

They meant well, probably

A short book about deciding that other people's clumsy
behaviour was aimed at you

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit, and the habit is a sentence. Somebody does something clumsy, a message goes unanswered, a colleague talks over you, a friend forgets a birthday, an email lands with no greeting, a car cuts in, and before you've had time to think, a sentence has formed about why. They're ignoring me. They think they're more important. They don't rate me. They did it on purpose. The sentence arrives fast, it feels like knowing something, and it's usually wrong.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the habit makes sense from the inside. Guessing at motives is what minds do, the guess protects you from being caught out, and now and then it's right. The second is that the guess has a known lean, and the lean has been studied for sixty years. People explain other people's behaviour by their character and their own by their circumstances, they overrate how clear their own tone is and so assume other people's tone was deliberate, and the guess feeds back into how they treat the person, which produces the behaviour they suspected. The third is practical. Before you settle on a motive that needs malice, name three that don't. If the act matters, ask one plain question. And when you object, object to the act and not to the motive you assigned it. Chapters 17 to 20 cover how.

This book doesn't ask you to think well of everyone. Some people do mean it, and chapter 21 is about them. It asks you to stop deciding before you've looked.

Two cautions.

If the person whose motives you're reading belittles you, controls your money, keeps you from friends or family, checks where you are, or frightens you, the charitable reading this book describes isn't the right tool, and chapter 21 says where to go instead.

And if you find that you distrust most people most of the time, that the suspicion is there before anyone has done anything, and it's making you miserable or costing you relationships, that's worth talking to a GP about, because it can be part of anxiety or low mood and there's help for both.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

The message with no reply

You sent a message on Tuesday. It was a normal message, a question about a plan, or a link you thought they'd like, or a photo of something. It's Thursday. The two blue ticks appeared on Tuesday evening, so they've read it. And nothing has come back. By Thursday afternoon you've decided several things. That they're not that bothered about you. That they'd have answered anyone else. That the friendship has been running mostly on your effort for a while now, and this is what it looks like when you stop pushing.

Or it's the meeting. You were three sentences into a point and a colleague came in over the top of you, and the conversation moved on, and by the time it came back you'd lost the thread. Or it's the birthday your brother forgot, the first time in years. Or the email from a manager that said "Please send the figures by Friday" with no greeting and no thanks. Or the car that pulled in front of you at the roundabout. Each of them produced a sentence about why, and each sentence had a person in it who meant something by what they did.

These examples are invented, but I'd guess yours are close. Some words. **The slip** is the clumsy act itself, the unanswered message, the interruption, the forgotten date, the blunt email, the car. **The charge** is the motive you attach to it, the sentence that says what they meant. **The unseen half** is everything about their day that you couldn't see and the charge doesn't mention. **Your own week** is the collection of slips you've made yourself, which turns out to be the best evidence about what slips usually mean. **The pattern** is when

the same person's slips add up, which is the case where the charge might be right, and chapter 7 is about telling the difference. **Three causes** is the method in chapter 17. **The plain question** is the one sentence you ask when the slip matters. And **the grudge** is a charge that's been kept past the day it was made.

Before you go on, do one thing. Think of the last slip that stung, and write down the charge you made in one sentence, as close as you can to the words you used in your head. Then write down whether you've checked it. Not whether you're sure. Whether you've asked. Most people find they've never asked about any of them, and that all the certainty came from the sentence itself.

Why the charge feels like insight

The charge doesn't feel like a guess. It feels like seeing clearly. It feels like the moment you stopped being naive about someone. And it's worth being honest about what it gives you, because a habit that gave nothing wouldn't last.

The first thing it gives is speed. You don't have time to investigate every interruption. A motive is a summary, and a summary lets you move on. The second is protection. If you decide they meant it, you can't be caught out later by discovering they meant it. Being wrong in the suspicious direction feels safer than being wrong in the trusting direction, because the first is only a wasted evening and the second is being a fool. The third is that the charge is sometimes right. Some people are careless with you because they don't value you. Some interruptions are power. Some silences are a decision. A book that pretended otherwise would deserve to be put down.

The fourth thing it gives is harder to admit. The charge makes you the one who was wronged, and the wronged party has a clear position. You know what happened, you know who did it, and you know what you think of them. The alternative, that it was nothing, that they didn't think about you at all, that the unanswered message is sitting under forty others, offers no position. You're not wronged. You're just someone whose message hasn't been answered. That's less comfortable than it sounds, and I think a fair amount of charging is a way of avoiding it.

So the charge gives speed, protection, occasional accuracy and a role. What the next chapters ask is what each costs, and whether the speed is buying anything, whether the protection protects, how occasional the accuracy is, and what the role does to the people around you.

"I know what that was about"

The belief under the whole habit is that you can read motives from acts. The colleague talked over you, so the colleague wanted to talk over you. The email had no greeting, so the sender chose to be cold. It seems like the plainest reading. The act is there, you saw it, and acts come from people.

Daniel Gilbert and Patrick Malone reviewed thirty years of work on this in 1995 and called it the correspondence bias. It's the tendency to infer someone's lasting character from behaviour that the situation fully explains. If you're told a person was assigned to argue a position, you still tend to believe they hold it. If someone is rude in a queue, you conclude they're rude, not that they've had a morning. The bias is one of the most reliable findings in social psychology, and Gilbert and Malone describe four ways it happens. You may not be aware of the situation at all. You may have unrealistic ideas about how people behave in it. You may see the behaviour as more extreme than it was because you've already categorised it. And you may start to correct for the situation and stop early, because correcting takes effort and the first answer was already there.

