Many years ago, during my college years, I was succeeding beyond my wildest dreams at a paid summer internship. Still, there was a problem. Even as I was doing my best work, snow covered the streets and Santa Claus waved from store windows. My way of dealing with this was to avoid thinking about what it meant. I loved working at an adult job, so the previous September, I hadn’t gone back to college. My employers were pleased by my cheap and unexpectedly competent services, and kept me on. But toward the end of December, my boss finally announced that
my “summer” job was over. I greeted the new year as an unemployed college dropout.

No problem, I thought. I had a plan to get another great job, in only a few months. Before getting the job I’d just lost, I had applied to two summer internships and been accepted at both. Of course, I would apply again to the place I’d turned down the previous year. Of course, they would offer to hire me again. I would only have to do odd jobs through the rest of winter and spring, and then I’d be back doing what I loved.

I didn’t hope this would happen. I didn’t consider it a possible scenario as I gamed out alternatives. This was simply what I knew had to happen. No other alternatives were conceivable, and I certainly didn’t conceive them.

I was, in short, delusional. But I was not unusual.
A COUPLE OF HOURS IN ANY OFFICE WILL REVEAL, self-deception—overestimating one’s own powers and underestimating obstacles—is a hallmark of adult life. Across North America, Europe and Asia, in places where cars are common, some 80 percent of people rate themselves as “above average” drivers. Similarly, research on energy conservation by the utility software firm Opower found that a majority of consumers in the Middle East, South America and Eastern Europe think they’re more environmentally concerned and better at conserving power than their neighbors are.

Self-delusion isn’t confined to one gender, social class or age group; in one recent U.S. survey, conducted by the MSNBC network and Elle.com, far more than 50 percent of a 26,000-person sample rated their own appearance as “above average.” The respondents’ ages ranged from 18 to 75. Then, too, most students think they’re well above the 50th percentile in smarts and skills; most professors think they are above-average teachers; most executives think their job performance is comfortably above the median.

Not everyone, however, is as extreme as the shareholder who, at one recent Tesla Motors annual meeting, asked if he, with no particular knowledge or qualifications, could have a seat on the board. But every day we all have moments when we fail to see ourselves as others see us.

These illusions don’t just make for embarrassing pratfalls in personal lives. Self-deception costs companies and other institutions serious money each year. As the economist Terrance Odean has written, some of the volatility in equity and other markets is caused by traders who wrongly assume they are sharp enough to beat the market. And every year, hundreds of lawsuits go to trial instead of settling because lawyers overestimate their abilities to win. Every organization loses hundreds if not thousands of hours every year to lack of self-awareness. Inaccurate self-assessment leads to targets that can’t be met, deadlines that can’t be honored, jobs sought and won that then aren’t done well. Why are we so inclined to this costly mistake? And how can we learn to see ourselves more clearly?

It should be a simple task. After all, few of us have any trouble seeing through the delusional self-assessments of others—the mousy numbers guy who wants to be considered for the C-suite; the self-styled master of PowerPoint whose presentations are a mess; the awkward, clueless boss who gives advice to others because he is, in his own mind, a wonderful manager. Even as we assume that others don’t know us (because there is so much about ourselves that we never reveal), we assume that we do know others (because
with them, what you see is what you get). This curious asymmetry means that when people learn about one of the most famous psychological studies of self-deception, their reaction is often to congratulate themselves for being smarter than the people in the experiment.

In that study, the psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger showed that people with little knowledge of a skill set were prone to think they were masters of it. People who actually know what they are doing were more humble, they found. This “Dunning-Kruger effect” is often invoked to assert that other people, who are stupid, don’t even know they are stupid. But, as Dunning told the journalist Chris Lee in 2012, the real lesson of the work “is that one should pause to worry about one’s own certainty, not the certainty of others.”

In other words, being able to spot others’ flawed self-assessments is no help with your own. The reason is built in to the insidious mechanism of self-awareness: You apply different standards to yourself than you do to others. Therefore, the tests of probability and evidence you impose on others’ beliefs aren’t marshaled to challenge your own views of yourself.

