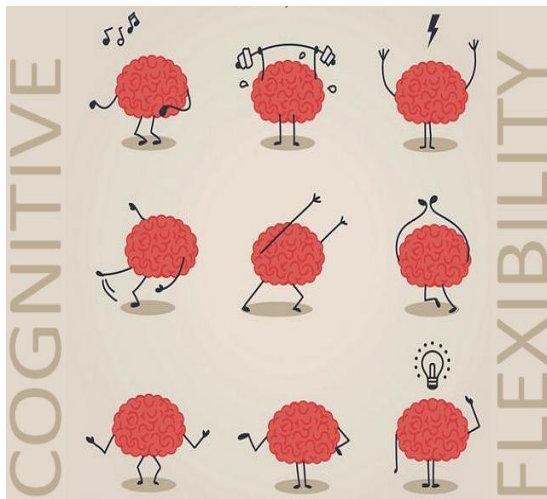


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The Importance of Thinking Flexibly (Especially These Days)

Whether one is a student or parent, they could likely picture a time when one math problem took them an entire night to complete. They might have sat there for hours with the textbook, a pencil, and a calculator only to take one look at the answer and realize that the problem could have been solved in minutes. Sometimes, in the thick of solving the math equation, it can be hard to take a step back and look at it differently. This could make it harder and longer to find the solution.

One's inability to think outside the box applies to more than just middle/high school math homework. People can be rigid in their thoughts about how they should be living their very own lives. As humans and creatures of habit, we often make consistent and predictable choices. On one hand, this can keep life safe and comfortable. On the other hand, this can send us into a downward spiral of boredom and purposelessness. However, when people are flexible in their thinking, they allow themselves to adjust and adapt to this ever-changing world.

What is Cognitive Flexibility?

In the TED talk: *How Cognitive Flexibility Changed My Life*, Chantise Holliman defines the word cognitive as “of the mind or thoughts,” and the word flexibility as “able to be modified or changed.” Therefore, she defines cognitive flexibility as “the ability to adjust

or change your thinking when presented with unexpected variables. Simply put, cognitive flexibility is the ability to think on your feet.

Interview with Dr. Anne Spahr

I sat down with Dr. Anne Spahr, a new provider at North Shore Center. Dr. Spahr is a licensed clinical psychologist who specializes in a variety of conditions. Some include adjustment disorders and self-esteem. Because of her expertise in these areas, I asked Dr. Spahr a series of questions on the topic of cognitive flexibility.

The Interview:

1. *What does Cognitive Flexibility mean to you?*

Dr. Spahr states that cognitive flexibility is the ability to change the way you think about something. She describes cognitive flexibility as “the foundation of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT).” When therapists practice CBT, they work with a client to define their current thought processes, help them assess why they think this way, and work to develop alternative ways of thinking.

Dr. Spahr then talks about cognitive rigidity, which is when people get stuck in their current thinking patterns. According to Dr. Spahr, people cannot solve their problems with the same way of thinking. People often need a therapist to help reverse their cognitive rigidity because they cannot see the way they think. In therapy, people can bounce ideas off their therapist, which allows them to reevaluate their current thought processes. Eventually, they will be able to think about things differently and ultimately create new solutions for their problems. Therefore, as a therapist, Dr. Spahr’s goal is to help change people’s thought patterns for the better.

2. *How young should you start teaching cognitive flexibility?*

Dr. Spahr says, once kids can walk and talk, they can make choices. Therefore, cognitive flexibility can be introduced at a very young age.

3. *What are ways you can teach it to children? To adults?*

For little kids, Dr. Spahr is a big fan of having young children choose between two options. For example, letting a child choose between two shirts or two breakfast kinds of cereal is a great way to establish cognitive flexibility at a young age. Also, letting your children try and solve problems and make mistakes is much easier to get through when they are little. The older one gets, the more damage their mistakes may cause. In most cases, the mistakes made by a 6-year-old are far less harmful or permanent than the mistakes made by a

26-year-old. Therefore, parents need to let their kids make wrong choices and create problems. Then, work to find a solution WITH their child, NOT FOR their child.

