

RESILIENCE IN ACTION

FLEXIBILITY

No Plan Survives Contact with the Enemy



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Flexibility

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Watch the Video

⌚ 8 min 24 sec

Video Transcript

Flexibility is one of the principals of warfare. The importance of flexibility was a crucial lesson I learnt as a young leader and it has proven to me time and time again that the person with the most flexibility in a situation often has the most power.

In the military we spend a large portion of our time planning, strategizing and rehearsing our tactics. We also practice what we call “Actions on” to provide planned flexibility to counteract the enemy’s most likely courses of action. But despite our plans and best efforts, we have a saying in the army that “no plan survives contact with the enemy” and hence we need to build flexibility in our culture and processes in order to cope with scenario Z that no one thought could happen but suddenly unfolds on the battlefield.

You know it’s a natural trait that most of us like to be in control, but the reality is, whether it’s on the battlefield, in business or just in life in general, there is not much that we actually have control over. As result, we need to maintain flexibility if we want to survive the uncertainty of most of the situations we encounter on a daily basis.

So, whether you operate with a reasonable amount of flexibility or have a long way to go in terms of adaptation, this section of the program will give you some great tips and exercises to help you build your coping skills and adaptability.

Now, I want to share a situation where it was paramount that I remained flexible and adaptive. In 2005, I was selected to represent Australia with the United Nations as an unarmed military peacekeeper on a mission called UNTSO. UNTSO stands for United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation and the UNTSO mission operates in the Middle East. I served on UNTSO for 13 months in total, the first 7 months was spent in Syria and the last 6 months I was working in Lebanon. For the duration of my time in Lebanon I was serving in team Sierra which was stationed at a tiny UN post, only about the size of a tennis court, so a very, very small base, called Patrol Base Khiam.

Khiam was located in the village of El Khiam on the southern border of Lebanon but right at the junction of the 3 countries, of Israel, Syria and Lebanon. Khiam was considered to be one of the most dangerous UN bases in the entire Middle East due to its location and also the fact that it was surrounded by three Hezbollah bases. The closest of these Hezbollah bases was only 75 meters away from us and the Hezbollah would sporadically have skirmishes across the border with Israel.

On the 12th of July, 2006 I was leading a UN vehicle patrol of the Khiam region when a “Mayday” call came over the radio alerting us that fighting had broken out along the border between Israel and Lebanon and we were to return immediately to the nearest UN base.

Now in that moment a number of things ran through my mind but the very first thing I did was breathe, which sounds rather simplistic, but it’s vitally important we do this as it avoids us going into a state of shock and prevents us from responding from a flight or fight mode. We cover the importance of breath in more detail in the activities.

Then, I assessed my options. And all of this would have happened very quickly. But I needed to investigate all of the options I had in terms of road networks that would get me back to base and I knew from serving in the region for 6 months that there were 4 or 5 different road options that could get me quickly back to Khiam.

The next step was to examine the pros and cons of each option keeping in mind a number of guiding factors such as cover and concealment, distance

and the time to destination, traffic congestion, potential blockage points and crucially consider the flexibility factor of each option.

I knew the most important consideration I needed was to have back-up contingencies as I simply didn't have control over how the Israeli Defence Force or the Hezbollah would respond. I therefore needed options that allowed me to make adjustments throughout the execution phase or that would provide the opportunity to consider a completely new plan if need be.

So, a key part of the process was maintaining as much flexibility as possible within each option I had at hand. The road network which provided the most flexibility to change and adapt depending on what circumstances evolved was ultimately the road I decided to take.

Throughout this situation it was also vital that I remained in a decision-making mindset so that even if I made the wrong decision, I could quickly get back on track by maintaining flexibility and simply making another decision. I call this decision-making momentum which is really important in crisis so

that we avoid becoming immobilised with fear or unable to take that next step forward.

For further insight on decision making processes head to my Leadership in Action program at matinajewell.online where there is a whole module on decision-making.

Now I've found that by maintaining flexibility in how we operate allows us to also be more resilient as we can adapt as new circumstances transpire and we have confidence to change appropriately to new environments.

