

Transcript for Srini Pillay | The Power of the Unfocused Mind (Episode 643)
Full show notes found here: <https://theartofcharm.com/643/>

SRINI: Most of us spend about 49.9 percent of our days daydreaming anyway. So, why not learn to unfocus in a more productive way?

JORDAN: Welcome to The Art of Charm. I'm Jordan Harbinger and I'm here with producer Jason DeFillippo. On this episode we're talking with Doctor Srini Pillay. He is a Harvard trained psychiatrist and a mainstream psychiatry expert who can help apply brain science to everyday psychological challenges to help deal with psychiatric issues, especially as they relate to stress and anxiety. There's a whole lot more to this guy other than that, of course, and that's what we're going to get to here on this episode of AoC.

Today we'll learn how focus and unfocus-- something he calls unfocus anyway -- work in the brain. Ninety to ninety-eight percent of mental activity is unconscious. Focus can only get you so far and we'll explore the unfocus side of things. We'll also explore how something called positive constructive daydreaming can help us become more creative and we'll discover the concept of possibility thinking. It sounds a little woo-woo but I promise it can help us solve seemingly intractable problems. There's a whole lot more here. We went a little bit long with Doctor Pillay and it was worth it. So, enjoy this episode of AoC with Doctor Srini Pillay.

The book is very much in line with what we teach here at AoC in that we're talking about a super power that everybody has but a lot of people have not yet discovered. And movies and comic books and things like that, of which Jason and I are of course, somewhat fans -- some people more than others, right Jason? There's a lot of superpowers involved in the human psyche and in the brain that we really don't know about and a lot of us think if we just try hard enough, if we just focus hard enough, maybe we can discover those or maybe we can hone those or maybe we can make those happen. And what I thought

was really interesting about [*Tinker Dabble Doodle Try*](#) was -- it's almost like trying less. There's a process to everything but it's a little bit like doing less, in certain ways, anyway, and getting more out of your brain. Can you speak to that?

SRINI:

Absolutely. I think that's a great summary of what the fundamental message is. And the reason I'm so committed to this message -- aside from a lot of subjective reasons -- is that if you ask most neuroscientists how much of brain activity is conscious, most people would probably say about two to ten percent, which means approximately 90 to 98 percent of mental activity is unconscious.

And so, if that's the case -- in most organizations and for most people, they dedicate all of their energy to the conscious stuff like, "Let me find a strategy," or, "Let me follow a plan," or, "Let me follow somebody else's structure on how to become successful," and that's just two percent of mental activity. So, I tell people that when we think about strategy or plan or any kind of, you know, three step process, that's really like a plant. But the plant really needs to have its roots in a very rich unconscious soil, and in order to do that, we need to learn how to till the soil of the unconscious so that the roots can really dig in deep, get a good hold, so that the plant can grow.

So, having a strategy is really important. Focusing is really important, but if you're really looking to make a major change in your life, potentially in an exponential way, then learning how to till the soil of the unconscious, is where I think the action is and this book is about learning how to till the soil of the unconscious.

JORDAN:

When you say concrete strategies, can you define what that means in comparison to unconcrete strategies?

SRINI:

Sure. So you know, like a lot of times, if you ask somebody, "Well how do I make \$100,000 more?" or "How do I make a million dollars more?" a lot of people would say, "Well, this is what you need to do. You need to identify what your mission is, then you

need to identify some kind of plan, set out a strategy and execute on that plan, set bench marks and move towards your goal." Well, a lot of studies show that generally, that doesn't really work. In fact, even for the prominent businesses, only 30 percent of strategies are successfully executed, and of those that are, most CEOs believe that they're too slow.

So, we know that having a plan is important, but having a plan is essentially like having a car. You still need to have the fuel in the car, which as you said, is the super power which I call ingenuity or psychological center of gravity. And so I think for a lot of people -- and I've seen this a lot in my coaching practice, and I've seen it a lot in my psychiatry practice as well -- you know, people are pretty smart when it comes to figuring out a 10 step process to get somewhere or a plan to go from A to B, but over the years it's really surprised me that despite the fact that people have very significant plans --and a lot of them actually execute in those plans -- they don't even get close to where they want to get to.

And part of that -- a lot of recent brain imaging has shown that when people say, "I need to do X,Y, or Z to get somewhere," they do the thing but the thing they forget about is the "I." The unfocus circuits in the brain are actually largely responsible for the sense of self and self-awareness. So, if you want to follow a strategy, to focus on the you part, unfocus really needs to be part of what's being activated.

JORDAN: Okay, so we have to use these different -- it's not necessarily a different section of the brain, it's actually -- the spaces in between is kind of what you talk about in the book. You mention forks versus spoons. Can you discuss that? That was really interesting to me and the visual, I think, makes this make a lot more sense to guys like me.

