

The book cover features a blue background with a light green floor. A donkey with a human-like torso in a dark suit stands on the left, facing right. A large yellow speech bubble originates from the donkey's mouth, containing the title. A red banner with white text is positioned across the middle, and a black microphone on a stand is to the right of the donkey. The author's name is in a white box at the bottom.

What
WAS I THINKING?

THE DUMB THINGS WE DO AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

WILLIAM B. HELMREICH, Ph.D.

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taylor trade publishing

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Published by Taylor Trade Publishing
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
<http://www.rlpgrade.com>

Distributed by NATIONAL BOOK NETWORK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Helmreich, William B.

What was I thinking? : the dumb things we do and how to avoid them /
William B. Helmreich.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-58979-597-6 (pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-58979-601-0 (electronic)

1. Errors. 2. Decision making. I. Title.

BF323.E7H45 2011

155.9'2—dc22

2010044192



The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America.

To my wife and children

Acknowledgments

My greatest debt for help in this book is to my wife, Helaine, and to my children, Jeff, Joe, and Deb. They carefully read my manuscript and made literally hundreds of valuable suggestions. They also challenged my assumptions and conclusions, thus refining and expanding my thinking on this endlessly fascinating subject. Jeff, in particular, helped shape and sharpen my ideas with his many thoughtful and perceptive philosophical and legal insights. As an added bonus, my wife and children are all gifted writers in their own rights. Their encouragement, enthusiasm, brilliance, and deep love are always with me.

The following people contributed in many important ways to this book by sharing their insights, thinking, reactions, and resources: First, my agent, John Willig, for his great effort in placing this book and for his infectious optimism. Zach Dicker, Judith Rothman, Ben Sherwood, and Jeff Wiesenfeld did yeoman work in helping me in many ways and have my eternal gratitude. Others who read the manuscript and commented, or who assisted me in other ways, include Arthur and Carole Anderman, Paul Attewell, James Jasper, Mel Berger, Sheldon and Tobie Czapnik, Esther Friedman, Hershey and Linda Friedman, Steve Goldberg, Joan Downs Goldberg, Avery Kotler, Okyun Kwon, Stanley Lupkin, Herbert Rickman, Allan Rudolf,

what was I thinking?

Charles Sassoon, Arden Smith, David Steinman, and Bill Thomas. I thank them all. Special thanks to the team at Taylor Trade, especially my editor Rick Rinehart, senior production editor Alden Perkins, and copyeditor Erica Nikolaidis.

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introduction

Sports icon Tiger Woods severely damages his reputation in a night of mayhem. He's one of the most famous figures in sports, a multi-millionaire worshiped by legions of adoring fans. Why did he do it?

Bernie Madoff, respected financier, bilks people, many of them his friends, out of millions of dollars. His hubris astounds everyone.

General Stanley McChrystal wrecks his career and is fired by President Barack Obama because of intemperate remarks he made in an interview with *Rolling Stone Magazine*. What made him do it?

Governor Mark Sanford tells people not to disturb him because he's hiking the Appalachian Trail when, in fact, he is consorting with his mistress in Argentina. Did he really think that, as a public figure, he could avoid being found out?

Lisa Nowak, a highly trained and disciplined astronaut, goes ballistic over a failed romance. In a frenzy of rage she drives over nine hundred miles wearing a diaper and threatens her fellow astronaut with an air pistol.

Michael Richards of *Seinfeld* fame destroys his career with a racist tirade that ends up on YouTube. He goes on TV with Reverend Jesse Jackson and defends himself with the "Some of my best friends . . ." argument. No one buys it.

Martha Stewart, an American icon worth hundreds of millions of dollars goes for a paltry \$45,000 illegal profit on a stock sale. Her reputation is permanently tarnished.

Former New York chief judge Sol Wachtler becomes obsessed with a woman and ruins his entire career in his efforts to win her back. He initiates a campaign that includes threatening letters and phone calls and ends up doing some hard prison time. What a come-down for a man who'd been a potential governor of his state.

A basketball team loses game after game. The players are listless underachievers. The coach is clearly unable to motivate them and the owner knows it. Yet he doesn't fire the coach. Why?