What prevents this from feeling like a mistake is the abundance of extra information you think you have about yourself. As Dunning has pointed out, other people’s words and actions (and their effects) are all you have to go on when you judge them. But when you look at yourself, you know—or think you know—so much more: the dreams no one else sees, the hopes you’ve guarded since childhood, the good intentions you never expressed. So someone else’s bad score on an aptitude test means she should change careers, because you trust the test. But your own bad score is easy to explain away: “The test can’t measure my determination.” Or “it’s known to be wrong now and then, and this is one of those times.”

Knowing so much about your hidden inner self, you can always find something to explain away your flaws and failures. In fact, even if you’ve just made up a new excuse, the mind will present it to you as if it were a deep-seated truth you’ve always known.

That is the irony of self-deception: The more knowledge you have (or think you have) about yourself, the easier it is to reject genuinely useful information in the form of bad scores, negative evaluations, angry scoldings and other corrective evidence. And so, as Dunning and two other psychologists once wrote in the journal Psychological Science in the Public Interest, “people’s self-views hold only a tenuous to modest relationship with their actual behavior and performance.”

In fact, recent neuroscientific research suggests that rosy self-deception may be our “default” mode of getting through life. In a study to be published soon in the journal Neuropsychologia, the neuroscientist Tom F.D. Farrow and his colleagues mapped the brain regions most involved in self-deception, by combining MRI scanning with a procedure for eliciting self-deceptive thoughts. The researchers wanted to measure differences in brain activity when people present themselves well compared to when they put themselves in a bad light. And that led them to notice that people took quite a bit longer to compose responses that would make them look bad than they did for image-enhancing answers. That suggests that seeing one’s self in a bad light involves more mental effort. The implication, as the researchers put it, is that “faking good [...] may be our most practiced ‘default’ mode.”

So it may well be entirely normal to be overly positive about yourself and your prospects. In fact, as the psychologists Lauren Alloy and Lyn Yvonne Abramson have found in their experiments, it is depressed people who have the most accurate view of themselves and their performance.

Why do the rest of us have to imagine that we’re exceptional? In his book “Seeing Red,” the British psychologist Nicholas Humphrey proposes that feeling unique and special is an old and powerful adaptation for animals. Self-preservation, he argues, comes more easily and urgently to a creature that feels it has a self worth preserving. Our ancestors weren’t the amphibians who thought “I’m just a garden-variety newt, like any other.” They were the ones who looked into their reflections and thought the prehistoric equivalent of “you’re special ‘cause you’re you.”

If this is so, then the mind has deeply baked into its recesses a resistance to the news that it, its owner, and all that it cherishes are nothing special, with no particular talent and no great prospects for success. Specialness is part of being human, and anything that says we are not surprising or unique is unwelcome, and always has been. As one Amerindian warrior captured by his enemies in 19th-century South America told a missionary: “Now I see myself as a slave without being
So how can you tame your tendency to flatter yourself, without tipping too far into unmotivated gloom? It’s a hard balance to strike, but psychology can offer a few suggestions:

Try mindfulness.

Mindfulness is often associated with meditation, but there is no need to twist into a lotus position to experience it. It is simply the state of paying attention to your own mind, observing it carefully and without judgment. In the course of a day spent focusing outside the self on the tasks at hand, we seldom notice our own reactions or states. And when we do use gadgets to “quantify” ourselves, we measure physical states to see how well we conform to a goal. “Did I cut enough calories, get enough sleep, run enough steps?” This approach encourages you to judge information about yourself as it comes in. This was a “good” run; that was a “bad” lunch.

Mindfulness involves a different kind of observation. The goal is to foster and expand what the psychiatrist Dan Siegel calls “mindsight”—our capacity to perceive our own minds, as well as those of other people. Mindsight, Siegel says, becomes evident when you take the trouble to say “I feel sad” rather than “I am sad.” The latter limits you to the feeling of the moment, as if “sad” were you and you were it. But thinking “I feel sad,” Siegel writes, “suggests the ability to recognize and acknowledge a feeling, without being consumed by it. The focusing skills that are part of mindsight make it possible to see what is inside, to accept it, and in the accepting to let it go, and finally, to transform it.”