That last one is the interesting one for a book about a habit. The charge isn't the end of thinking. It's the start of thinking, cut short. Your mind produces "they don't rate me", begins to adjust for the fact that they're in the middle of a house move, and gives up halfway because the adjustment is work and the charge is finished. That's why the charge feels like a conclusion. It's the only complete sentence in the room.

You can test this on any slip. Take the interruption and list what would have to be true of the colleague's situation for it to mean nothing about you. They didn't hear you start. They thought you'd finished. They'd been waiting to say something for ten minutes and had stopped tracking who was speaking. The meeting was running over and they were watching the clock. None of those are exotic. All of them are things you've done. And every one of them was available to your mind on Thursday and got dropped because "they don't rate me" was already sitting there, complete.

"I'd never do that"

The charge survives because of a comparison you don't notice making. They didn't reply for two days, and you think, I'd never leave someone hanging like that. They forgot the date, and you think, I don't forget. So the act must come from something in them that isn't in you.

Now look at your own week. There's a message you haven't answered. There's one you answered a week late with "sorry, this got buried". There's an email you sent with no greeting because you were writing four at once. There was a time you interrupted someone, probably today, and you didn't notice it as an interruption because from the inside it felt like joining in. There was a birthday you remembered at nine in the evening. There was a roundabout. If you've done every kind of slip in this book, and I'd put money on it, then you know exactly what a slip usually means, because you know what yours meant. They meant you were busy, tired, distracted, and thinking about something else. They meant nothing about the other person at all.

The old idea was that people explain their own behaviour by circumstances and everyone else's by character, across the board. Bertram Malle went through 173 published studies in 2006 and found it wasn't that simple. Across everything, the asymmetry barely existed. But it did hold for negative events. When something bad has happened, people explain their own version by the situation and other people's by the person. For good events, it reversed. So the lean isn't a general failure to see other people's

circumstances. It's a specific lean that appears exactly when someone has done something you didn't like. Which is when the charge gets made.

So the comparison "I'd never do that" is false twice. You would do it, and you have, this week. And the reason you don't count your own version is that the thing that makes you generous to yourself, knowing the circumstances, is the thing you're not bothering to imagine for them. Your own week is the base rate for what slips mean. Use it.

"The tone was obvious"

Written slips are the worst, because they arrive with no face and no voice and you supply both. "Please send the figures by Friday."

Read it in a flat voice and it's an instruction. Read it in a cold voice and it's a rebuke. Read it in a tired voice at the end of a day of forty emails and it's someone typing as fast as they can. The words are the same, and the tone you hear is the tone you brought.

Justin Kruger, Nicholas Epley and their colleagues ran five experiments in 2005 on how well people communicate tone by email. Senders were confident their sarcasm, humour or seriousness would come across, and it came across much less often than they thought. The reason, in the last two studies, was that senders couldn't detach from their own perspective. They heard their own message in the tone they intended, and assumed the reader would hear it the same way. Someone typing "Please send the figures by Friday" hears it as brisk and ordinary. They have no idea it's about to be read as cold.

This cuts in both directions and you need both. First, the sender of the blunt email almost certainly didn't hear it as blunt. They heard their own intention, which was probably "get this off the list before the next meeting". The coldness was added at your end, and the sender doesn't know it exists. Second, you have sent that email. You've sent dozens, and you'd be startled to learn how some of them landed, because you heard them in your own voice too.

I'd put it this way, and it's my interpretation. Tone in writing isn't sent. It's assigned by the reader, and the reader who's already made a charge assigns the tone that fits it. Once you've decided a manager is dismissive, every short email is evidence, and there's no email short enough to be neutral. The words haven't changed. Your assignment has. The practical rule for written slips is the plainest one in the book, and it's this. Read it once in the most boring voice you can manage. If it still stings in a boring voice, it might mean something. If it doesn't, it didn't.

"If they cared they'd have replied"

The unanswered message is the slip people carry longest, so it deserves its own chapter. The charge runs like this. They've read it, they've had two days, replying takes ten seconds, and they haven't. So the ten seconds weren't worth spending on you. It's clean, and it's the kind of reasoning that would hold up in a meeting.

Here's the unseen half. They read it on a phone while standing in a shop, intending to reply properly when they'd got home. At home there was a child, a meal and a call from their mother. By the time they'd thought of it again it was a day old, and now the reply needs an apology at the front, and the apology needs a reason, and the reason is that they forgot, which is embarrassing, so it needs another day to become something they can say lightly. Meanwhile the message has gone under a stack of others. None of this is about you. It's about how messages behave once they've been read and not answered, and you know this because you have a message like that yourself, right now, from someone you like.

The ten-seconds argument is the tell. It's true that a reply takes ten seconds. It's also true that the ten seconds have to happen at a moment when they remember, have their phone, aren't mid-something and have the reply in mind. The charge treats a two-day silence as two days of choosing not to. It was more likely two days of not being reminded. Absence of a reply isn't a message. It's an absence.

