



Life in English Podcast

Transcript

&

Key Vocabulary

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Life in English Podcast | Episode #171 - What is the Action Bias?

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Episode #171 - What is the Action Bias?

Feb 1, 2022

Tony Kaizen: [00:00:00] What's up, my friend? You are listening to the Life in English podcast. I'm your host, Tony Kaizen, and today I'm going to tell you about a mental issue that is almost certainly making your life harder than it needs to be. And that issue is the "action **bias**¹".

Tony Kaizen: [00:00:20] The term "action bias" refers to our **tendency**² to prefer action to **inaction**³, even if there's no **evidence**⁴ that doing something is better than doing nothing. You know those situations when you feel **helpless**⁵ and you say, "Well, I can't just sit here and do nothing." That is the action bias at work.

Tony Kaizen: [00:00:38] So how does it affect us? Well, on an individual level, it causes us to waste time and energy doing things that have absolutely no positive impact on the situation. In fact, there are times when our **impulsive**⁶ need to act ends up making the situation worse. An example I'm sure most of us have experienced is when we're stuck in a traffic jam on the freeway. I mean, you know

¹ an unfair personal opinion that influences your judgment

² if someone has a tendency to do or like something, they will probably do it or like it

³ failure to do anything that might provide a solution to a problem

⁴ one or more reasons for believing that something is or is not true

⁵ unable to do anything to help yourself or anyone else

⁶ showing behavior in which you do things suddenly without any planning and without considering the effects they may have

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how it is. Every single car is going three miles per hour at most. Countless cars are trying to **merge**⁷ onto the freeway and every time traffic stops or someone tries to merge, some jackass feels the need to **honk**⁸ his horn repeatedly, as if that's somehow going to make the situation better.

Tony Kaizen: [00:01:17] The action bias **compels**⁹ this **jackass**¹⁰ to honk his horn because the idea of doing nothing in such a frustrating situation is unacceptable to him. He says to himself, "I bet if I just keep honking the horn, the entire freeway will **part**¹¹ like the Red Sea, and I'll be able to drive straight home." But what usually happens is the jackass gets **cut off**¹² in traffic, he honks his horn **excessively**¹³, then he sees that the honking is doing nothing but by that time, he's already angry and possessed by his need to act so he **furiously**¹⁴ follows the car that cut him off until it stops. Then he gets out of his car and tries to attack the driver, for example:

Reporter: [00:01:58] "Houston police got a call shortly before 9 am. Investigators say a man was driving this white truck down Airport Boulevard near Mykawa when a red truck cut him off. They say the man in the white truck then tried to catch up to

⁷ to combine or join together, or to cause things to do this

⁸ if a goose or a car horn honks, it makes a short, loud sound

⁹ to produce a strong feeling or reaction

¹⁰ a silly, stupid person

¹¹ to separate or cause something or someone to separate

¹² to suddenly move your car sideways in front of another car that was in front of you, leaving too little space

¹³ in a way that is too much

¹⁴ in a very angry way

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the red truck, but witnesses told police he caught up to the wrong red truck and he began following the truck. Inside that truck was a woman taking her eight-year-old son to school. When they reached the stoplight at Airport and Telephone Road, investigators say the man got out of his vehicle with a metal rod and broke the rear window of the woman's truck. They say that's when the woman in the red truck pulled out her pistol and shot the man once in the arm."

Houston Police Detective: [00:02:37] "One male victim was shot. Uh, he has been transported to the, uh, local hospital, like, in **critical**¹⁵ but stable condition. I do believe at this time he will...he is expected to survive."

Reporter: [00:02:48] "The woman was **detained**¹⁶ for questioning and investigators even asked her to **reenact**¹⁷ the **incident**¹⁸. The **alleged**¹⁹ **aggressor**²⁰ will survive, but officers have some advice for those angry drivers:"

Houston Police Detective: [00:02:58] "Try to just let it go. That's all I can say. Just let it go, because it's not...it's not really...it's not worth it. Not worth someone's life."