I've helped clients across many industries improve their processes in terms of maintaining flexibility and how to develop this skill in the workplace.

One of the crucial components of increasing flexibility in the military is through the power of acceptance. The quicker we can accept the reality of our new situation, even if that situation is frightening or dangerous, the faster we can adapt and respond. Avoidance or even denial of changes may help people cope initially but usually they are short lived measures, counterproductive and prevent the opportunity for growth and learning.

A method I use to increase acceptance and avoid denial is by thinking, or even saying aloud, "that was then, this is now". I used this technique at the outset of the Lebanon war when the "Mayday" call came over the radio. There was no point me trying to hold on to the old situation, where we were unarmed peace keepers whose mission was to observe and monitor a peace agreement. The longer I held on to the idea that "a warzone is not the environment we were meant to work in" was futile for me and my team. In fact, holding on to that belief could indeed create more danger for my team as I would have fallen into a state of denial. Instead, I needed to adjust to the new environment swiftly and accept that everything had changed. Which also meant we needed to change the way we operated.

Flexibility and acceptance involve not only acknowledging the reality of your situation, but also assessing what can and cannot be changed; letting go of what you can't control whilst re-directing attention on what can be changed. To expand on these topics, you'll find some great activities on the STOP Method and circles of control in your workbook.

So, let's get to work, these exercises are going to help you hone your skills in acceptance and adaptability and in turn you will be able to be more flexible regardless of the situation you and your team are faced with.

Reflecting on the Video

1. What is your key takeout from the video?

2. Thinking about this, is there anything you would like to stop/start/continue in your work or life in general?

Stop:

Start:

Continue:

3. Commit to these changes at:

Work:

Home:

Other:

4. Consider sharing one or testing more of these commitments with an accountability buddy?

☐ Done

5. Pick one of those commitments and take one small, but positive action.

Chosen commitment:

Proposed action:

☐ Done

6. For the same commitment, take a slightly bigger action.

☐ Done

7. For that same commitment, take an even bigger action.

☐ Done

8. Consider booking in calendar appointments so that you can repeat tasks 5-7 for your other 2 commitments. If not today, how soon can you start this process?

☐ Done



Remember to S.T.O.P.

Here are four simple steps to help you – or to help you help others – to quickly move out of a distressed state.

Esteemed psychologist Linda Graham describes mental agility as “the ability to pause, step back, reflect, shift perspectives, create options and choose wisely”.¹

This exercise is a technique to help you do exactly that. Developed by mindfulness pioneer Jon Zabab Zinn, it is called the STOP technique.

S - Stop.

T - Take a deep breath.

O - Observe your thoughts and feelings.

P - (Be) Present.

Task

1. Set an alarm for 11:11am tomorrow, 2.02pm the day after and 3.33pm the day after that.

Top Tip: If these times conflict with anything else in your diary – just pick a new time. (Why the odd times? A simple, disruptive memorable mnemonic.)

☐ Done

2. When that timer goes off, practice the S.T.O.P. technique.

☐ Done

3. How did you feel after the exercise? Did you notice a difference after the third try?

4. Use the STOP technique in a genuine situation (without being prompted by the alarm).

☐ Done

5. How do you think this kind of technique can help you identify and manage your emotions going forward?

A similar technique is used in Acceptance Commitment Therapy, called 'Dropping Anchor', a technique you may prefer. It involves a 3-step process:

1. Acknowledging Your Thoughts and Feelings. Notice and name them, e.g. I am feeling 'sad', 'mad', 'glad' or 'joy' (as basic examples only).
2. Get 'into' your body. Stand-up. Straighten-up. Stretch. And most importantly, take a couple of slow, deep breaths.
3. Refocus Your Attention. Focus your attention on what is most useful for the situation, right now. ²

² <https://app.psychwire.com/courses/115hfbr/course>

**“GRANT ME THE SERENITY
TO ACCEPT THE THINGS
I CANNOT CHANGE, THE
COURAGE TO CHANGE
THE THINGS I CAN, AND
THE WISDOM TO KNOW
THE DIFFERENCE.”**

SERENITY PRAYER

Whatever your religious persuasion - I think there's something we can all take from this quote.