And there's the question of what "caring" would look like if it were measured honestly. Not the speed of one reply. The last year. Did they turn up, ask about the thing, remember what mattered, come when you needed them? If the answer is yes, one silent Tuesday doesn't overturn it, and reading it as though it did is choosing the smallest sample you can find. If the answer across the year is no, that's real, and chapter 7 is for it. But it won't be this message that told you.

"It's a pattern with them"

This is the honest objection, and it's sometimes right. One interruption is a slip. Ten from the same colleague, always when you're speaking and never when the director is, is a pattern. One forgotten birthday is a Tuesday. A brother who has never once remembered while expecting you to organise his is something else. The book isn't asking you to go blind. It's asking you to know what a pattern is.

A pattern needs three things. It needs the same act more than once, from the same person, with the situation varied. That last part is the one the charge skips. If a colleague always talks over you in the Monday meeting, but the Monday meeting is where everyone talks over everyone because it's twenty minutes for an hour's agenda, you don't have a pattern about them. You have a pattern about the meeting. If a friend has gone quiet for two months, and the two months are the two months since their father got ill, you don't have a pattern about you. Vary the situation before you call it a pattern, and look for the act in a situation that doesn't explain it.

There's a subtler problem with patterns, which is that they're built by the charge itself. Benjamin Karney and Thomas Bradbury followed newlywed couples across eight waves of data and found no evidence that people have a fixed style of explaining their partner's behaviour. The explanations moved with satisfaction. As spouses grew less happy, they explained the same acts less generously, and the harsher explanations in turn predicted falling satisfaction. So the pattern you see in someone is partly the accumulated charges you've made about them. Once you've

decided a colleague is dismissive, every short reply gets filed under dismissive, and the file grows, and the thickness of the file feels like evidence when it's mostly filing.

So here's a test. Before calling it a pattern, count the instances you can actually name, with dates, and for each one write the situation next to it. Then look for one instance where the situation doesn't explain it. If you can't find one, you haven't got a pattern. If you can find three, you might, and chapter 18 is about what to do with it, which is ask, not conclude.

"Being suspicious keeps me safe"

Underneath the habit is a belief about safety. If you assume the worst, you can't be blindsided. People who take things at face value get used, and you'd rather be the one who saw it coming. Trust is what naive people do.

There's research on what habitual suspicion actually does, and it isn't protective. Psychologists call it hostile attribution bias, the tendency to read hostile intent into ambiguous behaviour, and it's been studied mostly because of what it's linked to. A 2019 systematic review of 25 studies by Klein Tuenete, Bogaerts and Veling found that in adults the bias goes with more aggression, with small to medium associations, across samples ranging from students to psychiatric patients. The studies were mostly one-off snapshots, so they can't say which causes which. But the direction of the link is clear enough. People who read hostility into ambiguous acts don't end up safer. They end up in more conflict, because they respond to the hostility they've read, and the other person responds to that.

Think about what the response looks like from outside. You decided the colleague talked over you on purpose, so in the next meeting you're clipped with them, or you don't back their idea, or you say something dry. They didn't know they'd interrupted you, so from where they sit, you've turned cold for no reason. They get wary. Now their next slip has a bit of real edge in it, and your charge has come true, and you take that as proof you were right the first time. You weren't. You manufactured the evidence.

And the safety the suspicion promised never turns up, because the actual dangers, the person who genuinely means you harm, aren't found by reading every ambiguous act as hostile. They're found by watching what someone does over time in situations that don't excuse it, which is the pattern test from the last chapter. Suspicion of everyone is noise, and noise hides signal. The person who charges everyone has no way of spotting the one who deserves it.

"I'm just being realistic"

Realism sounds like a defence, so let's take it seriously. Being realistic means matching your beliefs to how things usually are. So the question is what slips usually are, and you have the data. It's your own week.

Go back to the list from chapter 4. How many of your slips, this week, were aimed at someone? The message you didn't answer, the email with no hello, the interruption, the thing you forgot. I'd guess none. You didn't do any of them at anyone. That's not one week's oddity. It's what slips are. The realistic estimate of what a given slip means, from the only large sample you have full information on, is that it means someone was busy. A charge of malice is the unrealistic reading. It's the reading that assumes this person, unlike you, spends their day aiming their carelessness.

There's a second problem with "realistic", which is that you never find out when you were wrong. You charged the friend with not caring, and you never asked, and you cooled a little, and the friendship faded, and the fade looked like confirmation. You charged the manager with coldness, and you never checked, and the manager left for another job, and you never learned that they'd thought you were one of the good ones. The charges that were right get remembered because something happened. The charges that were wrong disappear, because nothing did, and there was no moment where the truth arrived. So your sense of your own hit rate is built entirely from the hits. That's not realism. That's a filing system that throws away the misses.

The genuinely realistic position is uncomfortable and it's this. For most slips you'll never know. The message went unanswered for a reason, and the reason is inside someone else's Tuesday, and it's gone. What you can know is the base rate, and the base rate says busy. Believing the base rate isn't being soft. It's what the numbers say, as far as you can see them.

"They should have known"

Some charges aren't about malice. They're about a failure of care. They didn't mean it, but they should have known it would land badly. A thoughtful person would have remembered. A considerate person would have noticed I'd started speaking. So the charge shifts from "they meant it" to "they didn't care enough to avoid it", which feels more reasonable and is mostly the same charge.