¹⁵ extremely serious or dangerous

¹⁶ to force someone officially to stay in a place

¹⁷ to repeat the actions of an event that happened in the past as a hobby or as a performance

¹⁸ an event that is either unpleasant or unusual

¹⁹ said or thought by some people to be the stated bad or illegal thing, although you have no proof

²⁰ a person or country that starts an argument, fight, or war by attacking first

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Tony Kaizen: [00:03:07] Now in modern society, doing nothing is typically seen in a negative **light**²¹. For example, whenever we witness some form of social **injustice**²², we say **illogical**²³ things like, "If you remain silent and you don't take action, that means you agree with what is happening." In other words, doing something is better than doing nothing. Whenever a social cause goes viral on the internet, every company in the Western world has to create a marketing campaign and a fucking **hashtag**²⁴ to show that they stand with whatever social group is being **exploited**²⁵ this month.

Tony Kaizen: [00:03:40] These empty actions receive praise and **applause**²⁶, even though they're not having any lasting positive effect on the situation. Why? The action bias. Now, it's still unclear as to why we've developed this **cognitive bias**²⁷. Some people believe it was **passed down**²⁸ by our ancestors who lived as hunter gatherers. Back then, failing to take action could literally mean dying of thirst,

²¹ a particular appearance presented to view

²² (an example of) a situation in which there is no fairness and justice

²³ not reasonable, wise, or practical, usually because directed by the emotions rather than by careful thought

²⁴ a word or phrase preceded by the symbol # that classifies or categorizes the accompanying text (such as a tweet)

²⁵ to use someone or something unfairly for your own advantage

²⁶ the sound of people clapping their hands repeatedly to show enjoyment or approval of something such as a performance or speech

²⁷ the way a particular person understands events, facts, and other people, which is based on their own particular set of beliefs and experiences and may not be reasonable or accurate

²⁸ to teach or give something to someone who will be alive after you have died

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starvation²⁹, or **predators**³⁰ attack. So this impulse to take action is in some way a survival **tactic**³¹, depending on how you look at it. But the problem with this bias is that we don't really need it to survive as much as we did in the past.

Tony Kaizen: [00:04:19] Now, others believe our need to take action comes from our need to feel like we're in control. When we take action, it feels like we're having an impact. It feels like progress. And when we do nothing, we feel helpless and it feels like we've given up. In other words, doing something makes us feel better about ourselves than doing nothing, which further **reinforces**³² this habit of acting impulsively.

Tony Kaizen: [00:04:42] Now, some believe this bias is continuously reinforced by society. There are so many situations in which those who take action are rewarded while those who do nothing are punished. For example, if a woman is being **harassed**³³ in the street, the man who **steps in**³⁴ to protect her is a hero. And the men who sit by and watch are **shameful**³⁵ **cowards**³⁶.

²⁹ the state of having no food for a long period, often causing death

³⁰ an animal that hunts, kills, and eats other animals

³¹ a planned way of doing something

³² if something reinforces an idea or opinion, it provides more proof or support for it and makes it seem true

³³ to continue to annoy or upset someone over a period of time

³⁴ to become involved in a difficult situation or argument in order to help find a solution

³⁵ deserving blame, or being a reason for feeling ashamed

³⁶ a person who is not brave and is too eager to avoid danger, difficulty, or pain

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Tony Kaizen: [00:05:05] Students who participate in class are often **favored**³⁷ by their teachers and get better grades, while the quiet ones often get **ignored**³⁸ and left behind. In society, you're seen as a loser if you never do anything with your life. We applaud those who do. We praise people's accomplishments. We **chant**³⁹ their names and we give them lifetime achievement awards. This only further reinforces the idea that the way to get respect, praise, and admiration is by doing something, especially if you're a man.

Tony Kaizen: [00:05:39] A man who does nothing is called a **bum**⁴⁰. He has no **utility**⁴¹ and therefore he has no value in society. And once we **internalize**⁴² this illogical idea, we allow it to influence all of our decisions. We're motivated by our fear of being a loser or losing control of the situation. We feel the need to take action at times when doing nothing is probably the best choice.