SRINI: Sure thing. So when you focus, and again I want to emphasize I think focusing is very important. If I didn't focus on the time of this interview, I wouldn't have come to the computer at this time.

JORDAN: Right.

SRINI: If I'm not listening to your questions, then I'm going to be in some lala land. So focusing is extremely important. When you focus and focus and focus, essentially the parts of your identity that area being represented, are metaphorically the parts of your identity that can be picked up by a fork. So, it's a little bit like your LinkedIn profile. What's your name? What's your age? If you feel like you're gender specific, what that is. What kind of work you do, where you've worked -- it's sort of all the concrete stuff about you. But, when the unfocus circuits are turned on, then the brain metaphorically invited other utensils to the table.

So the brain will invite, for example, a spoon to pick up the delicious melange of flavors of identity that need to be present in any mission. For example, the scent of your grandmother or the smell of apple pie on a crisp fall day. It may seem like it has nothing to do with finishing a project, but if all of these subtle elements of yourself are not present, your actual whole, authentic self is weakened. In addition to inviting the spoon to the table, the brain also invited chopsticks, which metaphorically connect ideas across the brain.

So, most human beings are filled with paradoxes. People are maybe introverts and also incredibly powerful. People may feel like they're happy, but they're also lonely. And in our day to day activity, we tend to polarize how we are. But when you stimulate the unfocus circuits, then these two sides of yourself get represented at the same time and that allows you to be much more powerful in executing your actions. In addition to that, the unfocus circuits also metaphorically invite a marrow spoon to the table. So it digs into all the nooks and crannies of your memory circuits, finds memories and fragments about who you are, and represents that as well.

So all of a sudden, with focus alone, you have pretty much your LinkedIn profile, which for most people, it's not really who you

are. It's what you've done and it's your qualifications, but you don't really get a sense of who this person is. When you invite all the other stuff that comes with the spoon and the chopsticks and the marrow spoon, now you're talking. Because now you're talking about the fact that you are operating with your strengths, your vulnerabilities, a set of memories that feels more complete, and you have much more data at your disposal. So, what I say to people is in general, while focus is important, if you focus throughout the day, you will be missing out in the richness of yourself.

And if you look at a lot of very successful people -- like, some people will say things like, "Oh, my God, I can't believe they're so obnoxious," or, "Why is that person so anxious?" or, "Why is that person not socially fluent," or lots of critiques. They don't know how to come across as a fluent, non-conflictual person. Well that's because they've got a lot of themselves online at any one point in time. And so, I would say to anyone who's listening to this -- ask yourself, is there something about you and who you are that's not being represented in your life right now and would unfocus -- meaning moving away from your day to day activities -- help you to build that in?

JORDAN: How do we know if there's something that's not being represented in our lives right now? How do we know if there's something where -- is it a feeling we get? Like, "Oh, I'm in my career and I'm doing well but there's something missing." I mean, where are we looking for this? If we need a marrow spoon to get it, we might not readily be able to point it out without some sort of guidance.

SRINI: Absolutely. So because a lot of this activity is unconscious, it's not something that's going to readily appear to your mind. So, one of the things we want to hypothesize is if things are going a little too slowly, if you're not able to make as much money as you want in a certain amount of time and you feel like, "You know, the thing looks okay but I really don't like the speed at which this is happening."

If you hit a wall, if you want a relationship and you're finding, "You know, I'm a pretty okay person. Why am I not meeting anybody and what am I doing that's standing in my way?" So basically, if there's any slowing down, hitting walls, not reaching your goal, or finding yourself making mistakes over and over again, you want to begin to suspect that perhaps there are obstacles in your way, and then you hypothesize about that and try out some of these interventions so that you can improve the way in which your brain works and strengthen your sense of self.

JORDAN:

So this stuff is really important because it is informed by science. There's a lot of hype in this area, there's a lot of woo-woo in this area where it's like -- it would be very easy to say, "Well okay, if something is missing in your life then unfocus -- here's a book that teaches you how to do it, it's only 20 bucks," right? It just seems like you can crawl down that path or slip and fall down that path pretty easily when it comes to this subject area.

So, you mention that there are certain interventions that we might need to take if we're feeling a certain way or not seeing a certain type of result, we might find that unfocus will help us. Can you give us something that we can try so that we can say, "Okay, maybe I think I'm not quite getting ahead in my career, or maybe I'm good in my career but my coworkers don't like me or something like that and I don't really know why. Maybe this is something unfocus can help me with." Where do we begin with the process concretely or unconcretely?

SRINI:

So the first thing I'll say is that most of us spend about 46.9 percent of our days daydreaming anyway. So, why not learn to unfocus in a more productive way? Now when I first say to people, "Let's figure out how you're going to unfocus," because they're so freaked out about reaching their goals, they're all like, "What are you talking about? That's the thing I hate. I hate being distracted, I hate not reaching my goals."

