



## **Hindsight bias**

Hindsight bias, also known as the “knew it all along effect” is the inclination, after an event has occurred, to see the event as having been predictable, despite their being no objective basis for predicting it. It is a memory distortion where the recollection & reconstruction of context can lead to false theoretical outcomes.

Hindsight bias occurs everywhere. It is present from everything from the writings of historians describing battles, our belief that “we knew” the politician *would* win the election, sports commentators criticizing coaches, physicians recalling clinical trials and judicial systems trying to attribute responsibility and the predictability of accidents.

There are two factors that increase the likelihood of hindsight bias:

1. Influences on memory & knowledge. After an event occurs, you would know the outcome, and so that outcome is easier to think about than the alternative. In addition, your memory for the uncertainty you felt initially tends to fade with time. And that makes it hard to remember that you were once unsure about what would occur.
2. Motivation. Our cognitive system tries to resolve inconsistencies- this is known as cognitive dissonance. When there is an inconsistency between our beliefs and our actions, one of these ultimately needs to change to make them more compatible with one another. This experience occurs after events too, where our experience of “the old world” shifts to feel more like “the new world”- the current world as we know it today- even though that wasn’t the case. This shift can make you feel as if you knew what was going to happen.

Hindsight bias makes it particularly difficult when we experience a traumatic event. Hindsight bias makes processing the traumatic event more difficult because we tend to look back and blame ourselves for what happened. It is very common to fixate on a particular decision and think “if only I had done X differently then Y would not have occurred”. Hindsight bias makes us believe that we knew something at the time, even though the evidence may suggest we didn’t. It leads us to think we made a bad decision and can result in strong negative feelings such as guilt or shame. Sometimes blaming ourselves can feel safer than accepting that negative things, over which we have little control, can happen. However this self blame comes with its own psychological consequences.

So in summary, although hindsight bias makes us think we knew it all along, we probably didn’t. Some questions you can ask yourself to challenge hindsight bias- and reduce the guilt and shame associated with your decisions:

- How could you have known something you didn’t know?
- Given what you knew, was it a reasonable/ unreasonable decision at the time?
- How could you be sure nothing worse would have happened?