Tony Kaizen: [00:06:02] In episode 94 of this podcast, I **posed**⁴³ the question, "How long are you going to watch?" And I was **implying**⁴⁴ that you must take action; you must participate in the game of life. But the reality is, my idea of a good life may be

³⁷ to support or prefer one particular possibility

³⁸ to intentionally not listen or give attention to

³⁹ to repeat or sing a word or phrase continuously

⁴⁰ someone who has no home or job and lives by asking other people for money

⁴¹ the usefulness of something, especially in a practical way

⁴² to accept or absorb an idea, opinion, belief, etc. so that it becomes part of your character

⁴³ to ask a question, especially in a formal situation such as a meeting

⁴⁴ to communicate an idea or feeling without saying it directly

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different from yours. I mean, who's to say that you have to do something with your life? Some people are **content**⁴⁵ with observing. Some people are content with staying **still**⁴⁶. And whether that's good or bad is really up for them to decide.

Tony Kaizen: [00:06:32] So in summary, the true origin of this cognitive bias is still a mystery, but it seems that it's **part**⁴⁷ **nature**⁴⁸ and part **nurture**⁴⁹ like many human behaviors. But you might be sitting there asking yourself, "Why should I care? Why does this matter?" Well, we typically **equate**⁵⁰ action with productivity, and productivity is also something we tend to value very highly. However, doing nothing can often be better and more productive than doing something.

Tony Kaizen: [00:07:00] Now, let's go back to the example of the traffic jam. You're in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the highway, right? You're going three miles per hour and you still got 30 miles to go. You can do the math on that one. So naturally, you start to get frustrated and you decide to get off at the next exit so you can take a faster route home.

Tony Kaizen: [00:07:20] But that decision quickly backfires when you realize that there's more traffic on the city streets than there was on the highway. You end up

⁴⁵ pleased with your situation and not hoping for change or improvement

⁴⁶ staying in the same position; not moving

⁴⁷ some but not all of a thing

⁴⁸ the character of a person, or the characteristics a person is born with

⁴⁹ the way in which children are treated as they are growing, especially as compared with the characteristics they are born with

⁵⁰ to consider one thing to be the same as or equal to another thing

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making more stops, more turns, and driving a longer distance just to get home. And all of that means you used more gas, which means you spent more money. So logic tells us that staying on the highway is more efficient, but getting off the highway makes us feel better.

Tony Kaizen: [00:07:45] When we sit in traffic, we feel like we're getting nowhere. We feel helpless amidst the endless sea of automobiles that won't just get out of our way. But when we get off the highway, we can drive at a regular speed. We're not stuck in the same spot for minutes at a time. We feel like we're **taking the situation into our own hands**⁵¹ and having a positive impact.

Tony Kaizen: [00:08:07] But the most productive thing to do is actually nothing at all. The most logical thing to do in **rush hour**⁵² traffic is to accept the fact that you cannot **outsmart**⁵³ rush hour traffic. So you should care about cognitive biases like these because being aware of them enables us to make more productive decisions that are based on logic instead of impulsive feelings. In other words, we can train ourselves to do what makes sense and not just what feels good in the moment.

Tony Kaizen: [00:08:35] And there are many times when we don't know exactly what to do. And our automatic response to that feeling of **indecision**⁵⁴ is often to take action without even considering the possibility that it would be better to do

⁵¹ to take control of something : seek to do something that is the responsibility of others

⁵² the busy part of the day when towns and cities are crowded, either in the morning when people are travelling to work, or in the evening when people are travelling home

⁵³ to obtain an advantage over someone by using your intelligence and often by using a trick; to outwit

⁵⁴ the state of being unable to make a choice

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nothing. This affects us on a personal and societal level alike. Whether you're in traffic, at school, or at work, the action bias will be present.

Tony Kaizen: [00:08:57] You will find it in government buildings where public policies are made. You will find it in doctors' offices where diagnoses are given. You will find it in investment firms where money is put at risk. And we don't know exactly how this bias was developed, but it seems clear that we as a society continue to reinforce it by rewarding those who take action and punishing those who don't.