Mindful Breathing³

This exercise is going to sound breath-takingly obvious, to reconsider the importance of O².

Brief

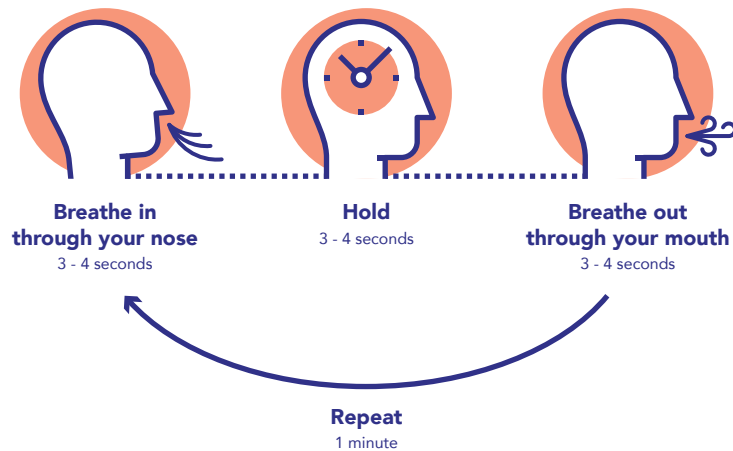
Every system in the body relies on oxygen, from cognition to digestion. Effective breathing can not only provide you with a greater sense of mental clarity, it can also help you sleep better, digest food more efficiently, improve your body's immune response, and reduce stress levels. And that's just the start!

³ Mindful Breathing was originally featured on the Greater Good in Action website produced by UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center.

Task

1. Simply focus your attention on your breath. Inhale slowly. Hold. And exhale.

Breath Check®



That's it!

This technique is really useful when you find yourself in stressful situations too. Just follow the same technique (sometimes an exaggerated breath to start helps). The more you practice using it, the easier it will be wield when you find yourself anxious or under stress.

As with similar mindfulness techniques, you'll no doubt have times when your mind wanders. That's natural. Just remember to be easy on yourself and try to bring your mind back onto your breath.

Top-tip: Download or activate one of the many breath apps. The App on my Apple Watch reminds me to breathe throughout the day when it senses I need it, with guided breathwork for 1 minute.

Arch and Craske (2006) found that, compared to a control group, participants who completed a 15 minute focused breathing exercise reported less negative emotion when responding to a series of slides depicting negative imagery. The study supports the assertion that simple breathing exercises can help improve our ability to regulate our emotions.⁴ Exercises like this work because our breath becomes an 'anchor' - helping us get a little distance from our thoughts and feelings, and strengthening our ability to fight potential feelings of overwhelm.

⁴ Arch, J. J., & Craske, M. G. (2006). Mechanisms of mindfulness: Emotion regulation following a focused breathing induction. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 44(12), 1849-1858.

Circle of Concern

How Reactive People Act

Large Circle of Concern and a small Circle of Control. A lot of time and energy is wasted reacting to issues that they can't control.



Circle of Control

How Proactive People Act

Small Circle of Concern and a large Circle of Control. A lot of time and energy is focused on issues that are within their control.



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Focus On What You Can Control

To thrive with uncertainty, we need to be flexible and accept that some things are outside of our control.

Brief

Circle of Concern Vs Circle of Control.

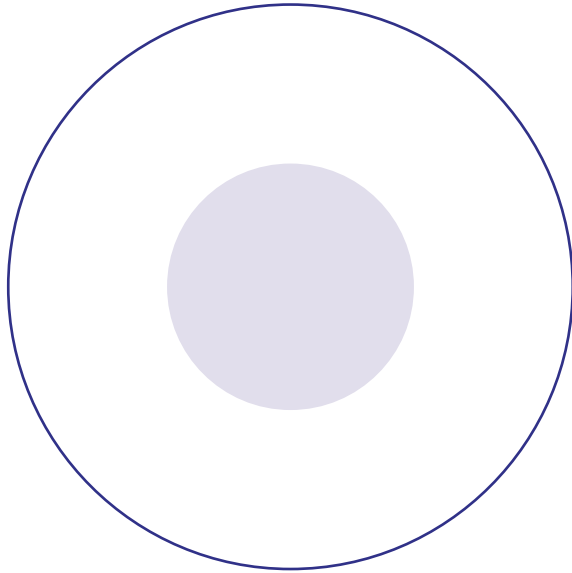
You are likely familiar with Stephen Covey's popularised notion of your Circle of Control verses your Circle of Concern. This exercise draws on that seminal work, operating from the simple premise that to worry less and get more done - it pays to be focused on what matters. That is, less time on your circle of concern and more time on the things you can control.⁵

