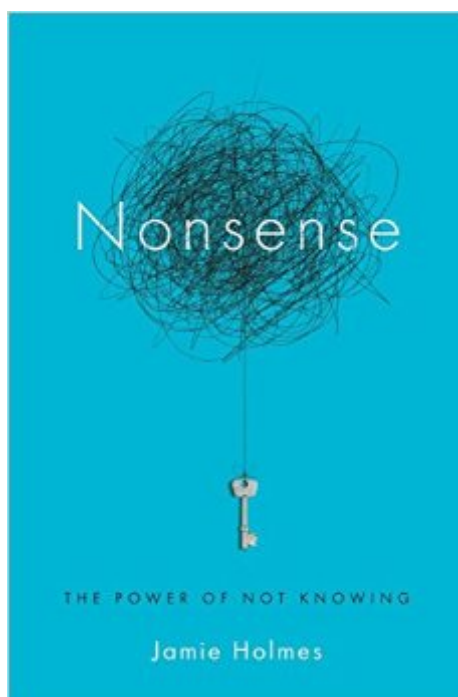


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# Nonsense: The Power Of Not Knowing



## Synopsis

An illuminating look at the surprising upside of ambiguity—and how, properly harnessed, it can inspire learning, creativity, even empathy. Life today feels more overwhelming and chaotic than ever. Whether it's a confounding work problem or a faltering relationship or an unclear medical diagnosis, we face constant uncertainty. And we're continually bombarded with information, much of it contradictory. Managing ambiguity in our jobs, our relationships, and daily lives is quickly becoming an essential skill. Yet most of us don't know where to begin. As Jamie Holmes shows in *Nonsense*, being confused is unpleasant, so we tend to shutter our minds as we grasp for meaning and stability, especially in stressful circumstances. We're hard-wired to resolve contradictions quickly and extinguish anomalies. This can be useful, of course. When a tiger is chasing you, you can't be indecisive. But as *Nonsense* reveals, our need for closure has its own dangers. It makes us stick to our first answer, which is not always the best, and it makes us search for meaning in the wrong places. When we latch onto fast and easy truths, we lose a vital opportunity to learn something new, solve a hard problem, or see the world from another perspective. In other words, confusion—that uncomfortable mental place—has a hidden upside. We just need to know how to use it. This lively and original book points the way. Over the last few years, new insights from social psychology and cognitive science have deepened our understanding of the role of ambiguity in our lives and Holmes brings this research together for the first time, showing how we can use uncertainty to our advantage. Filled with illuminating stories—from spy games and doomsday cults to Absolut Vodka's ad campaign and the creation of Mad Libs—*Nonsense* promises to transform the way we conduct business, educate our children, and make decisions. In an increasingly unpredictable, complex world, it turns out that what matters most isn't IQ, willpower, or confidence in what we know. It's how we deal with what we don't understand.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

From start to finish, *Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing* is a highly readable, engrossing book that explains how important it is to be able to deal with ambiguity, and not to be always seeking closure. Author Jamie Holmes points out early in the book that successfully dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty does not require a high IQ, but requires that one learns to master the emotional challenge of figuring out what to do when one has no idea what to do. He states that he hopes to convince the reader of "a simple claim": "In an increasingly complex, unpredictable world, what matters most isn't IQ, willpower, or confidence in what we know. It's how we deal with what we don't understand." Those who don't or won't master that ambiguity challenge are more likely to "jump to conclusions", "deny contradictions", be mentally rigid, be prejudiced and "revert to stereotypes", assert control elsewhere when losing control somewhere, be less creative, be more confident about an erroneous course of action, and be trusting of those who don't deserve trust and not trusting of those who do. There are also three things that tend to make individuals less likely to successfully deal with uncertainty and, thus, need a quick closure--fatigue, urgency and stress. States Mr. Holmes: "We have to reduce the messy world to manage it. But resolving something--fitting it into a metal box--also means that you stop scrutinizing it. Recognition means closure, and it marks the end of thinking, looking, and listening.

I selected the comment by Jamie Holmes to serve as the subject of this review because he cites one of the greatest challenges all of us face today. For example, one of the most important information needs is knowing what we think we know but, in fact, don't. So many times we make decisions based on assumptions or premises that are inadequate or incomplete, if not flat-out wrong. When told that he was believed to be the wisest man on earth, Socrates replied that if it were true, it was because "The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing." Holmes cites dozens of primary and secondary sources to support his "simple claim" that "what matters most isn't IQ, will power, or confidence in what we know. It's how we deal with what we don't understand." And I again presume to suggest that we cannot deal with something unless and until we recognize

that we really do not understand it, although we may be certain that we do. Not everyone who says "Got it!" in fact gets it but may well think they do and there's the problem. In this context, I am reminded again of a Jordan Peterson comment that Holmes quotes: "The fundamental problem of life is the overwhelming complexity of being." Peterson praises the capacity of mind to eradicate vast swathes of information, albeit accurate information that is nonetheless irrelevant to and thus useless in the given circumstances. He calls this capacity of the mind "the miracle of simplification." (Albert Einstein once recommended that everything be made as simple as possible "but no simpler.

Holmes offers truly interesting and entertaining examples as he illustrates many different ways of knowing. So many insights in this book. Each chapter covers a different aspect of knowing. Ideas are clear and well presented. Great balance of explanation and example. An enjoyable, educational, and ultimately useful read! As Holmes points out, this book has much to offer in this age, "Estimates are that 90 percent of the world's data has been created in the last five years. We're drowning in information, a reality that makes even the simplest decisions – where to eat, which health plan to sign up for, which coffee maker to buy – more fraught | Managing uncertainty is fast becoming an essential skill. • Holmes offers the following summary of his book: "Part 1 will lay the groundwork. We'll explore the trade-offs inherent in our mental machinery and meet a young psychologist in the Netherlands who is leading a vanguard movement toward a new, unified theory of how we make sense of the world. Part 2 focuses on the hazards of denying ambiguity. We'll look at the differences between wise and hasty reactions to destabilizing events, watch a master FBI negotiator deal with an ambivalent cult leader, and see how a cancer patient's comfort with uncertainty is helping change the ways that we make medical decisions. We'll also learn how one business readies for the future by acknowledging the futility of predicting it | We'll explore how to handle ambiguity in daily life, especially in stressful situations or those that require an immediate response. When we are under pressure, our urgent search for patterns and our dogmatic approval of ideals can play out with dramatic consequences.

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