Tony Kaizen: [00:09:18] If we're not careful, this cognitive bias can land us in some very senseless, unproductive situations simply because we feel incapable of sitting back and letting things happen. Our **desperate**⁵⁵ need for control could be the very thing that causes us to lose it. We've got to be more **cognizant**⁵⁶ of our **faulty**⁵⁷ logic so we can begin to **overcome**⁵⁸ it and make more productive and efficient decisions. But developing this skill is a longterm process that requires us to **cultivate**⁵⁹ an incredible level of self-control. And there's no easy way to do this.

Tony Kaizen: [00:09:51] In my experience, you simply got to pay much more attention to your impulsive feelings and then get in the habit of pausing and taking

⁵⁵ needing or wanting something very much

⁵⁶ understanding or realizing something

⁵⁷ not working correctly, or not correct

⁵⁸ to defeat or succeed in controlling or dealing with something

⁵⁹ to try to develop and improve something

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a moment to really think about what you're feeling in that moment. Before you can decide what you're going to do about your feelings, it's best to understand where the feelings are coming from, or in other words, why you feel the way you do. You tend to do things based on the way you feel. So if you never understand why you feel the way you do, you will never understand why you do the things you do. You understand?

Tony Kaizen: [00:10:27] I want you to imagine a scenario with me: Imagine walking down the street and seeing a man slap himself in the face repeatedly. Slap, slap, slap. Again and again. And naturally, this confuses you so you walk up to him and you ask, "Why are you doing that?" And the man pauses for a second. And he looks at you with a straight face and says, "I don't know."

Tony Kaizen: [00:10:56] That's what you look like when you allow yourself to be controlled by impulsive feeling instead of using a logical thought process to make decisions. You look like the guy on the street corner who's slapping himself for no reason, unable to figure out why his face hurts so fucking much. But once you realize you're slapping yourself and you stop to think about why you're doing it, you might realize that **deep down**⁶⁰, you just want to see yourself in pain so you impulsively do these stupid things that you **subconsciously**⁶¹ know will only bring you more pain.

⁶⁰ in the part of your mind where your strongest and often most secret feelings are

⁶¹ in a way that uses or relates to the subconscious (= the part of your mind that notices and remembers information when you are not actively trying to do so, and influences your behaviour even though you do not realize it)

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Tony Kaizen: [00:11:27] Now, with this **newfound**⁶² knowledge, you could begin to **monitor**⁶³ your feelings with a more educated eye and start to notice what **triggers**⁶⁴ those impulsive feelings. Once you identify the triggers, you can begin to remove them from your life or at least develop a better, more logical response to those triggers. One that's actually productive and in your best interest, **as opposed to**⁶⁵ one that just feels good in the moment.

Tony Kaizen: [00:11:52] And the point is not to favor doing nothing over doing something. I'm not saying we should **glorify**⁶⁶ inaction. I'm saying that we should develop the habit of pausing to think before we act on impulse. There are times when **decisive**⁶⁷ action is necessary, but there are also many times when doing nothing is absolutely the best choice. And the only way we can learn to identify these situations is by paying closer attention to the **motives**⁶⁸ behind our actions and even more importantly, the possible **outcomes**⁶⁹.

Tony Kaizen: [00:12:25] I want to thank you for your time and attention, my friend. I really hope this episode is giving you something interesting to think about. And you

⁶² only recently happening, discovered, or beginning to exist

⁶³ to watch and check a situation carefully for a period of time in order to discover something about it

⁶⁴ to cause something to start

⁶⁵ rather than; instead of

⁶⁶ to describe or represent something in a way that makes it seem better or more important than it really is

⁶⁷ able to make decisions quickly and confidently, or showing this quality

⁶⁸ a reason for doing something

⁶⁹ a result or effect of an action, situation, etc.

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already know, this is the Life in English podcast. I am your host, Tony Kaizen, and I'll talk to you soon. Peace!