Resilience is not a one-dimensional construct. It consists of a range of complex elements like behaviours, thoughts, feelings and skills. Yet, underneath all that complexity, eminent psychologist Suzanne Kobasa believes that 3 things determine our ability to 'bounce back' - challenge, commitment, and personal control. That is, our ability to see difficult situations as challenges to overcome, our ability to invest into our personal and professional lives, and our ability to focus on the things we have control over.

⁵ <https://jamesclear.com/brain-food>

Your Shortcut to Focused Control

Model your shortcut to focused control by drawing your own circles of concern and control.



1. List 3+ things in your circle of concern that might have the potential to take up time and energy, right now.

2. List 3+ things that you take up your circle of control that warrant your focused attention right now.

3. Pick one area that you would like to give less time and space to in your life. Then identify the reasons why that is.

4. Commit to attempting to spend less time on that area of your life. When you do find yourself thinking about it – don't beat yourself up about it. Practice the S.T.O.P. technique and shift your attention to something more productive.

☐ Done

Stretch Tasks:

5. Draw a third Circle of Influence with 3+ things outside your direct control, but potentially open to your influence.

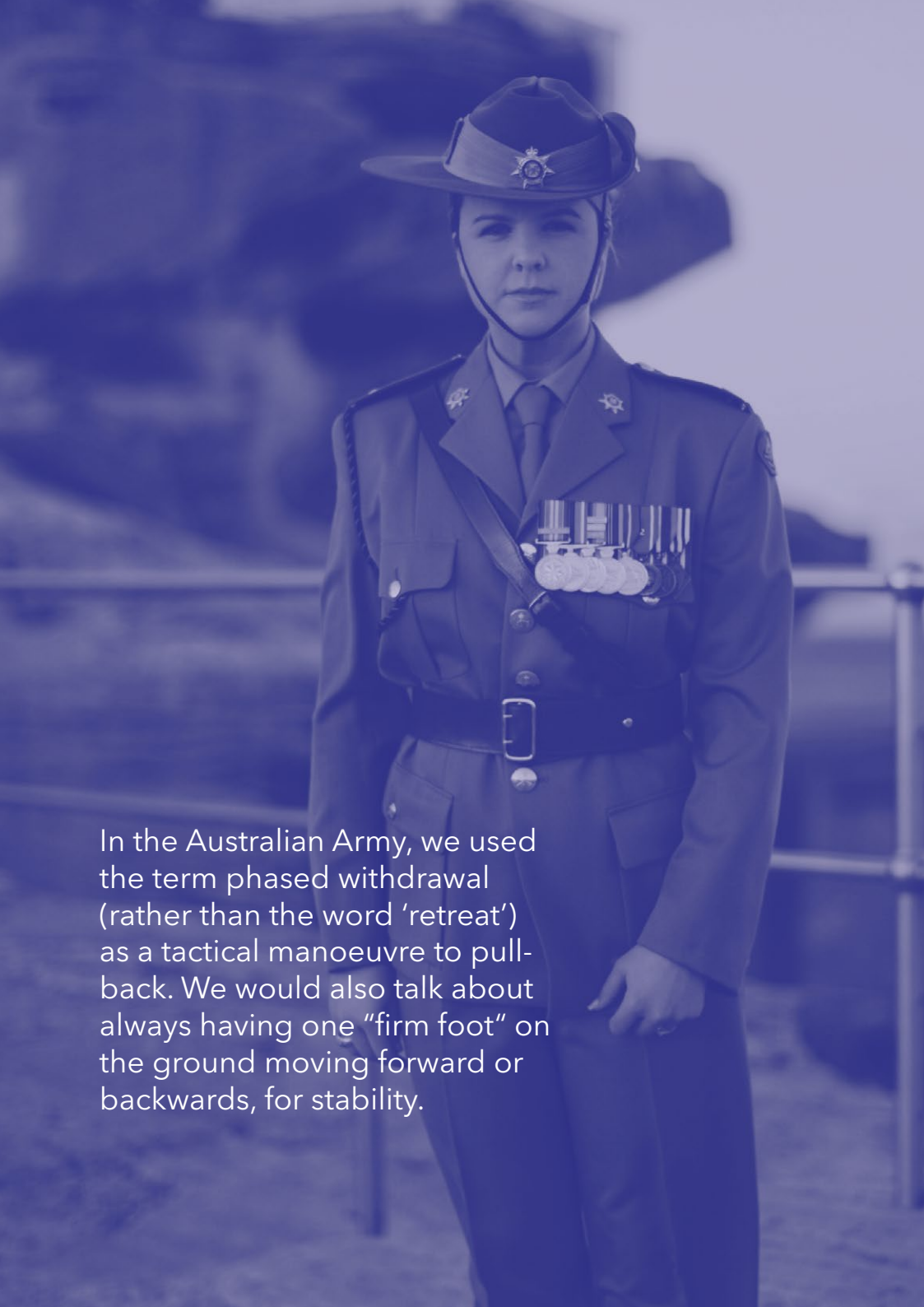
6. Did anything crop up for you there to focus on too?

