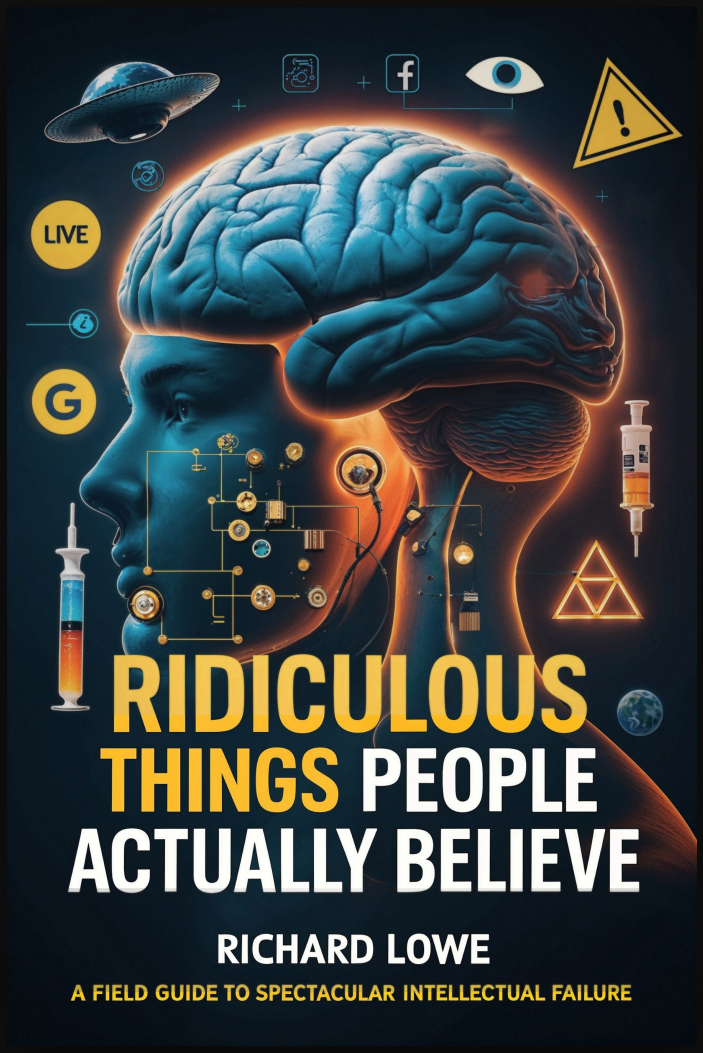
A FREE COMPANION TO RIDICULOUS THINGS PEOPLE ACTUALLY BELIEVE

The Half-Second Pause

A pocket kit for checking a claim before you believe it, buy it, or share it with everyone you know.



RICHARD LOWE

How to Use This Kit

Keep it next to your phone. Use it before you hit share.

Ridiculous Things People Actually Believe walks through flat earth, bleach cures, reptilian royals, moon landing denial, psychic hotlines and the rest, then opens up the machinery underneath: the fallacies, the cognitive biases and the feeds that turn private delusion into organized movements. The people who fall for these things aren't stupid. They are running normal human brains in an environment those brains weren't built for. So are you.

Knowing the biases won't make you immune. It can buy you a half-second pause before you believe, buy or share. This kit is built to give you that pause: one question, a fallacy spotter, a bias spotter, a claim tracer worksheet, red flags by marketplace, and what to do when the believer is someone you love.

> *That pause is the entire difference between critical thinking and its convincing imitation.*

Part 1: The One Question

Ask it every time, before anything else.

Does this make me feel good because it's true, or because it confirms something I already believed?

That gap, between “this feels true” and “this is true,” is where every belief in the book lives. The feeling of being right is identical whether you're right or completely wrong. Then run the checklist:

1. **Go to the primary source.** Read the study itself instead of the video about it. Read the whole article behind the headline, and the methodology behind the article.
2. **Ask who is selling something.** A supplement, a course, a protocol, a membership, a donation link.
3. **Count the people who would have to keep the secret.** Pilots, astronomers, doctors, forecasters, across countries and decades, with no credible whistleblower.
4. **Ask what would prove it wrong.** If every failed prediction becomes proof of a deeper plot, the claim can't lose, and that tells you what it is.
5. **Look for the correction.** It is usually out there, later and quieter, seen by a fraction of the people who saw the claim.

