

A Guide to Fostering Flexible Thinking

Mention the word flexibility, and most people think about yoga poses or Pilates positions instead of our thought processes. But what if we could use a flexible mindset to promote good health in our mental and emotional wellbeing?

Our mind is like a muscle, the more diverse ways that we use it, the more flexible it becomes. With practice and awareness, we can all begin to develop a more agile mind which in turn can help us to live more resilient, creative and fulfilled lives.

“Mental agility can enable us to more fruitfully and efficiently pursue both individual and group goals,” suggested Wilma Koutstaal, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of Minnesota. “It can enable us to be more efficient problem solvers and problem finders, helping to foster creativity and innovation and allowing us to identify and realise promising opportunities.”

Mental (cognitive) flexibility is about adaptability and our willingness to shift our thought patterns between the abstract and the specific, to respond to given situations in less regimented ways.

Rigid, 'black and white' thinking can help some people to eliminate stress-producing details in some cases, but this doesn't make us deep thinkers or as creative as many of us would like to be. It doesn't allow us to deal with problems quickly when they arrive. Yes, rigid thinking can help us make quick decisions about some things, but it is not suited to help us with our overall quality of life.

It's easier, for example, to pick one position; to be against the war or for lower taxes, for instance, instead of evaluating the complexities and recognising that war sometimes has positive outcomes and that lower taxes aren't always for the best.

Sometimes it can be hugely beneficial for us to be highly accurate in the details (of things), and that's a good thing, but then there are many instances when we need to be more abstract to adapt to the unexpected situations and circumstances that will inevitably always arise.

WHAT FLEXIBLE THINKING DOES

Developing a more flexible mindset allows us to evaluate and adjust to the different tasks, roles and responsibilities we are presented with each day.

Sometimes it can serve us (and other) to be more rigid, to follow specific rules; sometimes it's better to be more open and loose. Raising children can be an excellent example of an instance when it's imperative that we implement both ways of thinking (and behaving).

Cognitive flexibility is related to our perceptions, emotions, actions and even our deepest motivations. A change of environment, attitude or behaviour will also influence how we think. When we're feeling happy or optimistic, for example, we tend toward broad and inclusive thinking. Fear narrows our focus down to specific details. When we're able to make that mental shift without remaining stuck in a particular mindset, we're demonstrating mental flexibility.

How mentally agile we are from moment to moment will be different for all people all of the time. A flexible mindset moves us away from limiting 'black and white' thought patterns to a place of greater openness and possibility.



In those moments, when we are feeling stuck, tired of the routine or caught in old habits or repetitive patterns of behaviour, we can adapt our thinking and consequent actions in a way that will boost our inner resilience and our ability to solve complex problems.

HOW TO DEVELOP AN FLEXIBLE MIND

While some people have a natural temperament toward cognitive flexibility, all of us can become better at it, through practice, patience and perseverance.

Here are five brain exercises that you can start using today to either further develop your cognitive flexibility, or, to help your clients further improve theirs.

1) Change your context. Take a vacation. Take a walk around the block. Take a coffee break. Modify the context or your environment, and you'll feel your mind shift. Exercise offers another great mental boost.

2) Try something new. Learn to dance, pick up a new language or cook a new recipe. In a study led by Koutstaal, older adults who participated in a variety of novel and stimulating activities over a three-month period showed a significant gain in creativity, problem-solving abilities and other markers of "fluid intelligence" when compared to a control group. Mental flexibility is aided by novelty, and that contributes to brain growth and development throughout a lifetime.

3) Question your thoughts and words. Become aware of what you're thinking and saying. Don't attach to or lock into one way of thinking, Maisel says. Also, notice your language. Dispute those thoughts and words that don't serve you. Then, substitute them with more productive ideas and phrases.

4) Plan to be spontaneous. Change up your routine. If you're like Koutstaal and take an evening walk, occasionally venture along a new route. Occasionally alter the order of your day.

5) Mix up the way you think. Innovative and creative ideas often arise after periods of both focused thought and diffuse attention, Koutstaal says. So, allow time to concentrate on projects or challenges both in a deliberate manner and in an unfocused way while you're doing something else.

These 5 tips will not only help your brain to grow in agility and flexibility, but they should also leave you feeling more resilient, creative, and far more confident about accomplishing more of your most intimidating personal goals.

Mental flexibility is not arbitrary or whimsical but is more a balance between control and spontaneity. When we become more mentally agile, we do pursue goals, but those goals will often be more flexible - alongside the approach that we take towards fulfilling them.

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION

- 1) What times in your past can you identify as times in which you were cognitively flexible?
- 2) What times in your past might you have benefitted from having a greater flexibility in your thinking?
- 3) How much do you enjoy having conversations with other people who are cognitively inflexible?
- 4) What area in your life could you become more cognitively flexible in?

If you're feeling stuck in your relationships or personal growth or just struggling to find the "why" for your life, I'd love to share what coaching can do for you. Let's chat about how to honour your voice and bring it forward – what gets in the way, and how to start integrating your voice in healthy ways. Start somewhere, even if it is a whisper.

Schedule a complimentary 20-minute breakthrough session today! Book now.