A Word on Acceptance

Being able to accept the reality of the situations we find ourselves in is a key component of cognitive flexibility. It is only through this realistic appraisal that we are able to make well-informed and positive choices that take us a step further in the direction we want to be going.

Acceptance is not the same thing as denial. It's not the same thing as simply 'throwing in the towel' or 'quitting' because the going is tough. It isn't about avoidance.

Acceptance is a form of active decision-making, allowing you to assess the reality of the situation, and focus your energy on where it most makes sense. ⁶



In the Australian Army, we used the term phased withdrawal (rather than the word 'retreat') as a tactical manoeuvre to pull-back. We would also talk about always having one "firm foot" on the ground moving forward or backwards, for stability.

⁶ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/resilience/cognitive-and-emotional-flexibility/8A1DA713740F8E5D4EE0F891933058B9/core-reader>



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Bonus Reading Resource

Useful Coping Mechanisms

Some people confuse defense mechanisms with coping mechanisms. Although sharing some similarities, they are in fact different. But how?

Defense mechanisms mostly occur at an unconscious level, and people are generally unaware they are using them. Defense mechanisms can change a person's internal psychological state.

Coping mechanisms on the other hand, are typically conscious and purposeful and are used to manage an external situation that is creating problems for an individual.

More on Coping Styles and Mechanisms in the directors cut.

Good Read Recommendation



Resilience: The Science of
Mastering Life's Greatest
Challenges.

Coping Styles and Mechanisms

Ok, strap in for some theoretical stuff!

Coping styles can be problem-focused and also called instrumental or emotion- focused.

Problem-focused coping strategies are typically associated with methods of dealing with the problem in order to reduce stress, while emotion-focused mechanisms can help people handle any feelings of distress that result from the problem.

Further, coping mechanisms can be broadly categorized as active or avoidant. Active coping mechanisms usually involve an awareness of the stressor and conscious attempts to reduce stress.

Avoidant coping mechanisms, on the other hand, are characterized by ignoring or otherwise avoiding the problem.

Some coping methods, though they work for a time, are not effective for a long-term period. These ineffective coping mechanisms, which can often be counterproductive or have unintended negative consequences, are known as "maladaptive coping." Adaptive coping mechanisms are those generally considered to be healthy and effective ways of managing stressful situations.

Types of Coping Mechanisms

Among the more commonly used adaptive coping mechanisms are:

Support: Talking about a stressful event with a supportive person can be an effective way to manage stress. Seeking external support instead of self-isolating and internalizing the effects of stress can greatly reduce the negative effects of a difficult situation.

Relaxation: Any number of relaxing activities can help people cope with stress. Relaxing activities may include practicing meditation, progressive muscle relaxation or other calming techniques, sitting in nature, or listening to calming music.