You sue a plumber over a seventy-five dollar bill. You win in court, but it's a pyrrhic victory, considering all the time you spent on it. Why did you bother?

Someone cuts you off on the highway. Angered, you decide to "teach him a lesson" by tailgating him in a threatening manner. You're so focused on the offending driver that you crash into another car and end up in the hospital. As you lie in bed, you ask yourself, Why did I do that?

You end a long-term friendship over a minor disagreement. As time goes on you come to regret your hasty decision. Why did you do it?

A spur-of-the-moment affair shatters a twenty-five-year marriage, a secure job, and a place in the community. A loss of temper leads to injury, incarceration, or worse. The old life is suddenly gone.

Actor Russell Crowe hurls a telephone at a hotel clerk; Winona Ryder shoplifts; Bill Clinton messes around in a very public place, the White House; Richard Nixon covers up a third-rate burglary; Stephen Ambrose, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, plagiarizes. And on, and on, and on.

These are the sorts of things that all of us, famous and anonymous, do at one time or another, in countless different ways. We often know we're doing them, yet we seem almost helpless to prevent them from

happening. We'll almost always admit they were wrong and that's what's so puzzling.

President Clinton clearly knew the odds of getting caught with Monica Lewinsky were high, and the benefit hardly worth it. How, then, could someone of Clinton's caliber—a Rhodes scholar, a political genius—make a mistake any one of us could have predicted? How could someone so smart have been so dumb?

That's the mystery we will explore, and try to solve, in the pages to come. And it starts by recognizing something important: dumb mistakes involve taking risks that just aren't worth it. When a celebrity shoplifts, the petty gain from one more blouse pales by comparison to the disgrace of the career-ending scandal, if they're caught. Launching a sordid affair in a very public and accessible place is simply foolish—not because you might be caught, but because, as Clinton should have known, it was *obvious* he would be caught. Why, then, do smart people do it anyway, and so often?

Why, then, do some successful people fail, so colossally, in just a few moments of their lives? In this book we'll explore an often overlooked answer to that question. Smart people—or even average people—who do dumb things are not bad calculators. But they have a hidden flaw in their personalities, an *emotional* drive or need they have had, and nursed, all their lives.

An established scholar plagiarizes a few footnotes, or even a key part of his resume, thinking, "It won't catch up with me, because it's just getting me the respect I already deserve." An athlete who sweated for years to make the Major Leagues takes steroids to stay in the game. A person drives recklessly to get to an interview he's worked years to land. It's not that these people don't know that such activities, in general, are dangerous, and not worth the rewards. It's that when it comes to things they think they should have, the risks fade in their minds. This book is an exploration into a universe of human behavior. Its only boundaries are the thoughts, ideas, and actions of human beings.

The focus is on the mistakes they make, the things they say and do to each other that they invariably come to regret. These missteps are described as “dumb” because that is how they are seen by those who commit them and by others.

There is no one answer that explains such behavior. The problem is far too complex and the causes too varied. But we need to begin with society itself. Why? Because there have been profound social changes in the United States over the last fifty years that play a crucial role in how we think and act. Understanding them provides critical answers to how our values have shifted to the point where we can do things that were rarities a half-century ago.

The roots of some of these errors can be found in society, but they are also related to personal deficiencies in human beings. When these two factors combine, the consequences can be and often are devastating. Among the major culprits are deadly sins like arrogance, greed, and an obsession with pride, or honor. They are sins that often overwhelm the common sense that we should be exercising, but somehow cannot. There are also those mistakes that stem from a search for the easy way out of a dilemma, but which actually create even bigger problems.

Others are a consequence of impulses and insecurities that cannot, it seems, be controlled by their initiators. Some of them can be traced to the cornucopia of psychological maladies that afflict millions, problems not serious enough to require hospitalization, but which are disturbing and sufficiently crippling to seriously affect people’s lives. And in many instances, people’s foolish decisions can be traced to not one, but a number, of interrelated causes.

