To Err Is Human.

Book Description  We forget our passwords. We pay too much to go to the gym. We think we’d be happier if we lived in California (we wouldn’t), and we think we should stick with our first answer on tests (we shouldn’t). Why do we make mistakes? And could we do a little better? We human beings have design flaws. Our eyes play tricks on us, our stories change in the retelling, and most of us are fairly sure we’re way above average. In Why We Make Mistakes, journalist Joseph T. Hallinan sets out to explore the captivating science of human error--how we think, see, remember, and forget, and how this sets us up for wholly irresistible mistakes.

In his quest to understand our imperfections, Hallinan delves into psychology, neuroscience, and economics, with forays into aviation, consumer behavior, geography, football, stock picking, and more. He discovers that some of the same qualities that make us efficient also make us error prone. We learn to move rapidly through the world, quickly recognizing patterns--but overlooking details. Which is why thirteen-year-old boys discover errors that NASA scientists miss—and why you can’t find the beer in your refrigerator.

Why We Make Mistakes is enlivened by real-life stories--of weathermen whose predictions are uncannily accurate and a witness who sent an innocent man to jail--and offers valuable advice, such as how to remember where you’ve hidden something important. You’ll learn why multitasking is a bad idea, why men make errors women don’t, and why most people think San Diego is west of Reno (it’s not).
Why We Make Mistakes will open your eyes to the reasons behind your mistakes—and have you vowing to do better the next time.

A Q&A with Author Joseph T. Hallinan: Which Penny is Correct?

Question: We’ve seen pennies so many times—why is it so difficult to recognize which of these drawings accurately represents a penny?

Joseph T. Hallinan: Partly, it has to do with how our memory works. Our long-term memory, even for things we’ve seen thousands of times, is limited. Most of the time, we recall meaning but not surface details. It’s the same reason we remember faces, but not the names that go with them.

Q: Are there other real-world examples of this?

JTH: Sure. We just watched as Chief Justice John Roberts and President Barack Obama muffed the words to the Inaugural Oath—even though the oath has only 35 words and even though both men no doubt rehearsed it many times. It’s actually very hard to remember things verbatim. Take the National Anthem, for instance. You’ve sung it hundreds of times. But how many of the Anthem’s 81 words can you remember without singing it?

Q: How does this limitation lead to mistakes?

JTH: Because we think our memories are much better than they are, and rely on them more than we should. Consider how many times an eyewitness has mistakenly identified a criminal and you begin to see the significance of this type of error. Basically, we look but don’t always see.

Q: Alright then, we’ve waited long enough: which of the pennies above is the real McCoy?

JTH: That would be penny A. But when researchers conducted this experiment, fewer than half of the people in the study picked the right one.
This book covers some of the same behavioral economics territory considered in such recent books as Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions, Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness, and the Bronfman brothers' Sway: The Irresistible Pull of Irrational Behavior. There is also significant overlap with Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson's excellent Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts.

Joseph T. Hallinan's background is in journalism, not science, so this book is primarily a synthesis of the work of others. Hallinan won a Pulitzer during his time as a writer for the Wall Street Journal, and "Why We Make Mistakes" provides ample confirmation that he has the necessary writing chops. I think he does a spectacular job of synthesizing results of the relevant research. He's an unobtrusive but authoritative guide, steering the reader through the material with admirable clarity and focus. He has a journalist's talent for providing just the information needed to get the point across, often within the framework of a funny or thought-provoking example.

Basically, Hallinan does what we hope any good nonfiction writer will do - he provides a comprehensive, coherent summary of a relatively extensive body of research, drawn from a wide variety of sources. He not only makes it accessible to the general reader; the wit and verve with which he pulls it off make the book a delight to read.

To me, the most striking part of the book was the discussion of the phenomenon of overconfidence and its consequences. Think of it as the Lake Wobegon effect - as Hallinan puts it, "we all walk around with the private conceit that we are above average, and in that conceit lies the seed of many mistakes". Some of these mistakes can be catastrophic - as for instance when the overweening confidence of a handful of self-anointed financial "masters of the universe" proceeds unchecked to the point of triggering a complete meltdown of the financial sector. (A fascinating recent New Yorker article by Malcolm Gladwell makes a strong case that those executives whose errors of judgement were most instrumental in bringing about the meltdown still refuse to acknowledge that they did, in fact, make mistakes).

The potential for catastrophe is greatest in situations involving systems with a high degree of technological complexity where the price of failure is high - flying a commercial airliner, for example, or performing emergency trauma surgery. Possibly one of the most chilling results reported in the book is the percentage of survey respondents who agreed with the statement:

"Even when fatigued, I perform effectively during critical times"

Only 26% of pilots agreed. Among surgeons, the agreement rate was 70%.
Joseph T. Hallinan has written a fine book. I recommend it highly.

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Why We Make Mistakes: How We Look Without Seeing, Forget Things in Seconds, and Are All Pretty Sure We Are Way Above Average by Joseph T. Hallinan - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!