JORDAN:

Mm-hmm.

SRINI: And I say unfocus is not about distraction, it's about -- in order to start slowly, identify those points in your day when you're in a natural slump anyway. So for a lot of people it's either mid morning or after lunch. Mid afternoon is a big one or at the end of the day. Because most people are living their days with focus fatigue and so that's the end of that. So the brain starts off in this really great optimal capacity, and then goes lower and lower and lower. However, if you go focus, unfocus, focus, unfocus, you're replenishing your brain throughout the day so everything that you're doing, whether it's at 8 o'clock or 10 o'clock or after lunch, your brain is getting replenished and you're actually using more of your brain.

Now, in order to think about some of these techniques, I'll mention a couple of more concrete ones first and if we want to get funky and get more abstract afterwards, we can do that as well. So the first technique I'll mention is positive constructive daydreaming, which has been studied by Jerome Singer since the 1950s. Now, the very mention of the word daydreaming sounds kind of strange. It's like, what are you talking about? How is that going to help me?

JORDAN: Right, it doesn't sound super productive, if I had to point out one thing my teachers hated about me in school -- of the many -- it was that I did a lot of daydreaming while I was supposed to be focused instead.

SRINI: So, Jerome Singer found that if you slip into a daydream, that's not helpful. And if you are constantly ruminating, that's not helpful, but what is helpful is if you engage in positive constructive daydreaming. Three things to remember about how this is different from the regular kind of daydreaming -- the first thing is plan it for about 15 minutes at one of these slump times, where you'd be out of it anyway.

The second thing is be doing something low key like walking or gardening, potentially something like knitting, because studies show if you try this daydreaming when you're doing nothing, it

doesn't work as well. You have to be doing something lowkey. The third thing is in order to initiate it, you think of attention like a flashlight which basically points outwards. The whole day we're perceiving the world, right, with our sense organs. Now, if you take that flashlight and point it inwards, basically start wandering through your mind, you initiate positive constructive daydreaming by starting with a vision that is positive and wishful and potentially creative.

So positive and wishful, something like lying on a yacht -- if you have a dream about something, going into a tennis court, if you want to be really big minded about it -- the butler bringing out drinks to you once you're finished. Or if you feel like for you it's something like running through the woods with your dogs, you start with that. And your mind then starts wandering but what's interesting about this from a scientific perspective is that studies show that what we consider to be mind wandering is not just some random process that's occurring, that actually the lateral cortex which is part of the guiding brain is guiding your brain to actually find something of relevance.

Now, what positive constructive daydreaming does -- Singer has shown this and since then it's been shown in a number of studies -- is that it improves your creativity. Because, prior to that, your focus mind is just going in very specific ways. It's not making connections across the brain. But when you're daydreaming and your mind is wandering -- it goes a little bit to the right, a little bit to the left, collects a little bit from here -- and so you start mixing and matching things and ideas and new ideas are born. So, first thing I would say in terms of interventions, is consider positive constructive daydreaming, build it into a 15 minute period, do those three things, meaning decide when you're going to do it, have playful or wishful imagery while you are doing something low key and you'll have that covered.

The second thing, which I think is pretty easy, is about five to fifteen minutes of napping. So there are a lot of big companies that have now actually instituted napping pods and napping

rooms because they recognize that people are actually more productive after napping. Studies have shown that about five to fifteen minutes of napping can give you one to three hours of clarity and we all know what that feeling is like after lunch. After lunch everything feels like you want to close your eyes, you feel like it's siesta time, you're in a food coma, you can't quite concentrate -- so, one of the things to think about is, "Well, why don't I actually just take a nap? Because if I'm going to be out of it, why not actually be out of it in a way that's going to be productive for my brain?" And other studies have shown that 60 to 90 minutes of napping is what is needed for the brain to become more creative because when you're napping in that state, you're activating REM sleep and doing the deeper sleep, you're able to bring ideas together and form these more creative ideas.

The third sort of more superficial technique I'll mention is doodling, probably another thing that your teachers would have shouted at you about.

JORDAN: Sure, absolutely. Yes.

SRINI: It's like, "Jordan, pay attention. Why are you scribbling on a piece of paper?" A lot of people attempted to this in conference calls, right? So, in the book, what I do is I describe some of the research and the rationale behind this. But Jackie Andrade and her colleagues did a study in which they showed -- they asked two groups of people -- one group that doodled, and another group that didn't doodle -- to listen to a very boring message. And because it was so boring it was hard to retain the information. And they asked them to then recall eight names and eight places and what they found was that doodling improved memory by 29 percent, which is a pretty startling finding. And if you try to understand why, there are two things that are going on.