Part 2: The Fallacy Spotter

Logicians cataloged these more than two thousand years ago. They still work perfectly today.

FALLACY	HOW IT SOUNDS	THE QUESTION THAT STALLS IT
False dichotomy	Either Big Pharma wants to microchip your children, or you're a sheep who'll inject anything a white coat hands you.	What are the other forty-eight answers? Where is the boring middle?
Cherry-picking	A man squinted at boats on a canal in 1838 and saw no curve, so ignore satellites, GPS, time zones and stellar parallax.	What does all the evidence say, including the parts that clash?
Appeal to nature	It's natural, so it's good. Synthetic, so it's suspect.	Arsenic and smallpox are natural. Is natural actually the point?
Post hoc	I took the remedy, then I felt better, so the remedy worked.	Would I have recovered anyway? What else changed at the same time?
Ad hominem	The researcher is a paid shill, so the research is wrong.	What does the argument itself say? Would I apply this rule to the experts I like?
Confirmation bias	Every failed prediction means the operation is more sophisticated than we thought.	Is there any outcome I would accept as a failed test?

How they work together

The book calls it an ecosystem. The false dichotomy creates the dramatic choice. Cherry-picking supplies the evidence. The appeal to nature offers a simple decision rule. Post hoc reasoning delivers the personal experience of success. Ad hominem disposes of the inconvenient experts. Confirmation bias filters everything else. Once all six are running, the loop is closed to argument from outside.

Catch yourself

- [ ] I just dismissed an expert without engaging with their argument
- [ ] I reframed a failed prediction so it still counts
- [ ] I picked one side of a choice that had more than two sides
- [ ] I trusted a source because it agreed with me and doubted one because it didn't

Part 3: The Bias Spotter

Every one of these was adaptive once. They malfunction in the environment we've built.

BIAS	HOW IT GETS YOU	ASK YOURSELF
Pattern hunger	The brain that misses a real pattern dies; the one that sees a false one just runs for nothing. So it finds connections that aren't there.	Would this pattern survive if I counted the misses too?
Vivid memory	Sharks kill about one person a year in American waters. Vending machines kill about two. Guess which one has a movie.	Am I judging by the story or by the count?
Identity	When a belief is who you are, contrary evidence lands as an attack.	What would admitting this was wrong cost me?
Tribe	Leaving the belief means leaving the people. Your tribe's enemies are automatically wrong.	Would I hold this if my side held the opposite?
Confidence	The person who knows least sounds surest. Real experts sound uncertain because they know the field's limits.	Is this person certain because they know, or because they don't know enough to doubt?
Survivorship	You hear from the people it worked for. The rest never fill out the survey.	Where are the people it didn't work for?
Loss aversion	Losses feel about twice as bad as equal gains feel good, so people stay in long after the evidence has failed them.	Am I staying because it works, or because I've already paid?

How the feed uses them

- [ ] **The algorithm knows what gets clicked.** It has no way to know what is true
- [ ] **The rabbit hole is a feature.** Each recommendation goes slightly further than the last
- [ ] **"I've done my research"** usually means I've found a lot of content that agrees with me
- [ ] **The influencer feels like a friend**, so the advice doesn't feel like marketing
- [ ] **Speed favors the lie.** A 2018 MIT study of Twitter found false news reached people about six times faster than true news
- [ ] **The correction nobody sees.** The claim reaches millions; the debunking reaches thousands

Part 4: The Claim Tracer

Run one claim all the way to the ground. Do it once and you'll never read a viral post the same way.

The claim, in one sentence: _____

STEP	WHAT I FOUND
Where I saw it, and when	
Who posted it, and what do they sell?	
The original source it cites	
Does the source say what the post says it says?	
Was it peer reviewed? Has anyone replicated it?	
Do the citations lead anywhere besides other sites citing the same thing?	
What does the large body of research say?	
What would prove this claim wrong?	
Has it been corrected or retracted?	
How did it make me feel when I first saw it?	

Holds up

The source says what the post says, and the wider evidence agrees. Share it if you like.

Can't tell

The trail goes cold or the source is thin. Don't share. Wait.

Falls apart

Don't share it. If you already did, post the correction where the claim went.