The trouble is that "should have known" assumes people can tell how their acts land, and they mostly can't. You saw in chapter 5 that senders of emails have almost no idea how their tone reads. The same is true of interruptions, of forgotten dates, of short replies. From the inside a slip is invisible. The colleague didn't experience talking over you. They experienced saying their thing. The friend didn't experience ignoring your message. They experienced a day. An earlier book in this series, *They can't read your mind*, is about the mirror of this, the habit of expecting people to notice what you haven't said. This is the same fact from the other end. People are bad at guessing what lands, and they're bad at it in both directions. They don't notice what they've done to you, and you don't notice what you've done to them.

So the standard "a thoughtful person would have known" is a standard nobody meets, including you. And notice what it does. It converts an accident into a character verdict, thoughtless, inconsiderate, careless, which is exactly the correspondence bias from chapter 3 wearing a more reasonable coat. The act still fully explains itself by the situation. All that's changed is that you've found a way to blame them for the situation.

If an act genuinely needed avoiding, if the forgotten thing mattered, if the interruption cost you something, the remedy isn't a verdict on their character. It's telling them, once, in a way that lets them know for next time, which chapter 19 is about. People who don't know what lands can be told. People who've been silently judged thoughtless can't do anything at all.

"Giving the benefit of the doubt makes me a doormat"

Here's the fear that keeps the habit going even in people who can see it's mostly wrong. If I stop charging, I'll let everything go. People will walk over me. The interrupter will keep interrupting, the friend will keep not replying, and I'll be the one who smiles and takes it.

This confuses two separate things, the motive and the act. You can object to an act without deciding the motive. In fact you can only object well when you haven't decided the motive, because an objection that comes packaged with a verdict gets argued about at the verdict end. Say "you talked over me because you don't take me seriously" and the reply is "that's not true", and now you're arguing about their character, and the interruption has vanished. Say "I hadn't finished, can I pick that up" and there's nothing to argue with. The act gets addressed. The motive never needed deciding.

An earlier book, *You don't have to win this one*, is about the row over who's right. This is the row upstream of that one, the row about what they meant, and the way to avoid it is to notice you never have to have it. Dropping the charge isn't dropping the objection. It's dropping the part of the objection that can't be checked and can only be fought about. What's left is the part that can be fixed.

So what does a person who's stopped charging look like, from outside? Not a doormat. Someone who says, on the day, "that stung, I don't think you meant it, but I wanted you to know" and then

moves on. Someone who, when a colleague repeatedly interrupts, says in the moment "hang on, I'll finish this", every time, without heat, because there's no charge behind it to generate heat. That person is harder to walk over than the one who's seething and saying nothing, because they're actually objecting, out loud, to the actual thing. Charging and objecting aren't the same. The habit usually delivers the first and skips the second, which is the doormat outcome it was afraid of, arrived at from the other direction.

"I can't help what I think"

Fair enough, and partly true. The charge arrives before you've decided anything. You don't choose to think "they're ignoring me" any more than you choose to flinch. Telling yourself not to have the thought doesn't work, and a book that told you to simply think better of people would be asking for something nobody can do on demand.

But the charge isn't one thought. It's two. The first is the sentence that arrives, "they're ignoring me". The second is what you do with it, which is usually to treat it as true, build on it, and spend the evening there. The first you can't help. The second you can, because the second is a decision about what kind of thing the first sentence is. If it's a conclusion, you act on it. If it's a hypothesis, you check it, or hold it loosely, or let it sit next to three others. Same sentence. Different status.

This is where Gilbert and Malone's fourth mechanism from chapter 3 turns useful. The correction for the situation is something your mind does start, and stops early because it's effortful. You can't stop the charge arriving. You can decline to stop the correction. That's a smaller ask than not thinking the thought. It's finishing a thought you'd already begun, which is what chapter 17's method is for.

I'd add one thing, as my own view. The reason the charge feels uncontrollable isn't that it's fast. It's that it's satisfying, for the reasons chapter 2 gave, and a satisfying thought is one you don't want to interrupt. Noticing that you'd quite like the charge to be true, because it gives you a position, is often enough to loosen it.

You don't have to argue yourself out of it. You just have to notice that you're enjoying it, and that enjoying it isn't the same as its being right.

What the charge costs you

Add up an ordinary month. The message charge cost you a Thursday evening and a slight cooling towards someone you like. The interruption charge cost you a week of being clipped in meetings and an idea you didn't put forward. The email charge cost you an afternoon of composing replies in your head. The birthday charge cost you a phone call you didn't make. The roundabout cost you ten minutes of driving angry. None of these is large. All of them were spent on sentences you never checked, about motives that probably didn't exist.

The bigger cost is in the relationships where the charges accumulate. Thomas Bradbury and Frank Fincham reviewed the marriage research in 1990 and found that dissatisfied spouses consistently explained their partner's behaviour in ways that cast it in a negative light, and that the evidence pointed to the explanations influencing satisfaction, not only reflecting it. A decade later Fincham, Harold and Gano-Phillips followed couples in their second year of marriage across eighteen months and found the effect ran both ways. Harsher explanations for a partner's negative behaviour predicted lower satisfaction later, and lower satisfaction predicted harsher explanations. It's a loop, and it's the loop chapter 7 described. The charge lowers the warmth, the lower warmth makes the next charge easier, and neither party can see where it started.

