

Building Cognitive Flexibility

Objective

To increase cognitive flexibility by reducing rigidity, redirecting thoughts, and developing empathy.

What to Know

Cognitive flexibility is the ability to:

- adapt to changing situations.
- shift between tasks.
- think in a non-rigid and open way.
- juggle many concepts at once.
- see things from different perspectives.

Cognitive flexibility occurs when you interact with people that have differing points of view, or when you move from talking to a customer or your boss to chatting with a child. Without cognitive flexibility, you would be unable to “switch” your mind from situation to situation. It is essential for success in the workplace and in everyday life.

If you have rigid thinking, you may struggle to solve problems or relate to others. If you struggle with cognitive flexibility, you can improve and develop it. Practicing this skill can create new neural pathways in your brain, improving your cognitive flexibility.

Here are some ways you can improve your cognitive flexibility.

1. Start small. Introduce cognitive flexibility in small, low-risk ways. You might expose yourself to new situations without moving too far outside your comfort zone. Here is an example: The next time you order a meal at a restaurant, choose something from your top three meals instead of ordering your first choice. Then, imagine the menu changes or the restaurant is out of your favorite food. By taking small steps and opening yourself up to new challenges and experiences, you will identify other options when you need to be flexible.

2. Build empathy. Understanding others’ experiences helps you build cognitive flexibility. If you find being empathic challenging, try these activities:

- read fiction to see a story from someone else’s point of view
- ask co-workers how they would approach a problem
- practice active listening and intentionally see things from another perspective
- connect with an upset loved one and put yourself in their shoes

3. Interrupt and redirect your thoughts. If you tend to have negative thoughts about yourself, stop and redirect. Here is an example: Think about a time you experienced an unpleasant event and started telling yourself negative statements, such as, “I can’t ever get anything right!” Did your mind immediately begin reviewing all the ways you have failed? When something like this happens, practice redirecting your thoughts. Pay attention to what you are thinking and

interrupt the negative thoughts. Then, focus on something else entirely. If this is challenging, change your environment. Take a walk, chat with a loved one, or do something else that will distract you. Pressing “pause” on your thoughts, redirecting, and focusing on something else is cognitive flexibility.

4. Ask, “What else could be true?” Ask this question if you feel stuck, frustrated, or resistant. Do this in a gentle and kind way to take a broader view of a situation, consider other perspectives, or identify other options. Here is an example: You planned to meet your friend for lunch, and she cancels at the last minute. You might think, “I bet she’s mad at me! I wonder if she just found something better to do. Maybe she’s meeting another friend for lunch instead of me...” But what else might be true? Pause and breathe for a few seconds and consider what else might be possible in this situation. Maybe your friend is sick, or perhaps something urgent came up. There are many alternative explanations in this situation. Asking this question and considering options enhances cognitive flexibility.

What to Do

Answer the following questions to assess your current level of cognitive flexibility.

How easily do you adapt to changes in your routine or plans?

How comfortable are you with uncertainty?

How often do you try to see things from someone else's perspective? Explain.

How often do you engage in activities that require you to think creatively or outside the box? Describe one example.

How often do you seek out new experiences or challenges?

Reflect on your answers to the questions above.

What surprised you about your answers?

What areas of cognitive flexibility do you feel most confident in? What areas do you need to work on?

How has a lack of cognitive flexibility impacted your life? Give specific examples.

What benefits do you think you would experience if you were more flexible?

Identify three strategies you can use to improve your cognitive flexibility. Some examples:

- trying something new
- taking on a new challenge
- practicing mindfulness or meditation to increase awareness of thoughts and emotions
- seeking out different perspectives or opinions
- changing your routine or doing things in a different order to challenge your brain

What will you do?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

For each strategy, answer the following questions.

How do you plan to implement it in your daily life?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What are some potential obstacles or challenges?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

How will you measure progress and success?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Next, create an action plan for increasing your cognitive flexibility, including:

- 1. Three goals you want to achieve** (e.g., “I will adapt to changes in my schedule without feeling anxious.”).
- 2. Steps you will take to achieve those goals** (e.g., “I will meditate ten minutes each day to increase my awareness of my thoughts and emotions.”).
- 3. A timeline for achieving your goals** (e.g., “I will review my progress in one month and adjust as needed”).
- 4. Resources or support you require to achieve your goals** (e.g., “I will ask my counselor for feedback on my progress.”).

Write down your goals:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Steps to achieve your goals:

Goal 1

Timeline: _____

Goal 2

Timeline: _____

Goal 3

Timeline: _____

What are some resources or support you will need to achieve your goals?

Remember, improving cognitive flexibility takes time and effort, but it can have significant benefits for your mental health and well-being.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