Problem-solving: This coping mechanism involves identifying a problem that is causing stress and then developing and putting into action some potential solutions for effectively managing it.

Humour: Making light of a stressful situation may help people maintain perspective and prevent the situation from becoming overwhelming.

Physical activity: Exercise can serve as a natural and healthy form of stress relief. Running, yoga, swimming, walking, dance, team sports, and many other types of physical activity can help people cope with stress and the after-effects of traumatic events.

A short list of common maladaptive coping mechanisms includes:

Escape: To cope with anxiety or stress, some people may withdraw from friends and become socially isolated. They may absorb themselves in a solitary activity such as watching television, reading, or spending time online.

Unhealthy self-soothing: Some self-soothing behaviours are healthy in moderation but may turn into an unhealthy addiction if it becomes a habit to use them to self-soothe. Some examples of unhealthy self-soothing could include overeating, binge drinking, or excessive use of internet or video games.

Numbing: Some self-soothing behaviours may become numbing behaviours. When a person engages in numbing behaviour, they are often aware of what they are doing and may seek out an activity that will help them drown out or override their distress. People may seek to numb their stress by eating junk food, excessive alcohol use, or using drugs.

Compulsions and risk-taking: Stress can cause some people to seek an adrenaline rush through compulsive or risk-taking behaviours such as gambling, unsafe sex, experimenting with drugs, theft, or reckless driving.

Self-harm: People may engage in self-harming behaviours to cope with extreme stress or trauma ⁷

⁷ <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/coping-mechanisms>

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Bonus Exercise 1

Cognitive Flexibility

Originally coined by psychologists in the 1960s, cognitive flexibility has emerged from the literature and been rebranded as a popular concept in psych circles. It is traditionally defined in terms of how well an individual can adopt another perspective, change one's thinking, or mentally adapt to one's environment.⁸

Strategies for Improving Cognitive Flexibility

The good news is that there are some simple strategies you can incorporate into your life to help you become more flexible and adjust more easily to change. Improving nutrition, exercise and working on thought stopping/reframing can help improve cognitive flexibility.⁹

⁸ <https://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/10-keys-cognitive-flexibility/>

⁹ <https://www.verywellmind.com/ways-to-increase-your-mental-flexibility-2337481>



Challenges to Cognitive Flexibility

Memory

- + If you're solving a problem, you might choose the obvious path or you might recall a similar challenge from your past or a story a friend told you about solving a similar challenge or something you saw in a film. The act of using a memory from the past to solve a current problem, not because you've encountered this problem before, but because you are able to make a connection between this one and a different one (detect a pattern), this ability is at the heart of cognitive flexibility.
- + It is the same process going on when you hear someone's story and you respond with your own, recognizing a similar theme. This is harder than it sounds. You might have a better, more relevant story, but you cannot remember it now. Improving your ability to remember it would be enhancing cognitive flexibility. As would improving your ability to recall relevant facts/things you have read when someone brings up a specific topic in conversation.
- + To think flexibly, you must be able to draw from multiple reserves of knowledge and memory to engage with a task or problem. You need an ability to reach deeply into the past and not just draw your immediate reserves, which requires a particularly good declarative memory.
- + Being able to see all possible relevant experiences or bites of knowledge at once and choose the best response based on all of those, but most of us cannot recall enough in the moment...how do we improve at that function?
- + "We remember things because they either stand out, they relate to and can easily be integrated in our existing knowledge base, or it's something we retrieve, recount or use repeatedly over time," explains Sean Kang, PhD, assistant professor in the Department of Education at Dartmouth College.

Confirmation Bias

- + As we get older, we sometimes get fixed in our way of thinking and struggle to latch onto utterly new ideas. We tend to shape them to match info we already know and therefore miss out on the valuable part of learning.

Salience

- + There is an entire part of the brain, the Salience Network, devoted to noticing things which stand out in our environment. It requires cognitive flexibility to determine which of these things are worth paying attention to.
- + "Our brain is constantly bombarded by sensory information, and we have to score all that information in terms of how personally relevant it is for guiding our behaviour," says William Seeley, a neurologist at the University of California, San Francisco.