Those studies are about marriage, and I'm extending them. But I don't think the mechanism is special to marriage. Any relationship that lasts, a colleague, a sibling, a friend of twenty years,

accumulates a file of charges, and the file becomes the lens. The person hasn't changed. The lens has.

And there's what it costs you alone. The evening on the sofa building the case. The mood that the case produces. The sense of being surrounded by people who don't quite value you, which is what a hundred small charges add up to, and which is a lonely place to live even when every individual charge felt reasonable. You made that place, one sentence at a time. That's the good news, because what you made you can stop making.

What it does to them

Now the other side of the slip. The colleague who talked over you doesn't know they did. What they know is that since Monday you've been short with them, and they've gone back through the week looking for what they did, and found nothing, and concluded that you're moody, or don't like them, or have something going on. Which is to say they've made a charge about you, from your behaviour, with no access to your reasons. They're doing exactly what you did, and they're doing it because you did it first.

An earlier book in this series, *You don't have to win this one*, describes a spiral in which each person sees the other as biased, responds in kind, and looks more biased to the other for doing so. The charge starts the same kind of spiral, at a lower temperature. You cool, they notice, they cool, you notice, and now there's a real coolness between you that both of you can point to as proof. The original slip is buried under it. Neither of you remembers that it began with a message that went under a stack of others.

There's a quieter effect too. People become what they're treated as, a little. Treat a colleague as someone who dismisses you and they'll find you harder to be warm with, because warmth towards someone who's clipped with you takes effort, and they'll spend the effort elsewhere. Treat a friend as someone who's drifting and you'll stop making the calls that would have stopped the drift. The charge is partly a prediction, and predictions about people have a way of arranging the evidence. That's my interpretation, but I don't think it's a stretch from what the marriage studies show.

And they never get the chance to explain, because you never asked. Most people, told "I thought you'd ignored me on purpose", would be startled and a bit hurt, and would explain, and the explanation would be a Tuesday. You've been saving them the trouble by convicting them in private. That's not a kindness. It's the thing you'd least like done to you.

What it does at work

Work deserves its own chapter because work is where slips are densest and charges are most expensive. Forty emails a day, half of them terse. Meetings where six people are trying to get a word in. Decisions you weren't copied on, credit that went to the wrong name, a manager whose one-word replies could mean anything. If you charge at work the way you charge at home, you'll spend your career surrounded by enemies you invented.

The blunt email is the classic. "Please send the figures by Friday." You've seen in chapter 5 that the sender heard it as brisk and doesn't know it read as cold. Now add what work does to writing. People write emails between meetings, on phones, in the gaps. Brevity at work is a symptom of load, not a message about you, and the people who write the shortest emails are usually the busiest, which usually means the most senior, which is why the charge "they think they're too important to say hello" is so easy to make and so rarely true. They're not too important. They've got eleven minutes.

The meeting interruption is the other one. Meetings interrupt everyone, and the person who feels most interrupted is usually the person paying most attention to their own turn. That's not a criticism. It's just that the count you're keeping is a count of your interruptions, and you're not keeping anyone else's, so yours looks like a pattern and theirs looks like meetings. An earlier book, *Let them finish*, is about being the interrupter, and it'll show you how invisible it is from the inside.

What the charge costs at work is a reputation. Not for being wrong about motives, because nobody knows what you've charged. For being touchy. The person who's clipped after every terse email, who reads the seating plan for slights, who takes the uncopied decision as a message, becomes the person others handle carefully, and being handled carefully is the opposite of being trusted. The irony is complete. The charge that was meant to stop you being overlooked makes you someone people route around.

What it looks like from their side

There's a finding that explains why charging feels reasonable while it's happening and stops feeling reasonable the moment you imagine being them. Nicholas Epley, Kenneth Savitsky and Thomas Gilovich showed in 2002 that observers who could easily imagine being in an actor's position moderated their harsh judgements of that person. When the observer could picture the situation from the inside, the character verdict softened, because the situation became visible.

What this means for the charge is simple. The charge exists because you're standing outside their slip. From outside, a two-day silence is a decision. From inside, it's a phone in a pocket and a Tuesday. You have the inside view of every slip you've ever made, which is why your own slips seem innocent, and the outside view of every slip made to you, which is why theirs seem aimed. The difference isn't in the slips. It's in where you're standing.

So the single most useful move, before any of the method chapters, is to move. Take the slip and imagine you did it. Not a better version of you. You on a bad Thursday, with the day you actually had last Thursday. You read a message in a shop. You were three sentences behind in a meeting and blurted. You sent the figures email at 5.55 with your coat on. You forgot the date because the date was on a calendar you hadn't opened. What did you mean by each? Nothing. What would you want the other person to think? That it was a Thursday.

This isn't a trick for making yourself feel better. It's the only accurate view available. You genuinely know more about what slips mean from the inside than from the outside, and the inside view says they mean very little. Standing there for ten seconds, before the charge sets, does most of the work this book is asking for.