When it comes to establishing cognitive flexibility in adults, the process is more complex. First, Dr. Spahr asks her clients: “How do you think about it?” Then she asks: “Why do you think about it that way?” Finally, she asks: “Is there anyone else who thinks about it differently?” In doing this, Dr. Spahr encourages people to explore different angles of thinking. She also addresses the “stay in your lane idea.” Meaning that people often believe they have to stay on the straight and narrow to reach success. However, Dr. Spahr encourages clients not to be confined to a narrow lane of thinking. She helps them to realize their lane of thought is much wider than they think, allowing them the room to explore alternative ways to think about a situation.

For Dr. Spahr, it is crucial to teach both children and adults how to be cognitively flexible. Typically, people become cognitively rigid in an attempt to avoid doing something wrong. Oftentimes, they have an “I need to do it this way or it’s wrong” mentality. Dr. Spahr states people become afraid to explore alternative ways of doing something because they don’t want to upset someone else. They worry that others will not take kindly to them breaking the status quo. Therefore, they continue down the same path, try the same solutions, and form cognitively rigid ideals.

4. *What is the importance of being cognitively flexible? Especially today (during the pandemic)?*

Dr. Spahr’s word for cognitive flexibility is “pivot.” The better/quicker people can pivot, the less distressed they will be. Dr. Spahr compares life to surfing. Some people are great surfers; they know exactly what they have to do to stay on their board and continue to ride the waves of life. However, other people cannot surf life’s waves. They jump off their boards and struggle to keep afloat when the waves come at them.

Dr. Spahr states that people’s personalities can affect how well they adjust to a situation. For example, introverts had an easier time adjusting to the COVID-19 lockdown than extroverts. In addition to personality, Dr. Spahr states that one’s attitude toward a situation can also affect adjustment. When faced with a new situation, such as a pandemic, some people deny life has changed. They want to go about life the same way and try to do so; therefore, making it harder for them to adjust. Dr. Spahr states that it’s almost as if our mind knows something is

different, but it doesn't want it to be, and it thinks we can reverse the change by not changing. However, when a situation reminds people that times are different, they become stressed and worried all over again. To fully adapt, one has to be able to say: "I'm going to work with the situation as it is right now." Instead of saying: "I want it to be like it used to be, so I'm going to go through life acting like nothings changed."

5. *What can families (parents and children), adolescents, and younger/older adults do to grow their cognitive flexibility in this time?*

Dr. Spahr states that age can help increase cognitive flexibility on its own. The older people get, the more life they live, and the more they learn to "pivot." However, young children have not learned cognitive flexibility from life yet. Therefore, parents and families could benefit from working on these skills at home. One of the best ways to grow a child's cognitive flexibility is by asking them to make choices and solve problems. You can also practice different ways of thinking with your kids by asking them: "what is another way you could do this or think about this?" Through these questions, your child can create multiple solutions to a problem, pick one, and see how it plays out. Parents can also ask their children, "what were you thinking?" However, Dr. Spahr encourages you to use a genuine tone when asking this (don't interrogate). Asking this can help a child walk through what their thought process was.

6. *How does cognitive flexibility influence self-acceptance, if it does at all?*

Dr. Spahr says that cognitive flexibility definitely influences self-acceptance. If you feel there is only one way to be, for the world to accept you, then you're not going to allow yourself to think in any other way. Sometimes people create a mold of "who they should be" based on the opinions of someone else. When they try to live by others' likes, wants, or expectations, then they cannot accept themselves. Cognitive flexibility is especially important when people realize that they don't fit in the "perfect person" mold they created. They need to explore new ways of thinking so they can find out who they are and what they want. Once people find themselves, they are able to start finding self-acceptance.

Wrapping It Up

Cognitive flexibility can be summarized as one's ability to "pivot" or adjust to life demands. In the middle of this pandemic, being cognitively flexible is an important skill to have. Without it, one will never learn to adjust to this rapidly changing world. As Dr. Spahr said, continuing to stay in one's lane, living the same life, and trying the same solutions won't help anyone solve their problems. Think of the times people drive on the interstate and change lanes without

thinking twice about it. Maybe it was to avoid an accident or because the car in front of them was too slow. No matter what the reason, they knew that the lane change would help them get to their destination faster. Exploring other lanes of thinking and learning to pivot in the face of the unexpected is no different than driving. Just as changing lanes makes the interstate drive faster, changing thoughts makes adjusting to life easier.