In this book you will read many tales of human folly. They are told in simple terms. Some of them are amusing, others depressing and even infuriating. They are about the foibles of the powerful, glamorous, and rich—household names like Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, Barry Bonds, Martha Stewart, Britney Spears, Tiger Woods, Don Imus, Eliot Spitzer, Saddam Hussein, Gary Hart, Winona Ryder, and

many others. But there are other, equally important stories about the not famous. They are just as significant because they deal with the everyday lives of the hundreds of millions of ordinary mortals who do not make headlines, but who care just as much about happiness and fulfillment.

Yet the purpose here is not simply to tell interesting stories. They have a goal, these anecdotes. Through them, we'll come to understand the *reasons* why people say and do these things. Hundreds of people were interviewed for this book. They include the violators themselves as well as those who know or knew them. They also include the psychiatrists and psychologists who mine the recesses of the human mind in order to uncover and analyze people's insecurities and darkest fears. Lawyers, prosecutors, physicians, businessmen, and just ordinary folks—plumbers, gardeners, homemakers, and salespeople complete our panel of respondents.

To get the right answers you need to ask the right questions. But you also have to let people talk. Just about everyone's got an interesting story to tell; you just need to get them to tell it. I've listened my whole life, and especially for the past five years, as people have described, in emotions ranging from sorrowful to gleeful, the things that have happened to them, the arguments they've had, the disputes in which they were embroiled, the many ways in which they botched an opportunity, how they responded to a crisis, and how they managed to totally mess up their lives.

In these efforts, my training as a sociologist has helped me a great deal. The accounts, involving what could or should have been, shed much light on how, as the song goes, "You Can't Always Get What You Want." The explanations presented further illuminate why we can't or don't. They also show how we are so frequently accomplices in actions that come back to both harm and haunt us.

Reading the stories of the mistakes that people have made will, I firmly believe, offer key insights that can help people avoid similar errors in their own lives. They are cautionary tales and people often

absorb knowledge and insight from such accounts that can guide their future behavior. The motivation to learn is, of course, a key factor in making this happen.

The first step toward correcting a mistake is to admit you made one. The second is to understand why you made it. But the third is finding ways to avoid making the mistake again. That is why we offer, in the last chapter, *concrete ideas, approaches, and suggestions*, a road map, if you will, toward preventing missteps in life. These suggestions, while not a cure-all, can go a considerable distance in helping readers increase the satisfaction levels of their lives.

Naturally, people may find it necessary, depending on the problem and its severity, to go for talk therapy, cognitive therapy, and to take medication. But developing insight and understanding, along with willing yourself to follow some simple rules or suggestions, can go a long way.

Since the stories in this book always illustrate and further explain the underlying causes of such behavior—arrogance, insecurity, honor, and so on—they will be equally applicable to new mistakes made by others. And it's highly unlikely that there will ever be a shortage of people doing dumb things. *The names may change but the reasons will not. In that sense, this book is both timely and timeless.* And now, let's begin this exploration with a look at how the world in which we live shapes our understanding of life and our responses when we screw up.

I

THE WORLD WE LIVE IN

We've all done dumb things at some point in our lives, but when they happen to those we admire and sometimes envy for their good fortune, we notice it more. In reality though, these individuals aren't much different from us, or at least they didn't appear that way when they began their lives.

Think of Senator Larry Craig, Bill Clinton, or Tiger Woods as children. Their parents held them in their laps and changed their diapers and they played in the sandbox, just like you and me. They went to school, ate in McDonald's, got into and out of trouble, and were influenced by the world we live in. Britney Spears, Russell Crowe, and Michael Richards all lived in different communities, had ordinary friends growing up, and dreamed, like most of us do, of being rich and famous.

In short, to understand their misdeeds and our own, we need to begin with the society in which we were raised and look at it more closely. And when we do, we'll see how normal events or situations may be directly related to what we do years later, actions that others may condemn as over the top, scandalous, and even crazy.