Three causes first

Here's the method, and it's small. When a slip stings and the charge arrives, before you let the charge stand, name three causes for the slip that don't require the person to have meant anything by it. Three, not one, because one alternative feels like an excuse and three feels like a list of ordinary Tuesdays. They don't have to be true. They have to be plausible, and they have to be things you've done.

Take the unanswered message. One, they read it somewhere they couldn't reply and it went under later messages. Two, they meant to reply properly and the proper reply got harder as the days passed. Three, something's going on with them that they haven't told you. Take the interruption. One, they thought you'd finished. Two, they'd been holding a point for ten minutes and lost track. Three, the meeting was running over and they were watching the clock. Take the email. One, they wrote it on a phone between meetings. Two, they write all their emails like that. Three, they're under pressure from above for the figures and passed it on without noticing.

You'll find the three come easily, because you've been all three. And you'll find that once they're named, the charge has to compete with them, which it couldn't do while it was the only sentence in the room. It doesn't disappear. It becomes one of four. That's the whole aim. Not to convince yourself the charge is false, which you can't know, but to return it to the status of a guess among guesses.

The habit here is the naming, done in the moment, which means before the evening starts. It takes about twenty seconds, and the twenty seconds have to be spent before the charge has become a position, because a position is much harder to give up than a sentence. If you're good at this, you'll come to do it as the charge lands, and the charge will start arriving already surrounded. If you're not good at it yet, do it late. Late is still worth more than never, because a charge that's had an evening to set can still be loosened by the three, just more slowly.

The plain question

Most slips don't matter enough to check. The message will be answered, the roundabout is gone, the email was just an email. The three causes are enough, and the charge goes back to being a guess, and you move on. But sometimes the slip matters. The friend's silence is the fourth in a row. The colleague's interruptions are costing you standing. The brother's forgetting has a history. For those, the three causes aren't enough, because you need to know, and the only way to know is to ask.

The plain question is one sentence, asked of the person, about the act, without the charge attached. "I noticed you've gone quiet, is everything all right?" "Did you mean to cut in there, or had I run on?" "It felt a bit sharp when you didn't say hello in that email, was that just speed?" Notice what the sentences do. They name the act, they offer the innocent cause, and they leave room for the answer to be anything. What they don't do is say "why did you ignore me", which isn't a question. It's the charge with a question mark on it, and it gets answered with defence, not information.

The plain question feels risky, and it's worth saying why. Asking exposes that you noticed, and that it mattered, and the charge was partly a way of not having to admit either. But consider what you're protecting. You already look like you noticed, because you've been cool since Monday. Asking replaces a coolness nobody understands with a question anyone can answer.

And the answers are almost always a Tuesday. "Sorry, I saw it in the shop and it went out of my head." "Did I? I didn't notice, sorry, I'd been waiting to say that for ages." "No, I write all my emails like that, I'm told I should stop." Now and then the answer is something else. "Actually I've been a bit hurt since the thing at Easter." That's the pattern turning out to be real, and it's the best possible outcome, because now it's out and can be dealt with, instead of being a charge on your side and a puzzle on theirs. Either way you know. The charge never gets you that.

Object to the act, not the motive

Sometimes the slip needs more than a question. It needs an objection. The interruptions have to stop. The forgotten date hurt and you want it not to happen again. The email tone is getting to you and you'd like it changed. The habit's version of this is to object to the motive. "You don't take me seriously in meetings." "You never think about anyone but yourself." "You treat me like an assistant." Each of those is a charge stated as a fact, and each will be denied, because from the inside none of them is true, and now you're arguing about their character instead of the thing that happened.

Object to the act instead. The act is checkable, the motive isn't. "I've been talked over three times this week and I'd like to finish my points." "My birthday matters to me and I'd like you to put it in your phone." "Could you add a line at the top of the figures emails, they read quite sharp." There's no verdict in any of those. There's nothing to deny. The person can only say yes, or ask what you mean, or explain, and all three move things on.

This is also where the fear from chapter 11 gets answered in practice. You're not being a doormat. You're making a specific request about a specific act, out loud, on the day. That's more assertive than a month of silent verdicts, not less. And it works better, because a request about an act can be met, while a verdict about a motive can only be resented.

Keep the innocent cause in the sentence if you can. "I don't think you mean to, but I keep getting cut off, and I'd like to finish." It isn't weakness. It's accuracy, because you don't know they mean to, and

saying so makes the request easy to accept. People will change an act they didn't know they were doing far more readily than they'll accept a motive they know they don't have. Give them the act. Keep the motive to yourself, where it belongs, filed under guesses.

The decision

Here's the rule, and it's one sentence. When someone's clumsy act stings, I name three causes that need no malice before I settle on one that does, and if it matters I ask them.

Everything else in the book hangs off that. The three causes return the charge to the status of a guess. The asking replaces guessing with knowing, in the cases where knowing matters. And the objection, when one is needed, goes to the act and not the motive, which is covered by the same sentence, because you can't object to a motive you've agreed to treat as a guess.

Three when-then plans, which are the form that research on intentions says works best, a specific cue paired with a specific action. When I notice the sentence "they did that because" forming, then I say three other causes before I finish it. When a slip has stayed with me past the end of the day, then I ask the person a plain question tomorrow, or I drop it, and I don't carry it into a third day. When I need to raise something, then I name the act and what I'd like instead, and I leave the motive out of the sentence.

