✦ IDEA · CHEAT CARD · MIND

availability heuristic

The mental shortcut of judging how common or likely something is by how easily examples of it come to mind.

How it works

1. People cannot count how often something happens, so they try to recall examples.
2. Some examples come to mind easily because they are frequent, vivid, recent or often reported.
3. People take the ease of recall as a sign of how common the thing is.
4. So the estimate is right when ease comes from frequency, wrong when ease has other causes.

Example

Tversky and Kahneman's letter study, 1973

- Each of the five letters is more common as the third letter of English words than the first.
- 105 of 152 people said the first position was more likely for most of the five letters.

→ People search memory by first letter, so words starting with K come to mind faster.

Use it for

- ✓ Judging a risk you keep hearing about in the news, like plane crashes
- ✓ Checking a story about a stock or diet against cases nobody reports
- ✓ Writing a yearly review that is not based only on the last few weeks

Watch out

- ✗ Ease of recall is often a good guide, because frequent things are usually easier to recall.
- ✗ In 2021, listing 12 assertive acts instead of 6 did not lower 661 people's self-ratings.

Remember Before you judge how common something is, ask why its examples come to mind.