

Easy Answers are Not the Same as Simple Answers

Most of the time, the simplest answer is correct. No need to overcomplicate, especially when it delays action.

But there's an internal sleight of hand where "simple" gets swapped with "easy".

A simple answer is one that doesn't require mental gymnastics to understand. An easy answer is one that doesn't cause any discomfort or challenge.

Let's say you create a product no one buys. The simple answer is that people don't value it. But that's also a very hard answer to deal with. The easy answer is that people are idiots who don't know good stuff when it smacks them in the face, or that big companies stack the deck in their favor and you can't possibly compete, or that Facebook's algorithm is unfairly punishing you, or that if you only had the advantages of others, you'd succeed, or...

I'm incredibly bullish on simple answers. I try to reduce all answers to their simplest form as quickly as possible. Simple is cold, clarifying, and enables understanding and action.

I'm incredibly wary of easy answers. Their siren song is powerful, and can lull me into a flabby stupor, mumbling about and blaming all the things that stroke my ego and feed vices like envy and anger.

Easy answers are all around us. They constitute most of what passes for discussion on social media. New iPhone price is really high? Easy. Greed. Stock market lagging? Easy. Politician you don't like. Celebrity tweeted something offensive? Easy. They're a braindead lowlife and you just need to re-enforce your rage with a quick mention.

Not only can easy answers obscure the truth and muddy clear thinking, not only do they feed dangerous and regressive emotions, not only can they create volatile moblike groupthink, they're also less interesting. They tend to lead to less fun, enlightenment, and playful encounter with the ideas and people that populate the world.

What if there's something more behind it? What if you weren't allowed to take the easy route? What if you had to assume rational choice and charitable interpretation? What else might be going on?

The world begins to unfold in amazing ways. New mental modes become possible. Easy answers start to look startlingly complex compared to the simpler, but harder to swallow truth.

If it feels easy, time for a gut-check. Look for simple, not just easy.