What to expect. The first week, you'll catch about half the charges, and mostly after they've set, and you'll do the three causes late. That's fine. The second week you'll start catching them earlier, and you'll notice the charges are getting quieter, not because you've argued them down but because they've stopped being the only sentence. Around then you'll ask a plain question for the first time and get a Tuesday back, and the Tuesday will do more than any

chapter here, because it'll be yours. You won't stop charging. Nobody does. You'll stop believing the charge on arrival, and that's the whole change.

You'll also find that the world gets less hostile, quickly, and that nothing in the world has changed. That's my expectation and not a finding, but it's the natural result of a hundred small verdicts a month being downgraded to guesses. The people were always mostly busy. You're just seeing it now.

When it was on purpose, the partner who controls, the repeat offender, family, and when suspicion is everywhere

When it was on purpose. Sometimes the plain question gets an answer that confirms the charge, or no answer, or a pattern that survives every situation you vary. Then the charge was right, and the book hasn't failed. The method was never "assume the best". It was "don't conclude before you've looked". You've looked. Now you know something, and you can act on it, object to the act, change what you share with the person, or step back. What you've gained is that you know it rather than suspect it, and that you didn't spend the previous year treating twenty other people as though they were this one.

The partner who controls. There's a case where the charitable reading is exactly wrong, and it's important to name it. If a partner belittles you, blames you for arguments, keeps you from friends or family, controls the money, checks your phone or where you are, or frightens you, the NHS describes those as signs of domestic abuse, and abuse is about power and control, not clumsiness. A book about giving the benefit of the doubt has nothing to say to that situation, and if you recognised your own home in that list, the three causes are the wrong tool. The NHS says you can talk to your GP, and the National Domestic Abuse Helpline run by Refuge is on 0808 2000 247, free, at any time. The Men's Advice Line is on 0808 8010 327. In an emergency, 999. People in that situation are often the ones who've been told, for years, that they're reading too much in. This book is not telling you that.

The repeat offender. The colleague who does interrupt you and only you, in every setting, after you've asked. The friend who's gone quiet four times and each time there was no Tuesday. Chapter 7's test has been passed and the pattern is real. You're allowed to conclude. But conclude about the act, not the whole person. "They interrupt me" is a fact you can work with. "They have no respect for me" is a charge again, wider than the evidence, and it'll make the next act worse. Keep the conclusion the size of the pattern.

Family. Family slips carry thirty years of file, and the charge arrives pre-loaded. The forgotten birthday isn't this year's. It's every year's, and every other thing. The method is the same, but the three causes have to be harder-won, because the file is louder. The plain question helps more here than anywhere, and it helps to ask it about this instance only. "You forgot this year, was it just a busy week?" Not "you always forget", which is the file speaking, and which nobody can answer.

When suspicion is everywhere. If you find the charge arriving before anyone has done anything, if most people seem to be against you most of the time, if you rehearse slights that haven't happened, and it's making you miserable or losing you people, that's beyond a habit and worth taking to a GP. Persistent suspicion can be part of anxiety or low mood, both of which the NHS treats, and it's not a character fault to have it. It's a thing that can be helped.

When you charged them again

You'll do it again. A message will go unanswered, and by Thursday you'll have decided what it meant, and you'll have spent an evening there before you remember there was a method. Or you'll say the thing in the meeting, "you clearly don't want my input", out loud, and watch it land, and know as it lands that it was a charge. This chapter is for afterwards.

The first thing to know is that one charge isn't the habit back. The habit was believing every charge on arrival. What's happened is that you believed one, late, and noticed. Noticing is the change. The version of you from two months ago wouldn't have noticed at all, and would be on the third day by now.

The second thing is to do the three causes late. They still work after the charge has set. They work more slowly, because you've had an evening to build the case, but the case was built on one sentence, and three more sentences will loosen it. Then ask yourself whether the slip matters enough for the plain question. If it does, ask it, tomorrow, as though the evening hadn't happened. If it doesn't, drop it, out loud if you need to, "I've decided that was a Tuesday", and let it go.

If you said the charge out loud, repair it. Not with an apology for everything, but with one sentence about the act. "I said you didn't want my input, that was unfair, I was annoyed about being cut off." That's an objection to the act, correctly aimed, arriving late, and most people will take it, because most people have said the same kind of thing themselves.

Then ask which belief let the charge through. Usually it's one of the chapters. "I'd never do that" on a day when you'd done exactly that. "It's a pattern" with two instances and no varied situation. "The tone was obvious" from an email read in a cold voice. Find the belief, reread the chapter, and carry on. Don't count clean days. The aim was never to stop charging. It was to stop being run by it, and one charge you noticed is evidence that you aren't.

The message, read again

It's Thursday. The message you sent on Tuesday still has two blue ticks and no reply. The sentence arrives. They're not that bothered.

And this time, before it sets, three others turn up beside it. They read it in a shop. It went under. They've got something on. The first sentence is still there, but it's one of four now, and it's lost its authority, and the evening doesn't happen. You put the phone down and make dinner.

On Saturday a reply comes. "Sorry! Saw this in Tesco and it went straight out of my head. Yes to the thing on the 14th, what time?" And you notice, with some interest, that it's exactly the reply you'd have sent, for exactly the reason.