When you're scribbling on a piece of paper, it's not just your conscious focus brain that's at work, your unconscious is at work and the unconscious -- as we know -- shuttles around

memories and makes connections and makes associations, so it's going to allow you to remember better. But metaphorically, the way to think about this is that when you're doodling and you're not in a hyperfocused state, your brain is more like an absorbent sponge, so when it gets the information, the information is retained. Whereas, when you're stiff and super focused, you may be paying attention, but actually it's very difficult to remember information. One of the things to remember about focus -- and this is one of the many disadvantages of focus -- is that focus can deplete the thinking brain of energy.

So, this phenomenon has been studied a lot. It's called self regulation depletion. The authors who have studied this have found for example, if you ask two sets of people to watch a video and one group stares at the video, whereas the other group just looks at the video as usual, the group that's super focusing on the video, afterwards, if you ask them a moral question like, "What would you do to save these people," they couldn't care less. Whereas the people who are not focusing, have enough energy that they think about it and if you give glucose to the group that's focusing, they start to care again. So, we want to remember that there's some advantage to not being super stiff when you're trying to absorb information.

I think to remember this clearly, if you watch -- tennis is something that I love, and I think a lot of times you'll see great players -- when they tighten up, they can't really play well. They're not in the flow state anymore, they're not activating what they want to activate. In fact, you know, Roger Federer did so well this year and everyone's talking about the fact that for tennis -- he's 36 years old, he won the Australian Open, he won Wimbledon, and someone asked his coach, "Well what does he feel about IBM Watson stats?" and he was like, "Roger doesn't look at the stats." And they're like, "Why?" He said, "He specifically says 'I don't want to look at the stats. I don't want to stiffen up and think well, if I'm going on my forehand, I'm going to do this or my backhand. I play tennis well enough. I want to be in that flow state most of the time.'"

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: It sounds to me like one of the key concepts for me that would apply is the idea that focus really is very specific and very conscious. So, if I'm looking at a shelf full of LEGOs, and I think I know what I want to build, a focused mind would go, "All right, here's a little LEGO guy, here's four little LEGO tires, here's a flat part that's going to be the bottom of the car, here's the windshield piece," and I'm picking those pieces out, whereas the unfocused mind would just kind of reach out, grab handfuls of these and an armful of these LEGOs, rip all of them off of the shelf, and then go, "All right, I've got a bunch of LEGOs in front of me. Wow, I can build a whole lot of things. I don't have to build a car. There's a lot of things here. Or, I can build a car that's three stories tall and has 15 people in it or a car that can fly because I've got some wings here."

And so this unfocus really gives you a lot more to play with -- to beat this metaphor to death -- in that you can really get some different ideas put together based on what your unfocused mind is able to dredge up from your brain that you would not have seen had you specifically looked for just what you thought you wanted at the time.

SRINI: Absolutely. You know I think another really important paper on the unfocus circuit was a paper that basically had the words 'crystal ball' in it. The first time I came across it I was like, "Is this like real science? It sounds nonsensical." And when I read through the paper, what I found was that it was totally sensible because for us to do anything, there are small predictions and big predictions, right? So small predictions would be, if you're looking at your navigator and you're looking at where the traffic patterns are or, if you're lying on a beach and you're looking at clouds coming your way and you're like, "Uh-oh. There's going to be a storm." Your brain can put together this information and start to create prediction circuits.

But there are people, like Ray Kurzweil for example, who are just notorious or really well known for making predictions about the future of technology that most people are like, "What? How did this guy figure this out? What is he doing to make this happen?" Well, in our brains, the unfocus circuits are the prediction circuits because in order to create a prediction formula, you need to have the right data so that the brain can process this and crunch the data, and then figure out, "What's the likelihood of something happening?" Well, to have the right data, you need that marrow spoon to be digging in the nooks and crannies so that it can find all the little bits of information that you couldn't otherwise find.

There was one author who described why Kurzweil is so successful at this and said that while the rest of us are mucking around in the mud trying to figure out how to get up, Kurzweil rises above the mud and has a completely different perspective because he's not stuck in focus, he's moving around and looking at the world from different angles. And when you look at the world from different angles, you get more data from different angles and this actually helps your prediction circuits. So, the unfocus circuits are also really important for prediction as well.

JORDAN: That's interesting, I wouldn't have necessarily thought that because it seems like prediction involves creativity in a way, but it sounds like what you're saying is this type of unfocus can actually make us more creative, is that possible?

