



# Mind Wide Open: Your Brain and the Neuroscience of Everyday Life

*Steven Johnson*

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## **Mind Wide Open: Your Brain and the Neuroscience of Everyday Life** Steven Johnson

A tour of cutting-edge brain research reevaluates the essence of human personality, explaining how the brain predicts and processes events, citing the sources of creativity and ideas, and offering insight into neurochemistry.

## **Mind Wide Open: Your Brain and the Neuroscience of Everyday Life Details**

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Author : Steven Johnson

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## From Reader Review Mind Wide Open: Your Brain and the Neuroscience of Everyday Life for online ebook

### Michelle says

OLD: some interesting bits, but a little too everyday and wandering for me? but only 1/3 done and won't judge until the end.

NEW:

It feels like Steven Berlin Johnson set out on a quest to understand his own mind, kept a diary about it, and decided to publish it when he reached a conclusion. He doesn't delve too deeply into either the science or the anecdotes, and I lost his train of thought several times. It's a neat exploration, but a bit too self-indulgent to be a really compelling story for a reader.

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### Jeremy Phillips says

Good stuff, if a little dated now. Lots of interesting info about brain mechanics and the psychic Oinner-world. Not too much overt speculation or blah blah about evolutionary biology. Know thyself.

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### Grace says

Steven Johnson wanted to know what his brain was doing when he felt/did different things, why he felt/did different things, and to what extent all human brains are the same/different. He went to lots of specialists, got hooked up to various brain-reading machines and wrote this book about his experiences. It was really fun to read and really interesting. Warning: it does offer theories explaining how chemicals in our brain are responsible for all emotions, including love, so if you don't want to think of love as a chemical reaction in your brain, you may want to skip that chapter.

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### Bettie? says

Description: *Mind Wide Open speaks to brain buffs, self-obsessed neurotics, barstool psychologists, mystified parents, grumpy spouses, exasperated managers, and anyone who enjoys speculating and gossiping about the motivations and behaviors of other human beings. Steven Johnson shows us the transformative power of understanding brain science and offers new modes of introspection and tools for better parenting, better relationships, and better living.*

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### Tina says

This is a pretty fascinating book. It gets a little annoying whenever Johnson tries to pimp it out as a self-help book ("learning about your brain can help you!" blah blah), but luckily, it's NOT a self-help book -- it's an informative book about how your brain functions and how he went about exploring (via MRI and

neurofeedback, etc.) about how his brain works. (I'm guessing he thought trying to pass it off as self-help would increase his audience?)

The chapter on attention was a tiny bit dull for me in some parts, but this might have been b/c I was already pretty familiar with most of the info. (This is pretty much the extent of the usefulness of my psych degree.) But the info about the connections between emotion and memory, and the evolutionary purpose behind laughter and play -- stuff like that was really interesting. It's also a fairly quick, easy, layperson-targeted read, so you get to learn great stuff without giving yourself a headache. I recommend this one to my science nerd friends, or really, anyone who's interested in an introduction to how the brain works.

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## **Bucket says**

Steven Johnson explores neuroscience in a very accessible way by describing his journey to understand his own brain. He submits himself to MRIs, biofeedback machines, neurofeedback machines, and other neurological testing to gain insight into how his own brain (and all of our brains too) function on a daily basis.

He closes with a section about Freud, and how neuroscience, while showing the need to update or alter some of Freud's theories about psychoanalysis, does not totally replace them. Johnson posits that understanding the neuroscience and acknowledging the role that biology and even geneology play doesn't mean that we are somehow locked into behaving a certain way or that the poetic, psychological, literary, and philosophical interpretations of how our minds work suddenly go out the window. Instead, each of these interpretations have their place.

Johnson also states that understanding a little more about the chemical and biological mechanisms in his brain actually makes him feel less limited and more in control. Knowledge is power, rah rah!

Particularly interesting insights to me:

Using 10% of our brains most of the time isn't a bad thing; instead it's efficient. Our brains are composed of dozens of different tools that serve different purposes. If we used all of them at once, the sheer volume of information and input would leave us unable to function. Our brain uses the 10% (or so) that is directly tied to whatever task we're working on.

His findings turn conventional wisdom about dealing with trauma on its head. We all know we're supposed to "talk it out" when something traumatic or painful happens, and "not brag" when something wonderful and exciting happens. However, reliving memories and their associated emotions makes them stronger. Therefore talking about the painful can reinforce it and ensure the emotional response remains long after, and keeping something great quiet may cause us to lose the great emotional feeling that came with it.