Do one thing. Take the charge you wrote down at the end of chapter 1, the one that stung, the one you never checked. Name three causes for it that need no malice. If it still matters, ask the person one plain question this week. If it doesn't, cross it out. Either way, that's the habit, started.

Notes

These notes give the sources for the claims in each chapter, and say where I'm giving my own reasoning rather than a finding. Nothing here is medical or psychological advice for your situation. If any of the cautions in the preface or chapter 21 apply to you, please talk to a GP or use the helplines named there. The examples throughout, the Tuesday message, the interrupted meeting point, the forgotten birthday, the figures email, the roundabout and the Tesco reply, are invented to illustrate the habit and are not drawn from any real person.

I read the sources below as published abstracts unless stated otherwise, and where a study's sample or design is given it's taken from that abstract. Researchers' forenames are given only where the record supplies them.

Chapter 3. Gilbert and Malone, "The correspondence bias", Psychological Bulletin 117, 1995, pages 21 to 38. A review. The four mechanisms, lack of awareness of the situation, unrealistic expectations, inflated categorisation and incomplete correction, are theirs. The claim that the charge is thinking cut short is my reading of the fourth mechanism. The original demonstration of the bias is Jones and Harris, "The attribution of attitudes", Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 3, 1967, which I've confirmed by record only and haven't described in detail.

Chapter 4. Malle, "The actor-observer asymmetry in attribution: a (surprising) meta-analysis", Psychological Bulletin 132, 2006, pages 895 to 919. 173 published studies, average effect sizes near zero

overall, the asymmetry holding for negative events and reversing for positive ones. The claim that the reader has committed every kind of slip this week is my assumption and not a finding.

Chapter 5. Kruger, Epley, Parker and Ng, "Egocentrism over e-mail: can we communicate as well as we think?", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89, 2005, pages 925 to 936. Five experiments. The claim that tone is assigned by the reader rather than sent is my interpretation, as is the boring-voice test.

Chapter 7. Karney and Bradbury, "Attributions in marriage: state or trait? A growth curve analysis", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78, 2000, pages 295 to 309. Eight waves of data from newlywed couples. The three-part test for a pattern is mine.

Chapter 8. Klein Tuente, Bogaerts and Veling, "Hostile attribution bias and aggression in adults, a systematic review", *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 46, 2019, pages 66 to 81, as verified for the earlier book *Still true in twenty minutes*. 25 studies, mostly cross-sectional, so no direction of cause can be read from them. The description of the spiral in meetings is my illustration.

Chapter 9. No study is cited. The argument about unrecorded misses is my reasoning.

Chapter 10. Kruger and colleagues as above. The earlier book on expecting people to notice what you haven't said is *They can't read your mind*.

Chapter 11. The earlier book on the argument over who's right is *You don't have to win this one*.

Chapter 12. Gilbert and Malone as above. The claim that the charge feels uncontrollable because it's satisfying is my opinion.

Chapter 13. Bradbury and Fincham, "Attributions in marriage: review and critique", *Psychological Bulletin* 107, 1990, pages 3 to 33. Fincham, Harold and Gano-Phillips, "The longitudinal association between attributions and marital satisfaction: direction of effects and role of efficacy expectations", *Journal of Family Psychology* 14, 2000, pages 267 to 285. Couples married 15 to 20 months, followed over 18 months, cross-lagged effects in both directions for husbands and wives. Extending these to colleagues, siblings and friends is mine.

Chapter 14. The spiral referred to is described in *You don't have to win this one*, drawing on Kennedy and Pronin 2008 as verified for that book. The claim that predictions about people arrange the evidence is my interpretation.

Chapter 15. Kruger and colleagues as above. The earlier book on interrupting is *Let them finish*. The claims about who writes the shortest emails and about reputation are my observations.

Chapter 16. Epley, Savitsky and Gilovich, "Empathy neglect: reconciling the spotlight effect and the correspondence bias", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83, 2002, pages 300 to 312. Observers moderated their dispositional inferences when they could easily adopt the actor's perspective. Epley, Keysar, Van Boven and Gilovich, "Perspective taking as egocentric anchoring and adjustment", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 87, 2004, as verified for the earlier book *It wasn't about you*, is the basis for the claim that people adjust from their own view and stop early.

Chapters 17 to 19. The method is mine and hasn't been tested as a package.

Chapter 20. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. What I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 21. The signs of domestic abuse and the helpline numbers are from the NHS page "Getting help for domestic violence and abuse", read on 26 September 2026. The National Domestic Abuse Helpline is run by Refuge. The guidance on persistent suspicion is general and not drawn from a specific NHS page.

Chapter 22. No study is cited.

Looked up and not used. Gilbert, Pelham and Krull 1988 on cognitive busyness, which would support the claim that correction fails under load, but no abstract was available to me and I haven't relied on it. Ross, Greene and House 1977 on the false consensus effect, confirmed by record only and not described. Malle, Knobe and Nelson 2007 on actor-observer asymmetries, which supports Malle 2006 but adds nothing needed here. A 2026 meta-analysis of hostile interpretation bias and aggression in adults, 40 studies, which I saw only after the chapter was written and whose findings agree with Klein Tuente and colleagues.