SRINI: That's correct, absolutely. It can make us more creative and it also makes us more agile, right? Think about the way the workforce is today or how jobs are changing all the time. I see a lot of kids who are coming out of college or people who are trying to figure out careers. They're like, "I don't know what to do. The moment I think about this technology, it's changed to that." I think about this and a lot of people in the workforce are saying, "Yeah, you know, it's one thing to talk about agility but how am I going to catch up?" Well we can't catch up if we're stiff and super focused. We have to figure out how to relax so that

we can gather more data and change with the times as we need to, while still being productive at every phase in which we're invested.

And at some point it gets really frustrating because if you're someone who wants to be hunkered down and focused, the first time you're like, "Okay, that's irritating." The second time you're like, "Okay, that's super irritating." The third time you're like, "I'm exhausted. I don't even want to do this. I'm so bummed out because I can't get to where I want to get to because things keep changing." Whereas, if you have someone whose mind is flexible, and agile and on the move, they're like, "Uh-oh, looks like I've got to go this way. Uh-oh, it looks like I've got to go this way." That doesn't mean you have to be a dilettante, it doesn't mean you have to go whichever way the wind blows, it means that for the time that you're in, you can be in, but when you see the signals for change, you can be responsive to those signals for change.

One related concept to this is the whole idea of thinking across fields as well. I had a question this morning from the media saying, "How do you defend yourself if you've been job hopping?" Like, you know, if someone's like, "Oh, so you're applying for this job? You went there for one year, there for another year, there for another year -- how do we know you're going to stay here?"

JORDAN: Right.

SRINI: One of the things I said was, "Well, you can actually say that every step of the way you learned more about yourself and more of what you wanted and you feel like where you're ending up is much closer to where you want to be, which is where you're going to be engaged. But you can also say that you can learn a lot across fields and across domains." The two examples I mention in the book are examples that are close to my heart. One is Einstein and the fact that he had a think tank and he followed the theories of Poincare who was a famous mathematician who was absolutely brilliant.

And so they would discuss these mathematical theories of Poincare but Poincare was a realist, meaning he never asked the question, "What if this was possible?" He was like, "What do I see? Whatever the data is, I can see." And so he ended his theory where he stopped seeing data. Einstein, on discussing Poincare's theories -- and mathematics was not even Einstein's primary discipline -- actually asked the question, "What's possible?" by borrowing information from another field was able to come up with the theory of relativity. And what's so cool about that time was that Picasso, who was an artist who had his own group of avant garde literati. They were talking about math because they wanted to understand what are the principles of math that could inspire art? On hearing about the fourth dimension, Picasso created one of his most famous paintings Le Demoiselles d'Avignon, which represented a woman in two dimensions, and from this cubist art was born.

So, Steve Jobs is the other famous example of someone who took a calligraphy class -- had no idea why he was taking this calligraphy class but this came to use several years later when he was developing fonts for Apple. I say to those people who are feeling lost and those people who are feeling like, "I don't know what to do and I don't know where my real passion is," recognize that you can be engaged in something of interest, switch fields, and make connections. And the more you learn how to use this unfocus brain, the easier it will be to make connections across different disciplines.

JORDAN:

That sounds a lot like what Scott Adams, the creator of Gilbert had mentioned when he talked about skill stacking. I don't know if you've heard this term but it's essentially -- his idea is that, look, if you want to be in the 99th percentile as a physicist, that's really hard. But, if you want to be in the 75th percentile as a physicist, it's a lot easier. But if you want to be a 75th percentile physicist and a 75th percentile oil painter and a 75th percentile computer coder, you can mash those together into some kind of creative work that the 95th or 99th percentile physicist cannot or wouldn't even think to do. And then

suddenly you're unique and you're a specialist and you're the 100th percentile physicist, computer coder, oil painter, because you're the only one, right? And so you become much more versatile, valuable, and creative based on the intersection of those disciplines that you choose to pursue without becoming the Srinii Pillay of the field.

SRINI: Yeah, absolutely. I mean I'm not sure about the Srinii Pillay part but I think that --

JORDAN: You're welcome.

SRINI: Because I think the whole point of the book is connecting with your own ingenuity, right?

JORDAN: Yeah.

SRINI: I actually had somebody challenge me on this recently talking about this because I do a lot of different things, right? Besides psychiatry and coaching, I work in biotechnology, I'm writing a musical right now --

JORDAN: Wow.

SRINI: I'm doing a lot of different things. And so when I was sitting with a friend of mine and he was like, "So what are your financial goals?" I said, "Well you know, I don't really have a goal right now because I'm trying to figure out how all of this fits together. I want my musical to be a combination of brain science, music, and technology."

JORDAN: Mm-hmm.

SRINI: So I have a few tech startups that I'm working on. I want them to come together. People think this all sounds so desperate but it doesn't feel that desperate to me. And he laughed and he said, "Oh, you definitely don't want to be a billionaire," and I said, "Why is that?" and he's like, "Oh, because you're not focused on one project." And I said, "Well, firstly it's not true that I don't

want to be a billionaire." I can't even imagine having that thought. "I don't want to be a billionaire."