Cultivating a nonjudgmental awareness of one’s self reduces the motivation for self-deception. If you no longer expect to condemn yourself for talking too much at a meeting, you can admit that you’re a chatterbox more easily. You might think that being less aggressive in your self-management would make you more inclined to fool yourself. But psychologists have found that the opposite is the case.

Replace introspection with retrospection.

Since the future is inherently unknowable, a better way to compare selves in different times is to look backward. The writer and marketing executive Terri Trespicio proposes a “10-year test” as an aid to self-awareness. Unlike many motivational approaches, hers isn’t about the future.
Look back at who you were 10 years ago. That is a person you know, or knew. You can make a pretty good guess about how that person would see you today. So, would they be impressed? Feel sorry for you? Want to be you? Or avoid becoming you?

It’s a clever idea for promoting a more distanced view of the self. It uses one of the main sources of self-deception—the abundance of information we have (or think we have) about ourselves—and turns it into a lens for seeing more clearly. When we try to evaluate ourselves objectively, we can’t be sure we are correct (we can’t really step outside ourselves), and when we try to imagine how others see us, we are often wrong (because we don’t know other people well enough to be certain how we come across to them). The same problem occurs when we try to envision a future self—we may make a good guess, but that future self is an imaginary character, created out of our hopes and fears. That person has more in common with Batman than with the face in the mirror this morning. However, the person you were in the past was real, and you knew her or him intimately. That younger you’s reaction to you is probably easy to elicit and very likely to be accurate. And those reactions, be they negative or positive, will likely throw some of today’s self-deceptions into relief.

Don’t go it alone.

Solitude worsens self-deception, because it removes the main source of corrections to our illusions. We are a social species, instinctively attentive to the way we appear to other people. When you have company, you’re constantly receiving information about how your words and actions strike other people—whether, for example, they’re laughing sincerely at your jokes or faking it; whether they’re impressed or repulsed by your management style; whether they find your goals for next year admirable or risible. Of course, many of us are skilled at defending ourselves against judgments we don’t like, but in the absence of companionship we don’t even need to expend that effort to preserve our self-flattery.

This is why throughout the history of civilization, communities form to teach valuable skills. As anyone can tell you, learning anything (from Russian to guitar to accounting to hang-gliding) is far easier and faster when it involves at least one other person. Without a teacher or fellow-learner at hand, your impressions of yourself and your progress are never corrected. You mispronounce words in your new language and think you’re doing fine, and you avoid what’s hard in favor of what you find easy. For this reason, even innately solitary activities, like writing or religious meditation, are transmitted by teachers in communities.

A good safeguard against self-deception, then, is trusting a community of fellow practitioners. Not necessarily friends (who have an incentive not to offend you) and certainly not subordinates. But it can be an invaluable help to find a trusted colleague or two who will tell it to you straight.

As I’ve mentioned, self-delusion is not invariably harmful. Great things have been accomplished by people who refused to see themselves as others saw them. And achieving anything requires tuning out doubters and adversaries. Self-confidence and self-delusion are close cousins, and sometimes impossible to tell apart. And while it’s true that self-delusion can keep you from learning from a mistake, it’s also true that there might never have been a mistake to learn from without some earlier self-delusion to cause it. So while too much self-delusion is an obvious liability, having none whatsoever—being always ready to give up in the face of the odds—is a sure road to a life without much interest or accomplishment.

Which brings me back to the ridiculous, overly self-confident plan of my unemployed, college-dropout self. It worked.

I got the job that I unreasonably expected to get. And, as I had decided I would, I transformed it from summer work into a full-time job. I kept it for a year until I finally woke up and went back to college.

Fortunately, on that second job I began to learn how and why I had been lucky, not right. And I came to appreciate the importance of not tuning out unwelcome feedback. Today, like many adults well along in life, I look back at my former self and shake my head at his mistaken notion of himself. But—again, like many adults—I have to acknowledge something else: without that earlier self’s rose-colored glasses, I wouldn’t have climbed up to the place from which I now look down on him.

Like alcohol, marijuana, mad love and other mind-altering forces, self-delusion is often dangerous. You can’t achieve much if you make it your master.