SAVANTS · EPISODE 2

# Can We Train to Be Savants? The Truth About Mental 'Biohacking'

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In the previous episode, we discovered that Savant syndrome is like having a 'superpower' that emerges, ironically, from a difference in brain wiring. We saw cases of people who can remember every day of their lives or draw entire cities after a single glance. It is natural that, upon hearing these stories, an inevitable question arises in our minds: Can the rest of us, those with 'standard' brains, learn to do the same? Is there an instruction manual to unlock that inner genius without being born with a specific condition or suffering a brain injury?

This curiosity has given rise to what we know today as mental 'biohacking'. The internet is full of promises on how to 'hack' your memory or increase your IQ using ancient techniques or modern supplements. But how much of this is true? To explore this frontier, we must look at mental athletes. People who, without being savants, achieve feats that seem magical.

Take the case of competitors in the World Memory Championships. These individuals can memorize the order of a deck of cards in less than twenty seconds or remember thousands of digits of the number Pi. The fascinating thing is that most of them confess to having an absolutely normal memory in their daily lives; they forget their keys or what they had to buy at the supermarket just like any of us. They were not born with the 'hardware' of a savant; instead, they installed specialized 'software' through years of rigorous training.

- They use the famous 'Memory Palace', a technique that converts abstract data into spatial images.
- They train 'artificial synesthesia', associating numbers with colors or shapes so the brain processes them faster.
- They practice deep focus to silence the mental noise that normally distracts us.

However, this is where science steps in and forces us to look closer. Although these mental athletes achieve amazing results, there is a fundamental difference between them and a genuine savant. The savant doesn't 'use' a technique; the savant simply 'sees' the answer. For the savant, genius is a system characteristic, not an installed application. This leads us to a fascinating scientific doubt: Can we really 'hack' our biology to see the world like a genius, or are we simply imitating the symptoms of something much deeper?

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## The Difference Between Hardware and Software

To understand if it is possible to imitate a savant, we must first understand what makes their brain different from most. Imagine your brain is a modern office. In a normal office (a neurotypical brain), there is a Chief Executive Officer (the prefrontal cortex) who is in charge of filtering all the incoming information. If you receive an email about the color of the walls of a building you passed ten minutes ago, the CEO throws it in the trash because it is not relevant to your survival. This filter is vital; without it, we would go crazy processing every tiny detail of the world.

In a savant's brain, this 'CEO' often functions differently or is partially absent in certain areas. This allows 'raw' information —the minute details, textures, numerical patterns— to reach consciousness without being filtered. The savant doesn't have to struggle to remember the pattern of a carpet; they simply don't have the filter telling them that the pattern is irrelevant. Their brain is different hardware.

### Mnemonics: The Software of Mental Athletes

When we talk about people who train to have prodigious memories, such as memory champions, we are talking about installing very powerful 'software' on standard hardware. The most famous technique is the Memory Palace or Method of Loci. This technique takes advantage of one of our brain's oldest functions: spatial survival. Our ancestors didn't need to remember lists of words, but they did need to remember where the fruit tree or the tiger's cave was.

By using a Memory Palace, a mental athlete associates a boring piece of data (like the number 42) with a vivid image (a rhinoceros in a tutu) and places it in a familiar location, such as their living room sofa. When they want to recall the number, they 'walk' mentally through their house and see the rhinoceros. It's a brilliant way to trick the brain into storing information it would normally discard. But, and here is the catch, it requires a conscious and exhausting effort. A savant, on the other hand, doesn't need rhinoceroses in tutus; numbers have a personality, color, or natural shape for them.

### Artificial Synesthesia and the Sensory Bridge

Many savants experience synesthesia, a condition where senses mix: they can see sounds or taste colors. Daniel Tammet, a famous savant, describes numbers as visual landscapes. For him, the number 9 is tall and dark, while 37 is lumpy like oatmeal. Some biohacking enthusiasts try to induce this synesthesia through training, associating letters with specific colors repeatedly. While this can help short-term memory, science suggests that learned synesthesia never reaches the emotional and automatic depth of congenital synesthesia. In the savant, the connection is structural; in the learner, it is a learned association.

## Can We 'Turn Off' the Filter? The Thinking Cap Experiment

One of the most fascinating experiments in this field was conducted by Dr. Allan Snyder in Australia. Snyder theorized that we all carry an 'inner savant' within us, but it is silenced by our brain's CEO. To prove it, he used a technique called Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (TMS) —basically a device that uses magnets to momentarily 'turn off' specific areas of the cerebral cortex.

Snyder applied the device to the left temporal lobe of healthy volunteers, the area that is often damaged in many savants. The results were astounding: for a few minutes, ordinary people showed a marked improvement in drawing skills and in the ability to count large numbers of objects at a single glance, similar to what a savant does. However, as soon as the magnet was turned off, the 'genius' disappeared and the CEO took control again, filtering reality to make it manageable once more.

### The Cost of Genius

Here we reach an important reflection. Why didn't evolution make us all savants if that capacity is there, latent? The answer seems to be efficiency. The brain spends a lot of energy (almost 20% of our daily calories). Filtering information allows us to generalize. Because our brain 'ignores' the details of every individual dog we see, we can create the general concept of 'dog'. A savant often has difficulty understanding abstract concepts or complex social situations because they are too focused on individual details, on the 'pixels' of reality, and struggle to see the whole picture.

Mental biohacking and memory techniques are wonderful tools that demonstrate the incredible plasticity of our minds. They teach us that we can expand our boundaries much further than we believe. But they also teach us to value the 'filter' we possess. Being a savant is not just about having a gift; it is about living in a world without filters, a place where the noise can be deafening.

So, can we train to be savants? The short answer is: we can imitate their results with a lot of effort, but we cannot (yet) inhabit their way of processing the world permanently. What we can do is learn from them to find new ways of seeing reality. In the next episode, we will explore what happens when this gift does not come from birth, but suddenly appears after an accident. What does the 'acquired savant' tell us about the hidden potential of your own brain?