Our limbic brain is more or less responsible for emotional responses and our neocortex is more or less responsible for intellection and thinking. These systems work together, but at different speeds. The limbic brain learns slowly and remains in various emotional states longer, whereas the neocortex learns (and moves on) very quickly. This explains those moments where you feel stressed or anxious and don't know why. Then when you think for a moment, you remember something that you just heard that was stress-inducing and that your neocortex had moved on from before your limbic brain was finished reacting.

There's also a fascinating section of the book about our ability to detect emotion - subconsciously and in a split second. We're not just talking happy and sad here, but 412 different "discrete emotional concepts." All

this is handled by our limbic system; in fact, bringing your neocortex into play and trying to analyze the emotions on someone's face will make your reading less accurate than going with your split-second decision.

Themes: neuroscience, psychological, self-knowledge, technology, personality

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### Daniel Hadley says

What Johnson does well is break down complex scientific topics with clear prose and interesting real life examples. Sometimes I sense that he is oversimplifying things, but overall I like his style.

Here's the good news: we can read minds. Our brains can read subtle clues in facial expressions, body language and voice intonations. This happens in the subconscious, below our radar (or, outside of the "Executive Branch," as Johnson calls the conscious mind). Pretty cool.

We also are high on drugs all the time. Many of the same chemicals that make crack so much fun can be had in ordinary situations.

My only beef with the book: it glosses over or doesn't address some major debates in neuroscience. It sidesteps the whole debate over the role of evolutionary psychology by saying that we are products of both nature and nurture. Mostly, though, I would have liked to see more about the debates over free will that are happening in neuroscience circles. To get that, I think I will read Wegner's book, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, which I skimmed once in the bookstore.

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### Steele Dimmock says

This is a solid intro in to Brain Science worthy of 3.5 stars.

I got a few things out of it:

- \* Freud attracted a large audience because you didn't need to be mentally ill to get something out of it
  - \* Duchenne smiles
  - \* Experiments prove that Humans remember pain in a separate location from memories
  - \* Your brain is nothing but drugs, constantly going in and out
  - \* One of the effects of Prozac is the removal of rejection sensitivity
  - \* Prefrontal Cortex function is reduced when you are sad and increased when you are happy.
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### R.f.k says

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### **Kirsten says**

This is a really excellent look at how neuroscience relates to our everyday emotional lives. One of the most interesting bits to me was the discussion of the way that we remember trauma. Research now shows that a lot of conventional wisdom about trauma is flat-out wrong; in particular, this book suggests that if "talking out" a traumatic event reproduces the fear response (increased heart rate, etc.), it may cause the fear produced by the memories to become more firmly etched, not less. This means that talk therapy might not actually be the most effective treatment for survivors, especially if the trauma is recent.

It can be kind of eerie to realize that so much of what we experience emotionally is related to chemicals flowing about in your brain, but I found it fascinating. I'm pretty used to the idea in some ways already, since I take medication to control my depression, but this book has really sparked my interest and I'm planning on seeking out some of the books that he mentions in his excellent footnotes.

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### **David Everling says**

Good book. I think I would have given this a higher rating if I had read it when it was published in 2004, since I've read a half-dozen books since then that explore similar material. Indeed the more recent books from contemporaries like Malcolm Gladwell and Jonah Lehrer, Blink and How We Decide (respectively) are good examples, get the benefit of more recent studies and analysis. None of this is Johnson's fault of course, which is why I feel compelled to note it here, but it affected my engagement with the book nonetheless.

Still, Johnson has his own perspectives and niches of interest even looking at the same clinical psychology, and the book offered a refreshing dose of open-mindedness about the brain and how we might learn to tune it more precisely with emerging neuroscience.



If I was to sign up for a religion it would really have to offer me much more than the chance to chant “Holy, Holy, Holy” at the right hand of God for the rest of eternity. One of the things that would nearly sway me would be if it gave me a change to do and be all of the things there just isn’t time in one life to be and do. And if I was converted to this particular religion one of the lives that would be on the top of the list would have to be some sort of brain scientist type person – you know, a neurologist or a cognitive scientist, some sort of brain dude.

This really was a remarkable book about a remarkable journey into the brain of the author. Not just some crappy journey you might expect from one of those horrid 1950s science documentaries ... “Let me take you deep inside my brain...” No, nothing like that. This was a literal journey into his brain. Often it involved him being strapped into some god-awful, whirling machine and having to do things so that analysis could be done on him as he was ‘working’.

It is such a great idea for a book and one I would have loved to have come up with – this is precisely the journey I would have liked to have gone on. I could think of nothing better than playing with some of the stuff this guy gets to play with in this book.

There is lots of quite difficult material presented, but always in an interesting and engaging way. In fact, it was so well presented and so fascinating that the book just whizzed by. His discussion of our brain on drugs, for example, was quite fascinating.