JORDAN: I don't need that money.

SRINI: Right, yeah. But at the same time, I think partly through my own mistakes and also through watching the mistakes of my clients in psychotherapy and in coaching, that if you don't live your life as close as possible to your own terms, or at least don't strive to increase your own terms in your life, you actually feel really lost because you don't have what I call this mental six-pack, right? It's like if you're doing any kind of physical exercise, you need to have a strong core if you're going to move anything.

You can't only develop your biceps and have no core, because at some point a lot of the strength is coming from your core. Similarly, the unfocus circuits are what will build this mental six-pack that you need, because that contributes heavily to your sense of self. And so when you make mistakes, they're your mistakes and you learn from them. You're not making somebody else's mistake. And just to make the point about this, for me one of the inspiring stories that I told in the book was the story about the one laptop for all project, which is a bunch of laptops were given to kids in Ethiopia, who had never even seen any technology. And so the question was, "What are they going to do with this? Are they going to eat it? Are they going to sit on it? Are they going to lick it?"

JORDAN: Right.

SRINI: Like, you know, if you've never seen technology, you're not going to necessarily think, "Let me press a button."

JORDAN: Right, "Let me cook food on this thing, maybe. I'll put it over a fire and roast a duck on it or something," yeah.

SRINI: Right. But what they found was that within a couple minutes they found the on/off switch -- a couple days it was singing

ABC songs. I can't remember the exact period of time but they eventually hacked Android. They asked, "How do kids who know nothing about technology learn how to hack Android?" and so my feeling about this is that while education plays a vital role in helping us acquire knowledge and it gives us a vital set of skills to understand things, you can't let education lead you. You've got to use your education to your advantage.

And I tried this as an experiment with a group of executive coaches who are very high-powered in their fields -- wanted to learn how to apply brain based coach into their work. I had a piece of technology and I said, "Okay, I'm going to give you 30 minutes. Let's see what happens." Nobody went anywhere. They said, "Where's the instruction manual?" It was like, you don't need an instructional manual to work. Imagine if kids were like, "I'm not going to walk. No way. You need to tell me step by step how to do this." And so I think we've become obsessed with this question of how. On the one hand, I like providing frameworks, I like saying, "These are the five ways you can move blood from your fear center to your thinking brain." People know that, they can do those exercises, and it's cool.

On the other hand, I feel less interested in being an advice giver and more interested in being a wisdom activator. And so, a lot of what I want to share with you and anyone that's listening to this today is that the answers really are often within ourselves and we're duped by this notion that perception is accurate, because if you look at any scientific study you will see that visual illusions abound. The way the brain constructs information is completely nonsensical. You give it three pieces, it'll just fill in the gaps however it wants to fill stuff up. You know, we construct narratives about our lives that are completely unreliable. Our memories -- we're convinced by them.

The information that comes from external perception is helpful but it is often very off. And so, it makes sense that we'd want to integrate this with some kind of internal movement to discover

these other aspects of consciousness. And I think to those people that are saying, "Well, that's great but what do I do?" I would say the very first thing I would ask you to do is think a little bit like a scientist. I call this possibility thinking and if you're stuck and if you don't know where to go in life and you don't know what your next career move should be, or you don't know how to get to the next income level, ask yourself, "If this were possible, what would I need to do?" Because most people spend their time saying, "I don't see any way I can make this money so it must not be possible," but when you say something is not possible, your brain says, "Thank you, good night. I'm going to sleep."

JORDAN: Right, yeah.

SRINI: No need to try.

JORDAN: Case closed. Wash your hands of the whole thing.

SRINI: Right. If you say something is possible, your brain stays online and if you compare these to placebo studies, what's going to happen is you're going to get more dopamine in your brain, so you're going to feel super jazzed and rewarded and you're also going to get more opioids in your brain, so you're also going to feel more relaxed. And who doesn't want to feel relaxed and motivated at the same time?

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: It sounds nice. I think there's a lot of people in Silicon Valley that spend all day chasing something like that.

SRINI: Right. So I think possibility thinking is one of those things that can really get us jump started. I always ask people, "Do you want to live an exceptional life?" And they're all like, "Everyone says yes." And you say, "By definition, an exception is outside the norm, which means the norm is high probability, and the exception is low probability. Now, when you want to live an exceptional life, what you're telling me is you want to live a low

probability life. So don't ask me how likely is this because that's not the question we want to ask."

JORDAN: Right, the answer is not very likely, by definition. Right.

SRINI: That's right. What we want to do instead is ask, "What's possible?" What do the exceptions do? Is there any person in the world who at one point was making 50 grand a year who ended up making \$50 million? There are plenty of examples, right?

