Try these 5 supremely simple strategies to solve any problem from disagreements to projects

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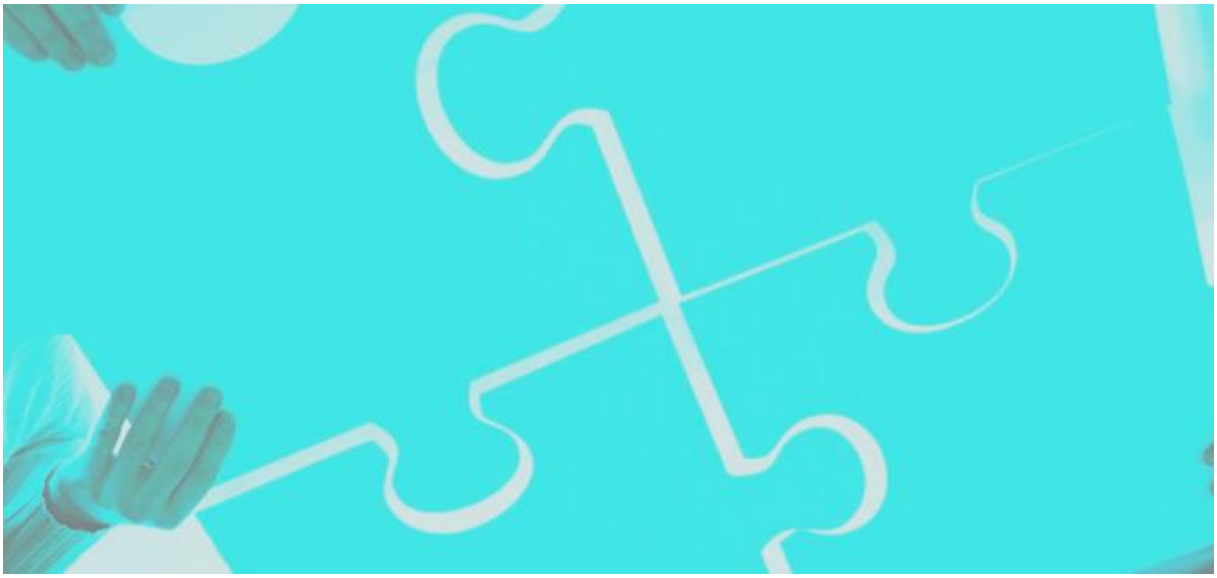

A. J. Jacobs is an editor for *Esquire*. As a journalist and author, he is known for putting himself in the role of test subject as he embarks on various lifestyle investigations.

Below, Jacobs shares five key insights from his new book, *The Puzzler: One Man’s Quest to Solve the Most Baffling Puzzles Ever, from Crosswords to Jigsaws to the Meaning of Life*.

1. DON’T GET FURIOUS—GET CURIOUS.

When confronting a problem, it’s easy to get angry and frustrated. But anger is counterproductive to creative solutions—you get tunnel vision. Instead, I recommend the Puzzler Mindset. This is a mindset of deep curiosity and reframing life’s problems and annoyances as puzzles.

The legendary music producer Quincy Jones has a saying: “I don’t have problems. I have puzzles.” I love this quote. I want a tattoo of it on my forehead because it’s the perfect encapsulation of the Puzzler Mindset. When I look at life and business as a series of puzzles instead of problems, I’m both more productive and happier because problems are fear-inducing and intractable. Puzzles are solvable, motivating, and engage your creative and playful side.

For instance, if I’m talking to someone who disagrees with me—about business strategy, politics, or whatever—I could try berating them into changing their mind. That rarely works. In fact, it’s often counterproductive. Instead, treat it like a puzzle.

What do we really disagree on? Why do I believe what I believe? Is there any evidence that could change one of our minds? Is there common ground? All of these are puzzles, and pursuing their answers is a more likely way to produce a productive solution.

2. CHOP YOUR PROBLEM INTO BITS.

One of the best strategies for any puzzle is chopping the big puzzle into a series of smaller puzzles. Consider the genre of puzzles called Fermi problems, a type of logic problem that Google and Microsoft famously ask at some job interviews.