But the most interesting parts of this book are the bits about the placebo effect and whether it ‘really exists’. I have always known that the placebo effect accounts for about 30% of the effectiveness of any medical treatment – but had no idea how I knew this. That this isn’t actually the case – that it really depends on the nature of the drug or treatment under consideration – is interesting enough. What is even more interesting is that the placebo effect can even be detectable when you know it is a placebo you are taking. Get your head around that one. You can know you are taking a sugar table and it can still make you feel better! He even goes so far as to say that clinical tests on Valium show that the drug is only effective if you are told you are going to be on it - not if you don't know. Lorena told me off today for suggesting this – but that was what the man said.

This was an interesting book on a truly fascinating subject.

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### **Stephanie Hinds says**

I agree with other readers that this book contained mostly information I already knew. This was not unexpected as it is roughly my field of expertise and the book was published in 2004- written about current understanding of the brain. The brain is our body's most complex organ, & perhaps the most complex thing known to man. Within 5 years of my completing school, fundamental ideas about the brain (ex. We don't grow new neurons) were not only being challenged but being disproven. All that being said, I approached the book with modest expectations and was very pleased. I read it in a single setting, way into the night. I was most impressed by the author's skill in drawing parallels btw neurophysiology & common life experiences, making complex topics easily accessible to anyone interested.

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### **Guillermojimenezespneo says**

Dentro de las revisiones de las neurociencias, por personas, incluidos periodistas involucrados directamente con alguna área particular, sin la formación científica propiamente dicha, es a veces más disfrutable que leer los artículos médicos, porque como dice Chaitin, los teoremas son mentiras que te acercan a la verdad. Lo mismo digo. A partir de situaciones de vida: el bloqueo creativo, la fobia a las ventanas de vidrio en medio de tormentas intensas, te vas dando cuenta que hay científicos que estudian las reacciones cerebrales a estos eventos y que tratan de revelar lo que es nuestro cerebro, nuestra conciencia, nuestro pensamiento, nuestro yo, para permitirnos vivir en equilibrio, o en estado zen o con conciencia plena (la literatura está llena de metáforas, similitudes y cercanías para los mismos conceptos). Además hay gente que ha descubierto, intuitivamente, esto es, sin una explicación suficientemente clara, técnicas para vivir en mejor situación nuestra vida cotidiana, o nuestra tensiones vitales, vaya, en el equilibrio que te permite aceptar y a veces disfrutar de tu vida cotidiana(dormir, comer, cagar, mear, copular ¿ser feliz?). Por ahí va este libro.

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### **Lauren Kampwirth says**

Yep. I'm a neuroscience nerd.

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### **Giedra says**

I really liked this book. Each chapter focused on a different aspect of the mind. For example, one chapter discussed our ability to "mindread" other people, referring to how we can read subtle cues about a person's mood, whether they are lying, etc. from their facial expressions, tone, etc. and we have no idea we can even do this. He points out that we DO usually sense that we enjoy conversing with some people more than others even when the content of hte conversations is largely the same, and posits that this may often be because you "click" with someone in terms of being able to optimally mindread one another. Another chapter provided insights into ADD/ADHD and how what we call "attention" is really more than 1 skill (there is auditory attention, visual attention, then the ability to switch back and forth or decide which external stimuli to ignore, etc.) Talked about using a neurofeedback machine that reads brainwaves to train kids to be more attentive-- the system uses a video game in which successful movement of your "guy" only happens when you are focused in a particular way. ADHD kids using the system report that now they understand what it's supposed to feel like when they are reading.

Many interesting things to ponder. I will enjoy rereading it as well, as you can easily take what you learn from this book and recognize that certain things going on in your own life are attributable to this or that neurotransmitter/attention skill/mindreading ability or lack thereof. Then realizing these things, you might be able to train yourself to overcome certain deficiencies or to do things to compensate.

My only complaint was that the last chapter got all Freud-talkie and was nearly as impenetrable as Freud(trying to explain what things from Freud are still worthy of being part of our lexicon and which things just have to be completely tossed based on what we know from brain science). Just plain dull after all the interesting reading that came before.

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### **Lola White says**

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## B. Rule says

This book is fine but it's on the level of a breezy magazine piece. The picture it presents of the brain is a vastly simplified one, and the set-pieces Johnson delivers in each chapter skate along the surface of the implications of modern neuroscience for philosophy, sociology, politics, etc. It turns out all the rich detail got dumped in the endnotes, but my opinion of the book was well set before I got to them. This would have been a much better book if that detail had been incorporated into the body of the work. As it stands, this doesn't delve much beyond the level of "wow, did you know you can do biofeedback and fMRIs to see how the brain has an actual architecture, and your mind is actually made up of a bunch of subsystems for various tasks like pattern-matching, visual acuity, different types of attentionality, etc. I won't bore you with the details, but cool, huh?!"

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