

Lynne Cunningham's
Book Review

I just read a great book that I think should be added to your Service Excellence Library.

Book	<i>How Doctors Think</i>
Author	Jerome Groopman, M.D.
Pillar of Excellence	Quality and Service
Publisher's Book Description	<p>I wish I had read this book when I was in medical school, and I'm glad I've read it now. Most readers will know Jerome Groopman from his essays in the <i>New Yorker</i>, which take on a wide variety of complex medical conditions, evocatively communicating the tensions and emotions of both doctors and patients. But this book is something different: a sustained, incisive and sometimes agonized inquiry into the processes by which medical minds—brilliant, experienced, highly erudite medical minds—synthesize information and understand illness. <i>How Doctors Think</i> is mostly about how these doctors get it right, and about why they sometimes get it wrong: "[m]ost errors are mistakes in thinking. And part of what causes these cognitive errors is our inner feelings, feelings we do not readily admit to and often don't realize." Attribution errors happen when a doctor's diagnostic cogitations are shaped by a particular stereotype. It can be negative: when five doctors fail to diagnose an endocrinologic tumor causing peculiar symptoms in "a persistently complaining, melodramatic menopausal woman who quite accurately describes herself as kooky." But positive feelings also get in the way; an emergency room doctor misses unstable angina in a forest ranger because "the ranger's physique and chiseled features reminded him of a young Clint Eastwood—all strong associations with health and vigor." Other errors occur when a patient is irreversibly classified with a particular syndrome: "diagnosis momentum, like a boulder rolling down a mountain, gains enough force to crush anything in its way." The patient stories are told with Groopman's customary attention to character and emotion. And there is great care and concern for the epistemology of medical knowledge, and a sense of life-and-death urgency in analyzing the well-intentioned thought processes of the highly trained. I have never read elsewhere this kind of discussion of the ambiguities besetting the superspecialized—the doctors on whom the rest of us depend: "Specialization in medicine confers a false sense of certainty." <i>How Doctors Think</i> helped me understand my own thought processes and my colleagues'—even as it left me chastened and dazzled by turns. Every reflective doctor will learn from this book—and every prospective patient will find thoughtful advice for communicating successfully in the medical setting and getting better care. Many of the physicians Dr. Groopman writes about are visionaries and heroes; their diagnostic and therapeutic triumphs are astounding. And these are the doctors who are, like the author, willing to anatomize their own serious errors. This passionate honesty gives the book an immediacy and an eloquence that will resonate with anyone interested in medicine, science or the cruel beauties of those human endeavors which engage mortal stakes.</p>
LC Review	This is a well-researched and easy-to-read book. Dr. Groopman includes real-life stories that are examples of key points.
Page	<i>Lynne suggests that you pay special attention to some of these features in</i>

	<i>the book.</i>
17	How a doctor thinks can first be discerned by how he speaks and how he listens. In addition to words spoken and heard, there is nonverbal communication, his attention to the body language of his patient as well as his own body language – his expressions, his posture, and his gestures.
18	The great advantage of open-ended questioning is that it maximizes the opportunity for a doctor to hear new information. “What does it take to succeed with open-ended questions?” Debra Roter, professor of health policy and management at Johns Hopkins University asks rhetorically. “The doctor has to make the patient feel that he is really interested in hearing what they have to say. When the patient tells his story, the patient gives cue and clues to what the doctor may not be thinking about.”
24	Every doctor is fallible. Experts studying misguided care have recently concluded that the majority of errors are due to flaws in physician thinking, not technical mistakes.
55	“The hardest thing about being a doctor is that you learn best from your mistakes, mistakes made on living people,” Dr. Karen Delgado.
58	Patients and their loved ones swim together with physicians in a sea of feelings. Each needs to keep an eye on a neutral shore where flags are planted to warn of perilous emotional currents.
169+ and 196	Commission Bias – the tendency toward action rather than inaction. Satisfaction of Search – the tendency to stop searching for a diagnosis once you find something. Vertical Line Failure – thinking inside the box. Availability Errors – a sharp bias in thinking based on a striking, unusual event that recently occurred and becomes prominent in the doctor’s mind.
173	“The perfect is the enemy of the good,” Dr. Terry Light.
174	“There is nothing in biology or medicine that is so complicated that, if explained in clear and simple language, cannot be understood by any layperson. It’s not quantum physics,” Dr. Linda Lewis.
Chapter 9	<i>Marketing, Money and Medical Decisions</i> – fascinating information about how drug reps try to impact physician decisions – from free pens to coercion by colleagues.
268 - 9	After writing this book, I realized that I can have another vital partner who helps improve my thinking, a partner who may, with a few pertinent and focused questions, protect me from the cascade of cognitive pitfalls that cause misguided care. The partner is present in the moment when flesh-and-blood decision-making occurs. That partner is my patient or her family member or friend who seeks to know what is in my mind, how I am thinking. And by opening my mind I can more clearly recognize its reach and its limits, its understanding of my patient’s physical problems and emotional needs. There is no better way to care for those who need my caring.

Overall rating	Excellent – This book should be given to each new doctor with their first white coat.	
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