A typical Fermi problem goes like this: “How many piano tuners are there in New York City?” You have to estimate the size of something about which you are totally ignorant. David Epstein talks about how to solve Fermi problems in his book *Range*. If you take a wild, off-the-cuff guess, you’ll probably be wrong by orders of magnitude.

Instead, break it down. As Epstein writes: “How many households are in New York? What portion might have pianos? How often are pianos tuned? How many homes can one tuner reach in a day? How many days a year does a tuner work?” You won’t guess it exactly, but you’re more likely to be in the ballpark.

Breaking a problem down into parts can work in all sorts of areas. I use it when facing the puzzle of writing my books. If I visualize my task as one monolithic book, I feel overwhelmed. Instead, I break it down into a series of chapters, and see it as a sequence of smaller puzzles. Tackle parts instead of the whole.

Or, take the puzzle of getting myself to walk the treadmill for a few minutes a day. If I say to myself, “You have to walk on the treadmill for an hour today,” I will delay this task forever. So, I break it down. I put the big picture out of my mind. First, I tackle the subgoal of putting on my sneakers. I can do that. Then the subgoal of turning the treadmill on. I can do that. And just step onto the rubber belt for just five minutes. I can do that. Eventually, I’m walking and realize, *this isn’t so bad. I can do this.* I stay on for the full hour.

3. TURN THE PUZZLE UPSIDE DOWN. OR BACKWARDS. OR ANY OTHER WAY.

Consider the following puzzle: There’s a man in a room. The walls are cement and the floor is dirt. The only openings are a locked door and a skylight. The man has a shovel and starts to dig. He knows it’s impossible to tunnel out but continues to dig anyway. Why?

As solvers, many of us focus on the man digging a hole, but he is also doing the opposite: He is building a hill out of dirt. He will climb the hill and exit through the skylight.

Reversing your thinking is an incredibly powerful tool not just in puzzles, but also in life and business. It has spawned everything from the assembly line (what if the car

parts move to workers, instead of workers moving to the car parts?) to the brilliant upside-down Heinz ketchup bottle.

4. BE SUPREMELY FLEXIBLE.

Perhaps the most powerful weapon a puzzler has is cognitive flexibility. Good puzzlers don't fall in love with their hypotheses. They keep their beliefs provisional, open to new evidence. They embrace the eraser and delete key.

Almost every puzzle I tackled required this. For instance, I love crosswords, and British crosswords are even trickier than American crosswords. They're all about devious wordplay. I remember one clue: "Gegs." That was the whole clue. I figured it was the plural of some word "geg," but what does it mean? I resorted to Google and found that it is the airport symbol for Portland. I got nowhere. It was only after I took a break, let go of my certainty, and came back a couple hours later that the answer came to me. The answer is "scrambled eggs." Very clever. Annoying, but clever.

I had to embrace the idea that I might be wrong to ultimately get it right. This is the hallmark of my favorite thinkers. As Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman says, "Being wrong is the only way I feel sure I learned anything."

This is why so many successful businesses started with a completely different premise. One of my favorite examples is that Welch's grape juice started as nonalcoholic communion wine during Prohibition. Only when that failed did they switch to grape juice as a sweet treat for kids. More recently, there is the messaging software Slack, which started as an internal tool for a video game before the founders realized it had more potential than the game itself.

5. FIND THE TOEHOLD.

When faced with a problem, attack it at its weakest point. Bill Clinton talks about this strategy when he's interviewed for the crossword puzzle documentary *Wordplay*. He says that if he's doing a really hard crossword puzzle, often he'll look at it for several minutes without knowing a single answer. Finally, he might see a clue that he knows, fill in that answer, and that's all that's needed to get started. You work out from that answer to get others.

Clinton says that he finds this a useful strategy for solving all kinds of problems, and I agree. Like with writing, often I won't know how to start a chapter or article, but I do have one great quote or anecdote that I know I want to use. I'll start with the anecdote and build out from there. Eventually, the whole structure will make itself clear, and I can write.

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