

THE JORDAN HARBINGER SHOW

Worksheet for Scott Adams | How Untrained Brains Are Ruining America (Episode 273)

From inside our reassuring bubbles of like-minded discourse, swirling around in the chaos of today's divisive world, we often can't tell the difference between genius and stupidity, and we are often guessing about how to interpret situations based on our own view of facts, our own biases, and the emotions we feel. There's plenty of information out there on hand to give us the straight facts, but it's so mired in misinformation (and information that doesn't support what we're going to believe anyway) that we forgive ourselves for being uninformed. But what if the big problem is that we just don't know how — or are unwilling — to think productively?

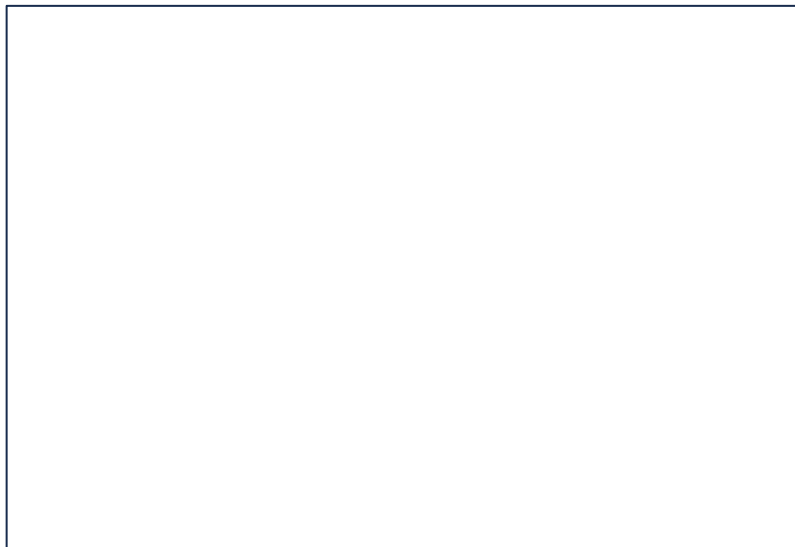
On this episode we talk to Scott Adams, *Dilbert* creator and author of *Loserthink: How Untrained Brains Are Ruining America*, who always brings fascinating (and often controversial) discussion to the table. We dig into what Scott means by the term “loserthink” and how we can spot it in others while avoiding it in ourselves, when ego isn't our enemy, how to poke holes in bad arguments, how to spot fake news, failing mental models, and much more.

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What Does Loserthink Mean?

“I think everybody has a different idea of what I mean by [loserthink],” says Scott. “I usually have to explain that what I mean is not the person is a loser, but rather the technique of thinking about things in a certain way can take you down a losing path. People who have high levels of certainty in very, very complex situations, especially if they’re not trained in those fields, that’s what you would call loserthink. But loserthink isn’t about being uninformed. It’s about unproductive thinking.”

We delve into specific examples of loserthink in this episode, but based on this loose definition, what qualifies as loserthink to you? It’s easy enough to count times when others have engaged you with what you might consider loserthink, but be fair: try to think of times when you’ve been guilty of it as well.

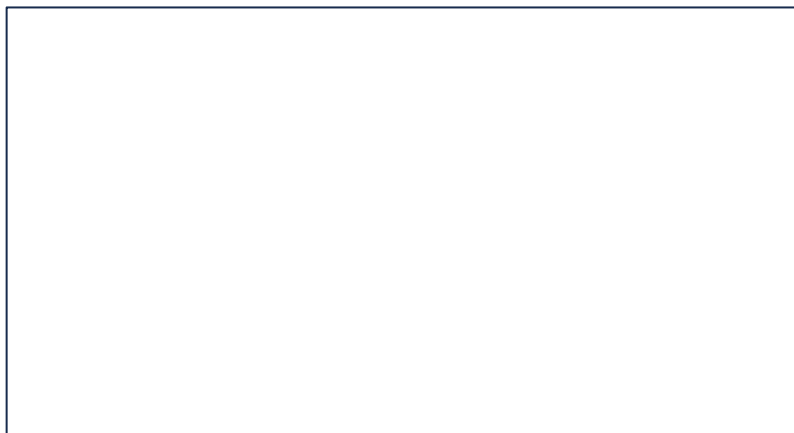


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Stacking Talents to See Inside

