beliefs illustrate how cultural environments sculpt the frameworks through which communities understand spirituality, existence, and moral frameworks.

Moreover, Shermer highlights how social identity plays a crucial role in belief formation. People have a tendency to adopt beliefs that reinforce their social connections, often aligning themselves with groups that reflect similar values and ideologies. This phenomenon can be clearly illustrated by the emergence of political tribes. For example, individuals may lean towards specific political beliefs, like those surrounding climate change or healthcare, based not only on personal convictions but predominantly based on the views of their social circles. As seen during recent political upheavals, where social media has proliferated echo chambers, individuals may become entrenched in particular belief systems that align with their group's ethos, often disregarding evidence that contradicts these beliefs.

Socioeconomic factors also play a pivotal role in shaping belief systems. Individuals from different economic standings frequently develop differing worldviews based on their experiences with privilege or hardship. A person from a low-income background may develop a belief in systemic barriers affecting their opportunities, whereas someone from a wealthier background might have a belief in meritocracy. These beliefs are reinforced by their

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social environments and the narratives promulgated within those circles, demonstrating that beliefs are deeply intertwined with the sociocultural fabric that surrounds individuals.

Additionally, Shermer explains how historical narratives and collective memory influence overarching belief systems within cultures. The beliefs held by a society are often built upon historical events that shape their worldview. For example, countries with histories of colonization or conflict may hold ingrained beliefs about nationalism, identity, and what it means to belong to a certain group. This historical context can foster either a sense of pride or guilt, shaping how individuals interpret current events and influence their beliefs regarding justice, equity, and reconciliation.

Furthermore, the media has increasingly become a significant agent of influence, with the rise of the internet and social media reshaping and sometimes distorting public beliefs. Shermer illustrates this point by discussing how misinformation can spread rapidly online, leading to the formation of conspiracy theories and polarized opinions driven more by social affirmation than by factual accuracy. The phenomenon of confirmation bias, where individuals favor information aligning with their preconceived beliefs, is exacerbated in this digital age. This bias illustrates just how susceptible belief systems are to cultural and social influences, as people selectively engage with media that aligns with their established



views.

In conclusion, Chapter 4 of "The Believing Brain" underscores the profound impact of cultural and social influences on our belief systems. By illustrating how beliefs are not merely individual constructs but social constructs shaped by history, identity, and communal values, Shermer emphasizes the complex yet fascinating dynamics that govern human belief formation. Understanding these influences allows for a more nuanced approach to belief systems, encouraging individuals to engage critically with their beliefs and remain open to the diverse perspectives shaped by the rich tapestry of human experience.

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6. Conclusion: Embracing Skepticism and Scientific Inquiry in a Believing Brain

In the quest to understand the intricate relationship between belief and the human brain, Michael Shermer's "The Believing Brain" journeys through the psychological and sociocultural landscapes that shape our cognitive processes. The concluding section emphasizes the importance of embracing skepticism and scientific inquiry as essential tools for navigating a world rife with misinformation and deeply entrenched beliefs.

Beliefs are not merely passive reflections of reality; they are active constructs shaped by our experiences, emotions, and social environments. Shermer argues that given our brain's predisposition to believe, it is vital for individuals and society as a whole to adopt a skeptical mindset. Skepticism in this context does not equate to cynicism. Rather, it embodies a critical approach to inquiry—asking questions, seeking evidence, and remaining open to new information while being aware of our cognitive biases.

One of the most potent examples Shermer presents is the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. Despite the abundant evidence disproving many widely held conspiracy beliefs, such as flat Earth beliefs or the falsehood of the moon landing hoax, these beliefs often persist. Individuals may be drawn to conspiracies for various reasons, including a desire to feel in control in an unpredictable world or to find meaning in complex events. This represents



how the ‘believing brain’ operates, clinging to narratives that provide comfort or a sense of community.

In addressing such beliefs, skepticism can guide us towards critical thinking. The renowned psychologist Dr. Elizabeth Loftus has conducted pivotal work on the malleability of human memory, illustrating how false memories can be implanted and strongly believed. This underscores how our cognitive architectures can lead us to distort reality. Loftus’s research highlights the monumental importance of questioning the validity of our memories and the narratives we choose to construct and believe. The interplay between belief and memory presents a compelling reason to advocate for greater scientific literacy, enabling individuals to discriminate between evidence and mere belief.

Moreover, Shermer expands on the role of cognitive dissonance, where individuals experience psychological stress when confronted by contradictory beliefs. This often leads to the justification of irrational beliefs rather than their reassessment. For instance, smokers may rationalize their habit despite knowing its health risks by focusing on anecdotes of smokers who lived long lives. This showcases the need for a culture that values critical inquiry and evidence over blind acceptance. When people learn to embrace skepticism, they begin to question not only their beliefs but also the underlying assumptions that lead to these beliefs.

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Societal narratives, heavily influenced by media and cultural context, can further complicate belief systems. They can act as echo chambers that reinforce existing views rather than challenge them. For example, misinformation regarding vaccines has led to increasing rates of vaccine hesitancy in parts of the world. Shermer's call to embrace scientific inquiry illuminates the pathway to overcoming such challenges. Engaging with credible scientific research, fostering open discussions, and promoting media literacy are vital steps towards creating an informed public that can resist the allure of false beliefs.

In conclusion, the call to embrace skepticism and scientific inquiry in the face of a believing brain is not just an intellectual endeavor; it is a necessary adjustment in the modern age where information is abundant yet often misleading. To navigate through this complexity, individuals must cultivate a mindset that values questioning assumptions, valuing evidence, and being willing to change one's beliefs in light of new findings. By transforming our thought processes and educational methodologies to prioritize scientific literacy and critical thinking, we can foster an environment where rational discourse prevails over unfounded beliefs, ultimately leading to a more enlightened society.

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