JORDAN: Sure. Yeah, of course, there have to be. I don't have any on deck but I guarantee you that there are.

SRINI: Is there anybody who was 300 pounds who ended up being 180 pounds? Absolutely. Is there anybody who was single until they were 60 and then found somebody? Sure. These are not the rules, these are the exceptions. So we want to learn how to reflect on the exceptions, understand the exceptions, and then not be afraid to live outside the norm.

So studies show that people who consider themselves normal are conscientious and they're hard working and people tend to like the whole normal thing. But the problem is they lack one vital element which is called openness to experience. And when you lack openness to experience -- which is a well studied criterion -- then you lack creativity and you lack the ability to get yourself out of a jam. Because then you're like, "I work so hard. I don't know what to do," because you're not open to the possibility of being like the exception. And that's another kind of unfocus because most people do not spend any time in their days -- you ask anybody. I did this as an exercise once with my friends. I said, "How often do you sit down and literally have a thought like, 'What's possible for me in my life?'" And most people are like, "I'm too busy to think about what's possible."

JORDAN: Right, yeah.

SRINI: It's like, "Well don't say your brain is dumb. Your brain is not dumb, you're just not feeding it the right information. You're not asking it what's possible."

JORDAN: It is interesting to see this in action. I was visiting my cousin in New York a couple of months ago and he said something really strange to me. We're from Michigan, he grew up in a rural area of Michigan, I grew up in a less rural area -- suburban Michigan. I said, "Yeah man, you live in New York now. This is crazy. The whole family still lives in Michigan," and he goes, "Yeah, you know, once you moved out, I just thought, "Wow, I guess we can move out of Michigan. So I moved to California. My girlfriend was From New York and I thought, 'Well that's cool. I'll go visit New York,' and now I live in New York." and I thought, "Yeah, that's how that works." And he's like, "Yeah, but you don't understand. I had never thought for one second that I would not live in Michigan when I grew up."

That's the reason I probably think about it is because I was an exchange student when I was in high school and I moved to Germany and so, "Of course I could live anywhere. I live in Germany and I'm in high school. What's next for me?" and everybody else in the family had just never left Michigan -- didn't leave until after college. And then once he did it, my other cousin moved, and then another cousin moved, and another cousin moved, and of course the family is like, "Thanks a lot, Jordan. All the kids are gone."

SRINI: Yeah.

JORDAN: But nobody had really thought of it and I guarantee you I wouldn't have thought of it had I not schlepped off to another country at such a young age.

SRINI: Yeah, I think that totally makes a difference and it's funny because it's those physical moves that can often change the way you think. There's a whole field of neuroscience called embodied cognition. When you move, you actually change the way your mind works. In fact, one of the unfocus techniques

that I talk about in *Tinker* is the technique of walking. So studies show that if you walk outside, it's more helpful for creativity than if you walk on a treadmill. So you maybe losing calories on the treadmill but it's not going to help your creativity as much as walking outside.

And the second fact about walking is that if you walk on a meandering path, you are much more likely to be more creative than if you walk around the block or if you walk in a rectangle. So you're talking about to travel all that time and space away -- I'm talking about meandering. It's somewhere else and you're discovering something. You have to rely on your ingenuity in a new place. I totally relate to that. In many ways in life, I find myself stuck as well. So it's not like because I know all these things, I can just pull this all off in two minutes and just do that. The process of life is a process of continuous learning.

I'm from South Africa and I'm from a pretty rough neighborhood -- grew up in that neighborhood, very loving family, so it was like getting my feet powdered while there were gunshots outside the flat.

JORDAN: Really?

SRINI: Yeah.

JORDAN: That's crazy. Look at that juxtaposition.

SRINI: So it was kind of like watching a ballerina on my mother's powder puff sort of go around to Chopin and hearing those sounds outside. But I always had a dream and I always felt like there was a way to get out of there. I remember standing at a conference and it was after medical school. I saw this guy talk on a topic of water intoxication. I was just completely -- I nerded out on it. I was like, "Oh, my God. This guy is unbelievable. I want to talk to him." But you know that feeling you get when you really want to talk to someone and then it didn't happen.

Disappointed, I walked outside, waited for a car to pick me up, and he came and stood next to me. I don't know what got into me. I can theorize about this. But, I looked at him and I said, "I just came to your talk. It was really amazing," and then I said, "Can you tell me something that will change my life?" That's not a specific question I ask anybody in general. He looked at me, he was a bit taken aback and he said, "Well, what are you interested in?" and I said, "Well, I'm really interested in studying the brain science behind mood changes," and he said, "Well," -- you know at that time, apartheid had not dissolved in South Africa. He was like, "Well, I work at the University of Stellenbosch. A scholarship is due tomorrow, we've never given it to a person of color, and we've never given it to anyone interested in studying psychiatry. So, why don't you fax it over to me? I'll walk it over to the committee. That's a possibility, right?" I said, "Yeah. Well, thanks."