"If you put together the right combination of skills, you've got something that's like a superpower," Scott says. "It gives you the ability to look into different windows. I like to use the house analogy, you know, when I was 19 and somebody said, 'Hey, tell me what's in that house?' I would walk up to the bathroom window and look in and say, 'Well, it looks like this house is a big old bathroom.' That's the only window I could see, but then I studied economics. I became a trained hypnotist. I learn communication skills as part of my job. I just started stacking things so I can see in more windows."

Maybe you're not world class in any *one* thing, but the skills you do possess (or could easily learn) make you uniquely qualified to see into windows others can't reach and do things few others can do. What does your talent stack look like, and how does this combination of skills make you the first person someone calls when they have certain problems that need solving?



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The One-Variable Problem

“If you’re talking about a complicated thing, whether it’s climate change or the economy or world events, and somebody boils it down to that one thing that matters, you can ignore everything they say,” says Scott. “Because if your worldview is down to, ‘Well, it’s just this one thing. If you understand this one thing, you know everything you need to know.’ That person probably doesn’t have a wide base of understanding of the world. The one variable tell is the one that I look for the most often is like, ‘Well, it doesn’t look like you’ve looked into this, or you don’t have the tools to look into this productively.’”

Think about something you have a strong opinion about — it could very well be climate change, the economy, or a world event as Scott mentioned above, or it could be something completely different. Being honest with yourself, how many variables of this problem do you truly understand? Is your position dictated by being part of a political platform to which you subscribe, or have you done the research (using multiple sources) to support this position if you had to defend it from someone who disagrees with it? What are these variables?

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Who's Your Favorite President?

Scott says: "If I ask somebody on Twitter, 'Hey, is this president or that president doing a good job — or did a good job?' People have a firm opinion. But if I asked a scientist, they might say, 'Compared to what?' Because the scientist, the economist, the business person, a lot of other domains would say, 'Well, you can't really tell anything until you've compared it to something that is a sensible comparison.' In presidents, you can't really compare one to the one that was the last one, because it was a whole different situation. The only valid comparison would be if you magically had another president in exactly the same situation at the same time doing the job in parallel, then you can see which one was getting better results."

Who is your favorite president (or comparable leader if you're not from the United States), and why? In your opinion, would the accomplishments that make this person stand out be valid in another era, or were they simply the right person for the job at the right time? Approaching this thought exercise from the other side, when might your least favorite president have actually been the right person for the job at the right time?

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Dialing Down Ego

“One of the things I recommend is that you keep you either a mental list, or even write it down, of when you got a prediction wrong,” says Scott. “Because we’re always going through life with either formal or at least casual predictions about what’s going to happen next, when you’re wrong, take note of that. The way we’re wired is we forget our mistakes and we remember our accomplishments, except for the bad mistakes, I suppose. But it’s really easy to make a prediction, be wrong, and then immediately wash [it out of] your memory bank, so it’s not part of who you are anymore. I say keep it, value it, because that told you something. There was something wrong with your mental models, your ability to predict that got that wrong, so make a point of remembering when you get it wrong.”

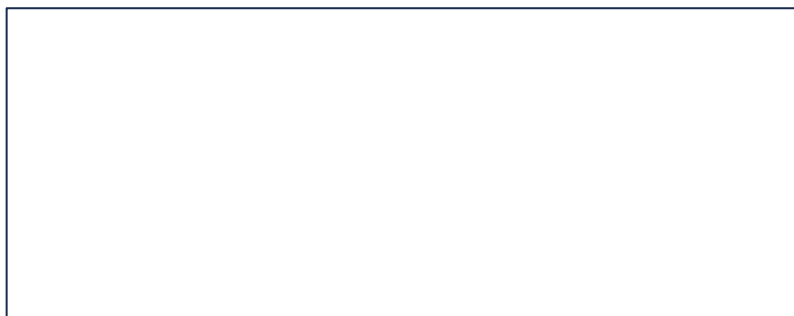
Reminding yourself that you’re not right all the time also reminds you that you are not wholly defined by your decisions. Acknowledging your own fallibility has an added benefit of allowing you to be more forgiving toward others who aren’t always right (which, let’s face it, is all of us). How have you been wrong lately?

