

# Magical Thinking [excerpted]

## How to avoid an insidious thought error.

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One of my patients suffers from chronic constipation due to irritable bowel syndrome. During the literally 20 years since she was first diagnosed, her symptom pattern has remained remarkably consistent: She has perhaps 1-2 bowel movements per week, occasionally accompanied by some mild cramping. Even she admits the symptoms are more a bother than a worry.

And yet, every time I prescribe a new medicine for one of her other ailments, within a day or two she calls me up complaining that it's causing her to become constipated. When I ask if she means that while on the new medicine she has *fewer* bowel movements or *more* abdominal pain, her answer is always no.

And yet she adamantly refuses to continue with the new [medication](#), insisting it's the cause of a symptom complex she's had for two decades. And no matter how cogently I argue that the new medicine can't be to blame (and I'm always careful to pick medicines not known to cause or exacerbate constipation), she refuses to continue with it.

Though certainly she *could* be right about 1 or even 2 pills exacerbating her constipation, the likelihood that all 16 pills I've given her have caused the same exact symptom in the context of the symptom *already existing* is just too far-fetched. A much more likely explanation is that she's indulging in [magical thinking](#).

Magical thinking is defined as believing that one event happens as a result of another without a plausible link of causation. For example: "I got up on the left side of the bed today; therefore it will rain."

The problem with this definition, however, is that exactly what constitutes "a plausible link of causation" can be difficult to pin down. If we were to take this phrase to its logical extreme, we'd have to consider a belief in *anything* that hasn't been scientifically proven to represent magical thinking. On the other hand, rejecting the use of *any and all criteria* with which to judge cause and effect leaves us vulnerable to believing that anything can cause anything—or even worse, that an effect can occur without a cause at all.

Perhaps, then, a more nuanced definition of magical thinking would be believing in things *more strongly* than either evidence or experience justifies. Though I can't prove the sun will rise in the east tomorrow, because it has every day since I've been alive, such a belief couldn't then be said to represent magical thinking. But because every person who's ever jumped off a building or a bridge has gone down and not up, believing that flapping my arms hard enough would enable me to float into the sky certainly would.

Problems with this definition remain, however. For one thing, simply in order to live we *have* to believe things without proof. If we refused to believe what our doctors, plumbers, electricians, barbers, or nannies told us without first being shown incontrovertible evidence, our lives would come to a grinding halt. For another thing, some questions we burn to answer aren't necessarily provable or disprovable.

An estimated 90 percent of the American people believe in God, yet no evidence for God's existence has ever been demonstrated scientifically—and further, some would argue, *doesn't need to be*. This would mean that technically 90 percent of the American population is guilty of magical thinking (a statement, I imagine, that puts me at risk for becoming unpopular with 90 percent of you).

On the other hand, maybe not. As much as we yearn to know truths about the world around us (and inside us), we can only ever see objective reality through the lens of subjective experience. We may all agree objective evidence abounds for the existence of gravity, but that's only because we all have the same subjective experience of having our feet pulled back to Earth every time we take a step.

This opens up the possibility that we could conclude something is true for which there is only subjective evidence or experience (meaning, not objectively demonstrable to anyone else) and not be guilty of magical thinking. If eating highly processed carbohydrates ("white death" my wife calls it) *reproducibly* makes me feel [sleepy](#) or irritable, concluding the former caused the latter would be entirely rational, yet impossible for me to prove to anyone else.

I think we can say, however, there exists a world of difference between a thought process that leads you to conclude it will rain today because you awoke on the left side of your bed and a thought process that leads you to conclude life is eternal because you've had a vivid [memory](#) of a past life (which, by the way, I'm not arguing would necessarily convince me; I don't actually know what would convince me). You could certainly question the validity of such a memory—or even the sanity of such a person—but, unlike with the first example, *not the thought process that created the belief*.

We can't escape the intrinsic subjectivity with which we experience and interpret objective events. The best we can do is rigorously question the criteria we use to decide something is true. I suppose, then, what I'm ultimately arguing for is a constant, well-balanced degree of healthy skepticism about everything.

### **Why we should avoid magical thinking**

Clear and sophisticated thinkers remain consistently wary of the influences that put them at risk for magical thinking, always cognizant that why they believe what they do is influenced by so many things besides their reasoning minds.

Improving the criteria we use to judge the truth of things is difficult. But because what we believe ultimately determines how happy we're capable of being, we must constantly try. After all, the risks of indulging in magical thinking are quite serious:

1. **Not making the necessary effort to achieve our [goals](#).** If we believe, for example, in the Law of [Attraction](#) as popularized by the book, *The Secret*, then we're at risk for believing all we have to do is put out a clear enough [visualization](#) of what we want and wait for it to come to us. Unfortunately, we may find ourselves waiting a long time. How often do you find yourself *hoping* for something to happen when you should be doing something to *make* it happen?
2. **Making bad choices.** Five of the 16 medications my patient has now refused to take are blood pressure medications. As a result, her blood pressure has remained uncontrolled for several years, placing her at significantly higher risk for strokes and heart attacks.