

Cognitive Flexibility

Being Able to See More Than One Way | Space to Breathe Therapy

What is cognitive flexibility?

Cognitive flexibility is the capacity to shift between ideas, consider alternative explanations, adapt a plan when circumstances change and adjust responses when new information becomes available. It is one part of executive functioning, alongside working memory and inhibition. It does not mean agreeing with everyone, suppressing emotions or abandoning personal needs. Sometimes the most flexible choice is to maintain a boundary while changing how it is communicated.

Flexibility is influenced by context. Fatigue, high anxiety, sensory overload, uncertainty, time pressure and limited information can make it harder to move between perspectives. A person may be highly flexible in a familiar interest but struggle when an unexpected demand arrives. These variations are not a measure of intelligence, motivation or character.

How flexible thinking works

Imagine a meeting changes at short notice. An initial thought might be, "This ruins everything." A more flexible response is not forced optimism. It may involve acknowledging frustration, checking what has actually changed, considering whether the meeting can be moved, asking for an agenda or identifying which part of the original plan can be preserved. Multiple possibilities create choices, even when the situation remains difficult.

What research suggests

Cognitive flexibility is studied in cognitive psychology and executive-function research. Task-switching experiments show that moving between rules or tasks can have a mental cost; being flexible is not the same as switching effortlessly. Cognitive behavioural approaches also encourage examining interpretations and generating alternatives, but cognitive flexibility is broader than any single therapy technique. Evidence does not support treating one short self-report exercise as a clinical measure of flexibility.

Common signs of reduced flexibility under stress

Someone might feel stuck on one explanation, find changes disproportionately draining, repeatedly revisit a decision, struggle to see options or feel that a plan must happen exactly as expected. These experiences can also relate to anxiety, trauma, burnout, neurodivergence or environmental barriers. The aim is to understand the circumstances, not label a person as rigid.

A compassionate starting point

Ask: "What matters most here? What is within my control? What information is missing? Is there another approach that protects my needs?" Taking a pause, reducing demands and seeking practical support can be more helpful than pressuring yourself to think differently immediately.

Five pathways to flexible thinking

Practical examples and adaptations

1. A different perspective

Separate observation from interpretation. “My colleague did not reply” is an observation; “They are upset with me” is one possible interpretation. Other possibilities include workload, absence, missed messages or uncertainty about the answer. You do not need to decide which explanation is true before collecting more information.

2. New possibilities

When the mind offers only two options, ask whether there is a third. If a task feels impossible, alternatives might include splitting it into smaller parts, asking for clarification, changing the deadline, doing a lower-demand version or deciding it is not necessary today. Flexibility can include changing the environment rather than changing yourself.

3. Alternative approaches

Try “same goal, different route.” If a verbal conversation is overwhelming, a written message may achieve the same purpose. If a routine is interrupted, keep the essential steps and move optional ones. A successful alternative should be accessible and realistic, not simply another demand.

4. More balanced thinking

Balanced thinking makes room for more than one truth: “I am disappointed and I can still ask for help”; “This feels uncertain and I do not need to solve everything now.” Avoid replacing difficult thoughts with statements you do not believe. The aim is accuracy and choice, not constant positivity.

5. A positive way forward

Choose one small next action. It might be to gather information, rest before deciding, ask for an adjustment, write two possible responses or revisit the issue tomorrow. Afterwards, notice what helped and what did not. This creates useful feedback without turning every decision into a performance test.

Workplace and neurodivergent considerations

Predictable routines, written instructions, clear priorities, transition warnings, quieter environments and sufficient processing time can reduce unnecessary cognitive load. For autistic or ADHD individuals, flexibility should never be demanded as a substitute for reasonable adjustments. The responsibility for an accessible environment is shared, and a preference for consistency may be adaptive.

When to seek further support

If distress, anxiety or difficulty adapting is significantly affecting daily life, a GP or qualified mental health professional can help explore contributing factors and suitable support. This guide is educational and does not diagnose a condition or replace personalised care.

Reflection worksheets and personal plan

Complete at your own pace. Skip any question that does not feel helpful.

Worksheet 1 | One situation, several explanations

Choose a recent situation where you felt stuck. Write what happened as observable facts, then consider two other plausible interpretations. You do not need to believe them yet.

Situation and facts:

My first interpretation:

Two other possible explanations:

Worksheet 2 | Same goal, different route

What was your original plan? What matters most about it? List two alternatives, including an option that reduces demands or asks for support.

Original plan and essential need:

Two accessible alternatives:

Worksheet 3 | My flexibility support plan

Notice what makes change harder: time pressure, exhaustion, sensory demands, unclear expectations or something else. Identify one adjustment and one supportive person or resource.

My early warning signs:

An adjustment or support I can request:

One small step I will try this week:

Further reading

Diamond, A. (2013). Executive functions. Annual Review of Psychology, 64, 135–168. | Miyake, A. et al. (2000). The unity and diversity of executive functions. Cognitive Psychology, 41, 49–100.