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Dialing Up Ego

“This idea of dialing your ego up and down, it has to do with treating your ego like a tool as opposed to who you are,” says Scott. “I think most people go through life thinking that their ego is sort of a core part of who they are and they’re trying to protect it. So your ego is just protecting you from embarrassment, protecting you from pain, protecting you from discomfort. It’s more productive to see your ego as your enemy and something you should turn into a tool, not an identity. But there’s plenty of science that shows that if you can build your confidence up to a certain level, you’ll just perform better. It’s good to be able to crank it up before I go into anything important. I might actually play a little loop in my head that says, ‘I’m good at this. This will be great. Everybody will like this.’ Even if it’s not true, you’re just dialing your ego up for effect.”

Here on TJHS, We generally err on the side of authenticity, but can’t deny that there’s a modicum of wisdom in the ‘fake it ’til you make it’ branch of philosophy. And let’s be clear: selling your good qualities to the world doesn’t make you a narcissist. How have you been right lately?



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Lack of Imagination Problem

“If you see a set of facts and you say to yourself, ‘There’s only one way I could explain this set of facts,’ it might be that the problem is your lack of imagination,” says Scott, “because there might be several explanations; you just can’t imagine them.”

You might have a favorite pizza place in town, but have you tried every pizza place in town? Until you have, it’s impossible to point at a slice of your favorite — no matter how delectable — and say, “This is the best pizza in town.” Perceptions beyond your own offer pieces of the puzzle (or, in this case, pizzle) that you haven’t had the capacity to consider. What might you be leaving out as you try to imagine the entirety of your own position on something you hold dear?

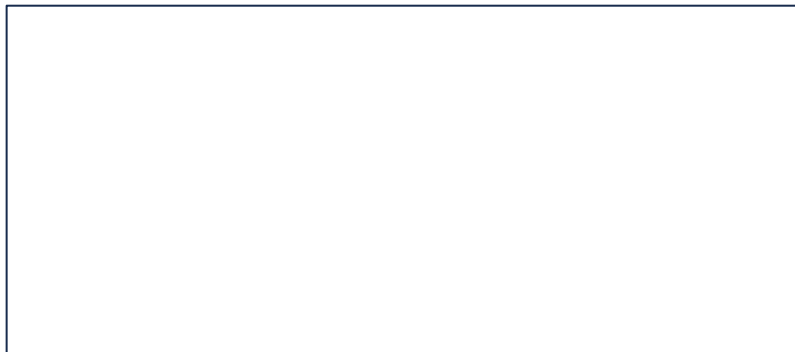


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Arguing By Definition

People who have good arguments use them. People who do not have good arguments try to win by labeling. Scott says: “The classic example is, of course, the abortion question. If your definition of life is that it starts this time versus that time, you’re trying to win an argument by simply defining what the terms mean. That’s not how you argue. You can’t win by definitions, but people do that all the time. Always be aware of people trying to win an argument by how they define words.”

If you find yourself trying to argue by definition, you’ve already lost. Each side is going to come away from the fray emotionally charged, but unswayed — in fact, they may just dig deeper into their current position. When analyzing your own position on an issue, try to determine *how* you arrived at that position. Do you have facts to support it, or are you merely hung up on how it’s defined? How might your attitude about this position change if you were able to step away from this emotionally charged definition and consider just the facts around it?