[END OF EPISODE]

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Key vocabulary

Bias: an unfair personal opinion that influences your judgment

Tendency: if someone has a tendency to do or like something, they will probably do it or like it

Inaction: failure to do anything that might provide a solution to a problem

Evidence: one or more reasons for believing that something is or is not true

Helpless: unable to do anything to help yourself or anyone else

Impulsive: showing behavior in which you do things suddenly without any planning and without considering the effects they may have

Merge: to combine or join together, or to cause things to do this

Honk: if a goose or a car horn honks, it makes a short, loud sound

Compels: to produce a strong feeling or reaction

Jackass: a silly, stupid person

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Part: to separate or cause something or someone to separate

Cut off: to suddenly move your car sideways in front of another car that was in front of you, leaving too little space

Excessively: in a way that is too much

Furiously: in a very angry way

Critical: extremely serious or dangerous

Detained: to force someone officially to stay in a place

Reenact: to repeat the actions of an event that happened in the past as a hobby or as a performance

Incident: an event that is either unpleasant or unusual

Alleged: said or thought by some people to be the stated bad or illegal thing, although you have no proof

Aggressor: a person or country that starts an argument, fight, or war by attacking first

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Light: a particular appearance presented to view

Injustice: (an example of) a situation in which there is no fairness and justice

Illogical: not reasonable, wise, or practical, usually because directed by the emotions rather than by careful thought

Hashtag: a word or phrase preceded by the symbol # that classifies or categorizes the accompanying text (such as a tweet)

Exploited: to use someone or something unfairly for your own advantage

Applause: the sound of people clapping their hands repeatedly to show enjoyment or approval of something such as a performance or speech

Cognitive bias: the way a particular person understands events, facts, and other people, which is based on their own particular set of beliefs and experiences and may not be reasonable or accurate

Passed down: to teach or give something to someone who will be alive after you have died

Starvation: the state of having no food for a long period, often causing death

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Predators: an animal that hunts, kills, and eats other animals

Tactic: a planned way of doing something

Reinforces: if something reinforces an idea or opinion, it provides more proof or support for it and makes it seem true

Harassed: to continue to annoy or upset someone over a period of time

Steps in: to become involved in a difficult situation or argument in order to help find a solution

Shameful: deserving blame, or being a reason for feeling ashamed

Cowards: a person who is not brave and is too eager to avoid danger, difficulty, or pain

Favored: to support or prefer one particular possibility

Ignored: to intentionally not listen or give attention to

Chant: to repeat or sing a word or phrase continuously

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Bum: someone who has no home or job and lives by asking other people for money

Utility: the usefulness of something, especially in a practical way

Internalize: to accept or absorb an idea, opinion, belief, etc. so that it becomes part of your character

Posed: to ask a question, especially in a formal situation such as a meeting

Implying: to communicate an idea or feeling without saying it directly

Content: pleased with your situation and not hoping for change or improvement

Still: staying in the same position; not moving

Part: some but not all of a thing

Nature: the character of a person, or the characteristics a person is born with

Nurture: the way in which children are treated as they are growing, especially as compared with the characteristics they are born with

Equate: to consider one thing to be the same as or equal to another thing

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Taking the situation into our own hands: to take control of something : seek to do something that is the responsibility of others

Rush hour: the busy part of the day when towns and cities are crowded, either in the morning when people are travelling to work, or in the evening when people are travelling home

Outsmart: to obtain an advantage over someone by using your intelligence and often by using a trick; to outwit

Indecision: the state of being unable to make a choice

Desperate: needing or wanting something very much

Cognizant: understanding or realizing something

Faulty: not working correctly, or not correct

Overcome: to defeat or succeed in controlling or dealing with something

Cultivate: to try to develop and improve something

Deep down: in the part of your mind where your strongest and often most secret feelings are

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Subconsciously: in a way that uses or relates to the subconscious (= the part of your mind that notices and remembers information when you are not actively trying to do so, and influences your behaviour even though you do not realize it)

Newfound: only recently happening, discovered, or beginning to exist

Monitor: to watch and check a situation carefully for a period of time in order to discover something about it

Triggers: to cause something to start

As opposed to: rather than; instead of

Glorify: to describe or represent something in a way that makes it seem better or more important than it really is

Decisive: able to make decisions quickly and confidently, or showing this quality

Motives: a reason for doing something

Outcomes: a result or effect of an action, situation, etc.