HOW SOCIETY PLAYS A ROLE IN DUMB BEHAVIOR

People have to take responsibility for their own stupidity. Yet, in many cases they're unable to and society frequently bears a portion of the blame. Here are the main reasons:

1. The particular way in which you were raised
2. The fact that our values are often shaped at a very young age
3. The very real failings of our heroes and icons
4. The failure to accept individual responsibility
5. American society is really many "small societies" and these can support misdeeds of which the larger society strongly disapproves.
6. "Everyone does it."
7. The societal cost of admitting wrongdoing
8. Resenting social pressure to conform
9. The bonds of community are falling apart.
10. We've become a "disposable society."
11. The precipitous drop in the price of scandal

HOW WE WERE RAISED

"Lie down with dogs, get up with fleas," goes the old saying. "You are judged by the company you keep," we are told. And it's true. Sociologists, psychologists, teachers, ministers, all of them believe, correctly, that environment shapes destiny, at least in part. Our values, attitudes, beliefs, and actions are influenced by how we are brought up, who we hang out with, what we see on TV and in the movies, and the music we listen to.

This is not news, of course. We know we are, to some extent, the products of our background and environment. But what seems amazing is that people who transcended their roots in so many ways—

overcame difficult childhoods, outgrew personal handicaps, rose above a narrow outlook, saw things in a new light, dominated mainstream society—could still act in a way that seemed to reflect no awareness of the norms of the world they inhabit.

Psychologists, pundits, and colleagues recoil in shock at how “this well-adjusted person” could have faltered after coming so far. What they fail to notice is that we don’t always come so far in our entirety. Parts of our past didn’t make the jump with the rest of us, and in the right—or wrong—combination of events, they burst to the surface.

Al Campanis was the respected general manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers, a great job to have and one that makes you think of someone who knows how to deal with people. So it was with amazement and disbelief that viewers watched him self-destruct in a 1987 interview with Ted Koppel on *Nightline*. The program was dedicated to Jackie Robinson, the famous second baseman of the Dodgers, who, in 1946, broke the color line in baseball.

Campanis had been Robinson’s teammate and when another player made derogatory comments about Jackie, Al slugged him. This was consistent with Campanis’ strong advocacy for blacks throughout his professional career. Midway through the interview, Koppel asked Campanis why so few blacks held senior administrative positions in baseball. After some prodding, in which he denied that discrimination had anything to do with it, Campanis said the most politically incorrect thing someone in his position could say: “I don’t believe it’s prejudice. I truly believe that they do not have some of the necessities to be, let’s say, a field manager, or perhaps, a general manager.”

Why, as a media savvy person, would someone like Campanis say something like that even if he believed it? Consider that Campanis grew up in the 1940s, an era when racially charged thinking by whites, even open-minded whites, was very common. It was a time when whites joked about blacks without a trace of self-consciousness. Simply put, Campanis slipped up, but he was stating a view that he had, very likely, held for decades.

Another, more recent case in point is that of Nobel Prize winner James Watson, who in 2007 asserted that, on the whole, blacks were not as smart as whites. Like Campanis, who was forced to resign as general manager, Watson quit as head of the renowned Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory under pressure from his board. And though Watson lives in a different professional world, he is quite similar to Campanis in terms of age and background.

Don Imus is a twofer. Like Campanis and Watson, he's from that earlier period in American history when you could get away with stuff like that. But he also belongs to another group not known for its attention to propriety—the shock-jock culture. And, in truth, Imus had been getting away with it for years. The only difference was that this time he crossed too many lines at once. In making crude and racist comments about Rutgers University players, he knocked young black women who had fought their way out of the inner city, who had risen to stardom on one of the best teams in the country, who were attending a good university, and who were, by their actions, making Imus look like a relic of the past who had no class, especially after they readily accepted his belated apology.

A year later, all seemed forgiven, as Jesse Jackson's early denunciations lapsed into silence and as another vocal critic, Al Sharpton, observed that Imus "has not been offensive" since then. "We were not trying to destroy Imus," he said. "I hope he does well."

Researchers have proven how strong an impact culture has on people. In a famous experiment, Stanford University professor Philip Zimbardo showed that almost anyone can cross the line between good and evil. College students were divided into groups of prisoners and of guards and placed in a fake jail. The change from regular guys to vicious, sadistic guards was so quick that the experiment had to be abandoned within a week.

Even the participants reported being appalled that they could become so cruel to people they didn't know and had nothing against. In follow-up interviews, Zimbardo discovered little, if any difference be-