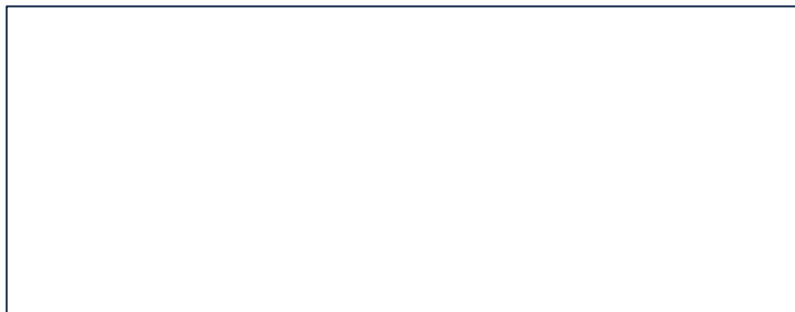


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Laundry List Persuasion

“When people have 10 reasons for something, that’s a sign of no argument at all,” says Scott. “My experience has been that if somebody has at least one good reason and it’s strong, they’ll lead with their one good reason. If they know that none of the reasons are strong individually, they’ll put them together and try to sell them as a package. But if you say, ‘Well, what is your one best reason? Can you pick out your best one? Would you agree that if I can debunk your top, best, strongest point, that we don’t really need to talk about the other nine?’ the person will resist because they won’t give you the best one. [But ideally, they’ll] look at their list and go, ‘All right. I’m going to pick the best one. You know, they don’t look that strong when you put it that way.’”

In contrast to the one-variable problem we talked about earlier, sometimes having a laundry list of weak points to argue your case can hinder more than help your position. When you find yourself in opposition to someone else’s position and compelled to present a laundry list of reasons why, consider, instead, a stronger, more focused argument that better presents your case.

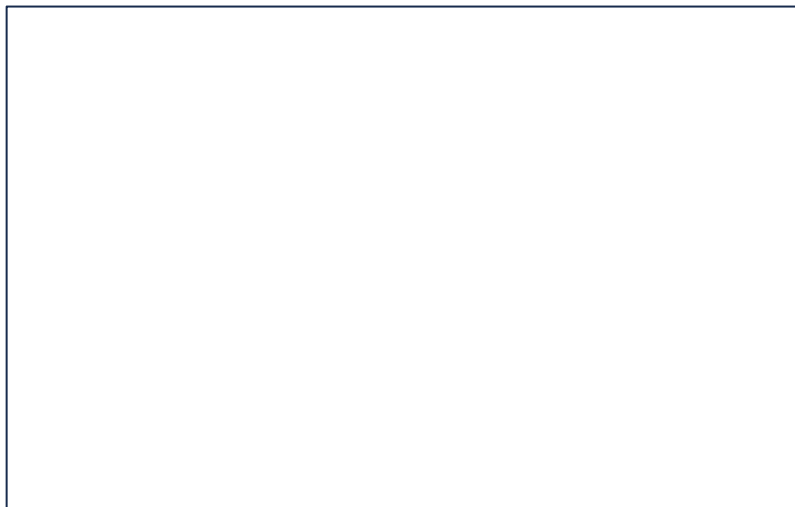


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News: The 48-Hour Rule

“Being human, if you form an opinion, you just don’t like to ever modify it. I mean we do sometimes, but it’s rare. So if you hold off for 48 hours, chances are you’ll get to form an opinion that’s based on something a little closer to the proper context at least. If you want to be an informed citizen and play a productive role, wait 48 hours on the big stuff.”

Before sharing sensationalized memes or news headlines on social media and spreading misinformation, check your facts — and if a story seems to have broken any sooner than 48 hours, consider what facts have been omitted (perhaps unintentionally) by the reporter eager to make the scoop ahead of everyone else. What news story have you recently been surprised by, only to find not long after that it was taken out of context? How might waiting 48 hours to formulate your opinion on the matter have changed your outlook?

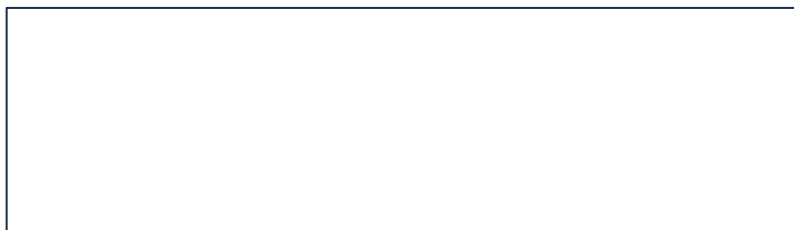
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Comparing News Sources

“You have to sample the other side’s new source. It doesn’t matter which side you’re on. If you’re watching mostly CNN, you have to watch a little Fox News to get their side of it. Whether you think it’s true or not, you’ve got to hear what they’re saying — and vice versa. I have a little rule that I talk about in *Loserthink*, which is that if both sides — the left and the right news business — if they say a fact is a fact, well, it’s probably a fact. It might not be, but probably. But if one side says it’s a fact, then the other side says it’s not, and they’re looking at exactly the same observation, it’s probably not — and *probably* meaning 90% chance not true.”

