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Sway

The Irresistible Pull of Irrational Behaviour

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Extract

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When we were growing up, our mother had two idols she hoped we would try to emulate. The first—and there was really no competition there—was Laura Ingalls of *Little House on the Prairie* fame. In our mom's eyes, she was the picture of perfection. We'd talk back to our mom, and she'd sternly ask, "Would Laura Ingalls ever talk that way?" We'd forget to do our homework, leave dirty dishes in the sink, or generally cause trouble, and Laura Ingalls would travel from the nineteenth-century American prairie to 1980s Tel Aviv and admonish us to get with the program.

The second heroic figure was our mom's cousin Reli, a hotshot lawyer who was valedictorian at Harvard Law. In our eyes, too, Reli could walk on water.

Although Ori thought about law school when he was in

eleventh grade, neither one of us took up a legal career. But if you count Reli in, we form the Jewish mother's equivalent of the holy trinity: Reli, the lawyer; Rom, the psychologist (we'll call him a doctor); and Ori, the businessman.

In a way, this book was born from our different paths in life. While Rom was completing his PhD in psychology, Ori was getting his MBA. On day one of business school, expecting to find himself immersed in a sea of finance, economics, and accounting, Ori realized in his first class, with Professor Roberto Fernandez, that this would be no tranquil sea. Fernandez had a voice that could project from here to the moon. He had that larger-than-life aura about him that made you sit on the edge of your seat. "I have some news for you," he told the class of eager MBA students that first day. "People aren't rational." And with that, Fernandez turned on a grainy film, shot in the 1950s, of open-heart surgery. "See that white stuff they're pouring over the guy's heart?" Fernandez narrated. "It's asbestos." People gasped, unsure of how to react.

"I'm serious," he boomed. "Unsurprisingly, the patients administered the asbestos started dying off." But the hospital had continued with the procedure. How often, Fernandez asked the class, do we turn a blind eye to objective information?

Then he shifted gears and passed around copies of a table featuring mechanical engineering data about a synthetic rubber seal called an O-ring. "Take a look at this chart," he said. "It represents the likelihood of a mechanical failure as

temperatures drop." The data showed that at around 32°F, the O-ring would lose its pliability and malfunction. None of the students knew where this was going.

It turned out that the O-ring in question was part of the design of the Space Shuttle *Challenger*. The night before the launch, engineers from the company that had built the O-ring recommended that the launch be delayed because they did not have conclusive proof that it would hold up in the cold weather predicted for the next day. Despite their concerns, however, management decided to proceed with the launch.

As Ori's class listened, mesmerized, Fernandez launched into similar stories of irrational behavior: movie executives bullied into hiring an actress who was obviously wrong for the part, a manufacturer that knowingly produced airplane brakes that caught fire, and more.

Fernandez's point was that although most of us think of ourselves as rational, we're much more prone to irrational behavior than we realize. It was a point that stayed with Ori long after business school, and it made us realize that our future professions had a lot more in common than we might originally have thought. Fernandez became a regular part of our vocabulary. Referring to someone who was obviously acting irrationally, we'd say: "This is a total Fernandez situation." And we found such situations everywhere we looked: in our own lives, in stories we read about the missteps of Fortune 500 companies, and in the actions of politicians.

Meanwhile, while we never quite lived up to the Laura Ingalls standard, as fate would have it, we did both become

writers. The true genesis for this book came after a dinner conversation Ori had with a doctor who had been practicing obstetrics for the better part of thirty years. Dr. Jenkins possessed all the qualities you'd hope for in an OB/GYN—he was patient, he listened, he was smart, and most of all, he was experienced. You could count on him to make the right decision.

The conversation drifted to group dynamics and how emotions play a major role in decision making. Without thinking, Ori said, "I'm sure it's very different in your profession, where you're all scientists."

The doctor's face took on a serious expression as he explained that doctors are by no means immune to irrational forces. And because lives are on the line, the repercussions of irrational behavior can be devastating.

Take what happened to ER doctor Brian Hastings, who shared a story of how irrational behavior can derail even the most professional of physicians.

A few weeks earlier a woman had arrived at the emergency room in a panic. Her two-year-old daughter, Amy, she said, was experiencing severe stomach pains. Abdominal pains might signal a condition as benign as indigestion, but the woman was worried it might be something more serious. Normally, doctors would start running tests and evaluating Amy's symptoms.

Dr. Hastings paused in his story and quickly enumerated a litany of procedures the ER physicians could have performed. Rather than focusing on Amy, however, the doctors focused

their attention on her mother: she was flustered and anxious and appeared overly concerned—basically, she seemed to be the type of parent who'd overreact. The physicians made a judgment call to send Amy home.

The very next day Amy and her mom were back in the emergency room. Physicians know that when treating toddlers it's absolutely vital to listen to their parents, who usually have an acute sense of when something is wrong with their child. But at the same time, the doctors now had even more evidence that Amy's mom was overreacting: here she was again at the hospital, showing all the signs that she was the kind of hypochondriac they refer to as a "frequent flyer." Once more the doctors sent Amy home without running any tests.

The third day started out pretty much the same way as the previous two. Amy and her mother returned; the doctors became even more convinced that the mother was overreacting. It was only when Amy lost consciousness that the doctors realized something was terribly wrong. But by then it was too late. Dr. Hastings shook his head as he recalled, "We lost her."

Had they considered the situation fully, the ER doctors would have recognized the need to keep Amy under observation. But instead they ignored the warning signs and repeatedly sent the toddler home. The moment the physicians labeled Amy's mom a "frequent flyer," they fell under the spell of an irrational force we call the *diagnosis bias*—in

other words, the moment we label a person or a situation, we put on blinders to all evidence that contradicts our diagnosis.

Why would these skilled and experienced physicians make a choice that contradicted their years of training and ultimately cost the life of a child? We wanted to understand what was going on in this situation and the countless others in which people are swayed from the logical path.

What psychological forces underlie our own irrational behaviors? How do these forces creep up on us? When are we most vulnerable to them? How do they affect our careers? How do they shape our business and personal relationships? When do they put our finances, or even our lives, at risk? And why don't we realize when we're getting swayed?

In this book we'll explore several of the psychological forces that derail rational thinking. Wherever we looked—across different sectors, countries, and cultures—we saw different people being swayed in very similar ways. We're all susceptible to the sway of irrational behaviors. But by better understanding the seductive pull of these forces, we'll be less likely to fall victim to them in the future.