JORDAN: What were you thinking right then? What were you thinking? Where you like, "I'm going to do this," or were you like, "There's no way this is going to work but I'll just do it anyway."

SRINI: What I remember was not feeling like, "There's no way this is going to work." I was kind of excited beyond my dreams to have that opportunity. And I think like a lot of people who want to be successful, I have selective forgetting. So, it's probably many times that I've tried things and they didn't work. But in this particular instance, I faxed it over and I was like, "Well, if it works, it works. That would be great." He got it, walked it over, called me, and said, "Guess what? Congratulations. You just won the scholarship. It's a first time." And so I made this move to another province and from there was where I called Harvard in a whim and was just like -- I'm sitting here in a small dorm room in South Africa thinking, "Boy wouldn't it be great to be at Harvard?" And I called to speak to the head of Harvard, because I didn't know who to speak to and --

JORDAN: Yeah.

SRINI:

-- got through several exchanges and eventually got to the head of psychiatry then got to the head of medical psychiatry. He told me later, "I thought you were crazy but I had to say the decent thing so I said, 'Send me your CV and a note and we'll circulate it and see what happens.'" And there too, a couple weeks later, I got a FedEx. First I had an interview and then I got a FedEx and it said, "Welcome to Harvard," and I was like, "This is weird, right?" Because they're probably -- and yes, I needed to have the grades to get in, blah blah, but there probably were a lot of students around the world who had those grades to get in. But the thing that makes a difference is whether you bother to believe something is possible.

And so, one of the reasons I say that this doesn't always work is that -- you know being an entrepreneur I'm rejected many more times than I am accepted on a day to day basis. My email box is filled with emails that make me mildly ill from the morning to the evening. But, at the same time, when I think about this theory of [positive disintegration](#), which this Polish psychiatrist Dabrowski came up with.

He studied people and said that people who are successful, are the people who realize that when they feel like their lives are coming apart, they're coming apart for a reason. Because the puzzle pieces need to be reconstituted so you can strengthen your life and develop a higher level of life again. Those who give up when they come apart, don't realize that the opportunity is to put themselves together again. I think that's what keeps me going and I think that's what keeps most people I've seen -- who persevere -- going. Our brains do have a way of reconstructing information and the unfocus circuit is the path to that.

JORDAN:

This is so great, Srini. Thank you so much Doctor Srini Pillay. The book is called [Tinker, Dabble, Doodle, Try](#). We'll link to it in the show notes. Thank you.

Great big thank you to Doctor Srini Pillay. The book title is [Tinker, Dabble, Doodle, Try](#). Of course that will be linked up in

the show notes for this episode. If you enjoyed this one, don't forget to thank Doctor Pillay on Twitter. We'll have that linked in the show notes as well. Tweet at me your number one takeaway from Doctor Srimi Pillay. I'm @theartofcharm on Twitter. As usual, we'll be replying to your questions and feedback for Doctor Pillay on Fan Mail Friday. If you're looking for the show notes, tap your phone screen. They should pop right up. Of course you can find this by going to theartofcharm.com/643.

I also want to encourage you to join us in the AoC challenge. You can find that at theartofcharm.com/challenge or by texting "AoC," that's A-O-C to 38470. 38470. The challenge is about improving your networking skills, improving your connection skills, inspiring those around you to develop a personal and professional relationship with you. It is free, a lot of people don't know that but that's free. It's the idea. It's a fun way to start the ball rolling, get some forward momentum -- we'll also email you our fundamentals Toolbox that I mentioned earlier on the show. That includes some great practical stuff, ready to apply, right out of the box, on reading body language, nonverbal communication, the science of attraction, negotiation techniques, networking and influence strategies, persuasion tactics, and everything else that we teach here at The Art of Charm. It'll make you a better connector, it'll make you a better networker, and of course it'll make you a better thinker. That's at theartofcharm.com/challenge or text 'AoC,' to 38470.

For full show notes for this and all previous episodes, head on over to theartofcharm.com/podcast. This episode of AoC was produced by Jason DeFillippo, Jason Sanderson is our audio engineer and editor, show notes on the website are by Robert Fogarty, theme music by Little People, transcription by TranscriptionOutsourcing.net, I'm your host Jordan Harbinger -- if you can think of anyone who might benefit from the episode you've just heard, please pay AoC the highest compliment and pay it forward by sharing this episode with that person. It only takes a moment and great ideas are meant to be shared. So share the show with your friends, share the

show with your enemies, stay charming, and leave everything
and everyone better than you found them.