We all have our favorite news sources, but it’s important to remember that nobody gets it right 100 percent of the time — and bias, no matter how much the source may try to avoid presenting it, is inevitable. Make sure you’re getting your news from multiple outlets and comparing the way their stories are told. You can get a good snapshot of how different sources report the same story by checking out [Newscompare.com](https://newscompare.com). Also, make sure you’re not picking sources that tend to skew only to one side of the issues with the help of [something like this media bias chart](#).

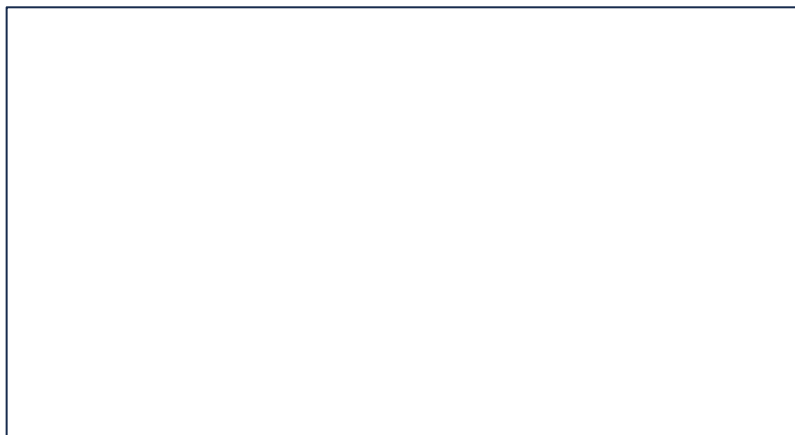


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The 20-Year Rule

“We now have the tools to hate somebody for something they did decades ago when they were literally a different person — because you’re not the same as you were 20 years ago,” says Scott. “So I have somewhat arbitrarily picked 20 years and said, ‘I don’t care what I find out about you or anybody else. If it was 20 years ago, it doesn’t count.’ I’d rather judge people by what they’ve done recently and I do apply this to the left, the right, my enemies, my friends. It’s a rule I try to be pretty consistent with.”

I realize some of our listeners might not be old enough for this to apply — maybe you can exercise your own 5- or 10-year rule if this is the case. But for the rest of us older-timers, try to think of past relationships that have fallen by the wayside as a result of personality friction. Whether this friction was caused by you or another person, make an effort this week to rekindle one of these old relationships — you can even cite this rule as the reason if it helps start the conversation.



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The Magic Question

“Somebody mischaracterized me on Twitter and then criticized their own illusion,” say Scott. “If I say to them, ‘You have mischaracterized me,’ they’ll just insist that they haven’t, and you can never go anywhere with that. Instead, I ask them: ‘Tell me something you think I believe that’s different from what you believe.’ People will be almost instantly stumped, because they’ve been mischaracterizing your opinion, but when they have to reconstruct it from its parts, they can’t find the difference. It’s a powerful thing. I find that people will eventually back off when they realize they can’t find anything that they think is different from you.”