Myopia

- + You know that point in a conversation when you start thinking, "This is boring, small talk, things we've sort of talked about before"? Cognitive flexibility is being able to flex a brain muscle and push the curtains aside and look out the window toward a more interesting conversation topic. Many of us just stay in the mill pond or go farther down the rabbit hole rather than stepping back and trying to sway things in a more interesting direction. Most of us just go with the flow, which is fine. But true cognitive flexibility would be directing this flow in a way that is valuable to you and your fellow conversation participants. To be able to judge what you know that could be most useful to the people you are talking to in that moment, that's cognitive flexibility.

Low latent inhibition

- + Latent inhibition is the name for the fact that it takes us longer to prescribe meaning to a familiar stimulus than to a new stimulus. For example, we may pass by the same houses on our street every day and prescribe little meaning to them unless our attention is drawn to them for a reason. This is normal and allows our brain to ignore old information so it can focus on new information. Some people, however, have what is called low latent inhibition, which means they have a harder time placing those houses in the category of "old information" and moving on. Individuals with autism become easily overwhelmed by stimuli that other people consider familiar. Poets, writers, and other artists also tend to get caught up in the details of things, which allows for greater creativity but also may sometimes prevent the brain from seeing the bigger picture or moving on.

Information bottleneck

- + Sometimes our cognitive flexibility suffers because we have got so much on our mind or so much information or experience stored in our knowledge reserve that a bottleneck occurs. Like cubes of ice blocking the flow of water out of a bottle, the possible pieces of information we could bring to a situation is so great that nothing comes to mind at all. We will offer a few ways to overcome this phenomenon in the next section.

Rigid thinking

- + Rigid thinking is the opposite of cognitive flexibility. It's what defines mental conditions like depression and anxiety: We get stuck in a loop of rumination and can't seem to think about things a different way. Becoming aware of the pattern of our own thoughts is a huge step forward in seeing things from a new angle and feeling more positive about the world.

Reinforcement

- + Thinking is like walking: you leave a footprint wherever you go, and the path becomes increasingly well-trodden the more you go down it. Neural pathways are the same way. Our brain remembers what we reinforce in our neural pathways, so if we're using the same facts or telling the same stories all the time, we're branding our neural pathways with them, which means we may end up repeating the same story to the same person and responding with less cognitive flexibility to situations and tasks.¹⁰

¹⁰<https://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/10-keys-cognitive-flexibility/>

Let's Get Flexible – Cogitatively!

1. Review the Maladaptive Coping Mechanism list above – are there any that you identify with?

2. Pick one and develop a strategy for overcoming this.

3. Make a note to review your own progress over the coming week.

☐ Done

Additional Reading

What Other Experts Say About Resiliency

Emotional Insight

Another example of building personal resilience at work is by developing and strengthening emotional insight. Insight is closely related to emotional intelligence. Individuals with a level of insight have a level of awareness about the full range of emotions they experience, from 'negative' through to 'positive'.

They will also consider the ramifications of their own reactions and behaviour and the effects their own actions have on others. Psychologically resilient individuals can be described as emotionally intelligent (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

A Biological Basis of Inflexibility: ACG

An area of the brain called the anterior cingulate gyrus (ACG) tends to be overactive in people who have difficulty with cognitive flexibility. Located in the front part of the brain, the ACG is involved with shifting attention.

When the ACG works well, it allows us to focus on something, let go, and then shift to focus on something else. However, when it is overactive, there is a tendency for people to get stuck. One of my patients described her experience with this as "being on a rat's exercise wheel, where the thoughts just go over and over and over."¹¹

'Bricolage'

In her Harvard Business Review article on resilience, Diane Coutu evokes the concept of bricolage, or tinkering, as proposed by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Bricolage in the modern sense can be defined as a kind of inventiveness, an ability to improvise a solution to a problem without proper or obvious tools or materials.¹²

¹¹ <https://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/10-keys-cognitive-flexibility/>

¹² <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/resilience/cognitive-and-emotional-flexibility/8A1DA713740F8E5D4EE0F891933058B9/core-reader>



Notes