An example from the book: the 1998 study linking vaccines to autism. The Lancet retracted it in 2010, its author was struck off the UK medical register, and a 2019 Danish study of more than 650,000 children found no association between the MMR vaccine and autism. The claim is still circulating.

Part 5: Red Flags by Marketplace

There is serious money in selling people what they want to believe. Check what you see.

Health

- [ ] "Natural" is offered as the reason it works
- [ ] Bad reactions are explained away as "detox" (MMS advocates call the signs of chemical poisoning detox reactions)
- [ ] The evidence is testimonials from people it worked for
- [ ] It asks you to drop proven treatment, such as chemotherapy, in favor of the remedy
- [ ] The doctors who disagree are all said to be paid off

Money

- [ ] A stranger contacts you first with an opportunity
- [ ] You must pay a fee before you receive anything
- [ ] Returns promised faster than steady saving and compound growth could deliver
- [ ] The seller's income comes from selling the course
- [ ] The money comes from recruiting the next person

> *If reliable methods for getting rich quickly existed, the people teaching them would use those methods to get rich instead of selling courses about them.*

The supernatural and self-help

- [ ] You remember the hits and forget the misses (psychics, horoscopes)
- [ ] If it didn't work, you are told you didn't believe hard enough
- [ ] The "evidence" is equipment readings that wiring, drafts and an old building already explain

The grand conspiracy

- [ ] Thousands of people across decades would have to keep perfect silence
- [ ] Every piece of contrary evidence becomes proof of how powerful "they" are
- [ ] Incompetence that can't fix potholes is credited with flawless secrecy

Part 6: When It's Someone You Love

The flat earther isn't lying to you. They believe it. The feeling is the trap.

When a belief has become someone's identity and community, a fact lands as an attack on who they are. In December 2024 a group of prominent flat earthers went to Antarctica, saw the 24-hour sun, and several admitted on camera that their model was wrong. The broader community declared the expedition fake. Plan for that.

1. **Skip the online argument.** It never works. Save your energy.
2. **Keep the relationship.** What sometimes works is sustained personal relationship, time and the slow accumulation of trust.
3. **Remember why they came.** These communities offer belonging, vocabulary and meaning. Leaving the belief means losing the people.
4. **Aim for harm reduction.** You may never change the belief. You can still protect a child's vaccinations, a parent's savings, a friend's cancer treatment.

Your own audit

The author admits to a lucky shirt and knocking on wood. Everyone runs these engines about something. Find yours.

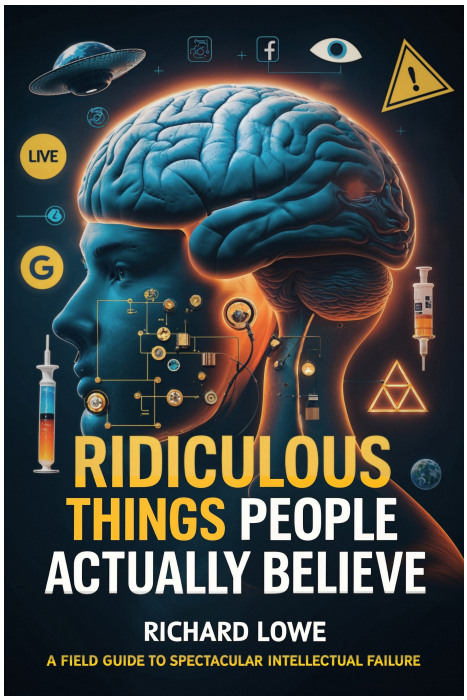
A BELIEF I HOLD THAT MY GROUP ALSO HOLDS	EVIDENCE I WOULD ACCEPT THAT IT'S WRONG

If you can't fill in the right column, that belief is the one to check first.

> *The measure of a belief is not how good it feels or how many people share it. The measure is whether it survives contact with reality.*

The Whole Story

This kit gives you the checklists. Ridiculous Things People Actually Believe gives you the full tour: flat earth, bleach cures, reptilian royals, moon landing denial, crypto cults and manifestation, each one taken apart, followed by the fallacies, biases and feeds that keep all of it alive.



Ridiculous Things People Actually Believe:
A Field Guide to Spectacular Intellectual Failure

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