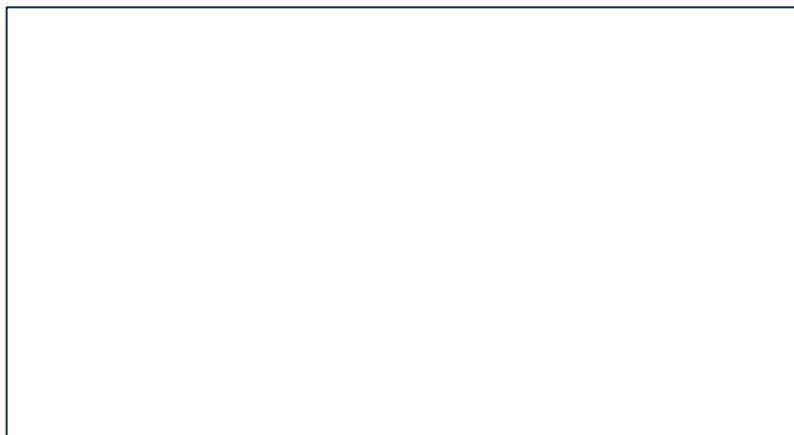
Keep this magic question in mind for times you find yourself up against this kind of loserthink: “Tell me something you think I believe that’s different from what you believe.” Feel free to keep track of the responses you get to this and share them with Scott (@ScottAdamsSays) and me (@JordanHarbinger) on Twitter!

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Mind Reading

“When people make assumptions about what you’re thinking, feeling, or believing and it’s wrong, I just call it mind reading,” says Scott. “The way you think and the way I think are probably different in a lot of ways, and you can’t tell in advance where that will be. Most people will back down when they realize, ‘I’m having an argument about what’s in your head with you. I think I’m losing because you probably know what’s in your head with greater accuracy!’

The next time someone makes wildly incorrect assumptions about your position in an argument, keep in mind that they’re probably just engaging in some form of mind reading — they may honestly believe they have a handle on the thought processes going on in your head, forgetting that the journey to that position differs from person to person and they have no way of knowing what variables occurred to help you arrive there. Keeping this in mind should also help you avoid mind reading others.



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Confusopoly

After we talked here, I heard this clever term that we were discussing post-show: confusopoly. It's when a company — like a phone, Internet, or cable provider — comes up with a price structure that's so confusing that we actually have no idea what we're getting for the money. I thought this was a brilliant term. Confusopoly. It's so apt.

What examples of confusopoly are present in your own life? Unless you live in the middle of nowhere, you probably have options — don't be afraid to exercise them! As a consumer, you can comparison shop and demand clarity when negotiating for the best rates.

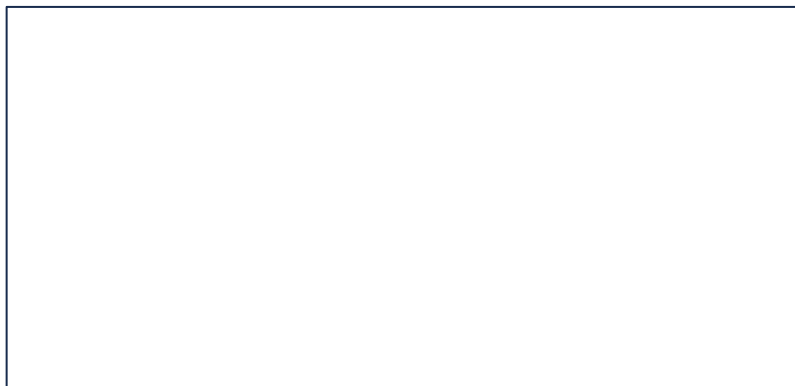


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Lessons Learned

People who have facts and logic on their side tend to show their work — that's one of the main messages Scott Adams is trying to convey in *Loserthink*. I love this, because if you have facts and logic on your side, you can show how you came to your conclusion. If you don't, you're going to hide the ball. You're going to try to confuse the issue. So if you see people doing this, it tends to mean that they don't actually have fact or logic on their side. They're trying to throw other things into the works to either confuse the issue or to get you emotionally involved in their arguments.

We often can't tell the difference between genius and stupidity when it comes to complex arguments and situations — we're just guessing about how to interpret situations based on our own view of facts, including bias and emotions. A big thank you to Scott for joining us and sharing the lessons from his book *Loserthink: How Untrained Brains Are Ruining America*.



Full show notes and resources for this episode [can be found here](#).

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About



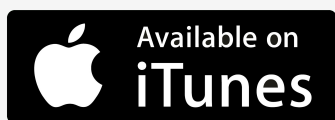
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We deconstruct the playbooks of the most successful people on earth — and learn new strategies, perspectives, and insights you can't find anywhere else. Then, take these valuable insights into your own life and live what you listen.

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