3
How Flexible Are You?

*We don’t see things the way they are. We see them the way we are.*
—Talmud

One beautiful September morning not long ago, I received a call from my good friend and colleague Bill. Bill is also an executive coach and has been in business for himself for more than 15 years. He has successfully coached executives at some of the best-known companies and universities in the country. In fact, Bill is one of the rare people to attain the status of Master Certified Coach as per the International Coaching Federation, which requires more than 2,500 hours of coaching to achieve this rank. In short, Bill is really good at what he does and I respect his thoughts on all issues regarding coaching. Unfortunately, Bill was calling to tell me that a client he had referred to me for coaching had chosen someone else to be his coach. “Okay,” I thought, “this happens. It’s not always a good fit and it’s not the first or last time that I lost a client to someone else.” I was disappointed but not devastated. I don’t like losing a sale and I also recognized that this was part of the life that I had chosen as an independent consultant.

Then, Bill said those words that people with a low set point for resilience dread (yes, me!): “Would you mind if I passed along some feedback from the client?” I said, “Of course,” even though I knew it was going to be rough and I
really didn’t want to hear it. For the next couple of minutes, Bill told me how the client said that I came across as too arrogant and that I missed several opportunities to coach in the moment. I immediately began to defend myself being called “arrogant,” as that might be the biggest insult you could lay upon me. I was angry and hurt. But as I reflected back on the conversation with the client, I understood how this impression could have been made. I was devastated.

The rest of the day was not very productive as I kept going back to my conversation with Bill. It hurt and I was beginning to think about how my entire business may be in jeopardy and that maybe I wasn’t as good at this as I thought I was...and the downward spiral began. I questioned my ability as a coach. I doubted my ability to sell my services to top tier executives. I started to believe that my colleagues would never refer business to me again.

Then, around 3 p.m., my youngest son arrived home from school. He sat down to do his homework while I checked a couple of emails, still worried that my business was collapsing before my eyes. Sensing that something was wrong, he asked me if I was okay. Since I do my best to model the behaviors I think are healthy for my boys, I proceeded to tell him about my conversation with Bill, how bad I felt, and what I thought were some of the implications for all of this: *I’m not a great coach and I’ll get less clients.*

With a confused look on his face he offered up the following: “Dad, that’s crazy. You’re great at what you do. Your clients pay for you to fly around the country and give talks. And when I saw you speak at the movie theater (he attended my talk on resilience to members of our business community back in 2013) everyone clapped really loud and they were laughing at your jokes. They thought you were awesome.”

I was dumbfounded for several reasons. First, how could a fourth grader be so skilled as to know that I was sad? And second, he was right! The points he made were all accurate. My thoughts on the situation were excluding the hard facts. I was not considering years of results that led to a successful business with satisfied clients. I had fallen into the trap of rigid, negative thinking.
Resilient people experience guilt, embarrassment, anger, fear, and anxiety just like the rest of us. They don’t feel, however, that they have to be upbeat and positive all of the time. They get knocked down, spend a little time on the ground, and get back up. When they get bad news, it hurts them just like it hurts the rest of us. And one of the key skills of resilient people is being able to engage in what I call flexible thinking. They challenge their thoughts to find new ways of looking at the situation. They check for accuracy, look for made-up stories, and avoid all-or-nothing thinking. In short, they’re the opposite of close-minded.

Imagine for a second that you are playing a game of catch with your 3-year-old son in your driveway. The driveway has a slight decline out to the street and your son is standing toward the street while you are uphill. You estimate the number of bounces it will take to get the ball directly into his hands because, at 3 years old, he does not yet know how to adjust to the ball. On the next throw you accidentally put a little too much into your throw and the ball goes directly over your son’s head. And what does a 3-year-old boy do when his ball goes in the street? He runs right after it. You yell to stop him but he is so focused on the ball that he keeps on running. To end this made-up nightmare on a more positive note, let’s assume your son makes it safely back to the driveway.

As you continue to play catch, you might question yourself with thoughts like: “Why doesn’t my son listen to me? I’ve told him a million times not to run in the street. What is wrong with my parenting that he doesn’t respect me? And what was I thinking by not playing in the yard where it’s safer, or switching sides with him to prevent the ball from going into the street?” This downward spiral starts a pessimistic mood, which leads to lower levels of energy, a fight with your spouse, giving up on harder tasks, and even snapping at your son (who has done nothing wrong).

Now, for a moment, consider the scenario we just reviewed with one small change. Imagine that your neighbor is walking his dog and watches as you bounce the ball too hard. It vaults clear over your son’s head and he runs straight into the street. Like before, you yell for him to stay in the driveway and he continues with an innate desire to get the ball from the street and (like before) he returns safely. Your neighbor,
seeing all of this, says to you, “What kind of father/mother are you? How could you let your son run into a dangerous street? How come your son has no respect for you? And, by the way, why didn’t you switch places with him or play in the yard where it’s safer?”

If you’re anything like me, you immediately launch into an argument with your neighbor saying, “I’ll tell you what kind of parent I am. I was up at 2 a.m. with him when he was afraid of the thunder. I stayed home from work today because he wasn’t feeling well in the morning. And, when he was feeling better, I spent about two hours on my knees playing Legos with him! Then, he asked me if we could go outside and play catch. That’s what kind of dad I am!” One of the differences between the two scenarios is the difference between being flexible in your thinking and locking yourself into being “right” and not questioning yourself.

Arguing with yourself is a tool that begins with first recognizing that your thoughts are lacking perspective. We instinctively debate with our neighbor who tells us we’re rotten parents because we know he is wrong and we’re confident that there is another way to see the situation. We instinctively accept our own thoughts as the truth without arguing. The first step in gaining flexibility in your thinking is to admit there may be more to the story.

In the corporate workshop on resilience that we facilitate, there is an anagrams exercise that really gets people thinking. (Anagrams are sets of letters that don’t make any sense as they are presented to you. To solve the anagrams, you move the letters around until they form words.) We tell the participants that they are to solve a set of 10 anagrams on their own with no help from other participants. Each anagram is on the screen for only 15 seconds. Their job is simple: Take the mixed up letters and rearrange them until they make a word in English. The participants get to work and immediately start shifting in their seats. They look around to see how their colleagues are doing and then the nervous smiles and giggles come about. Some give up. Some write down the anagrams they see on the screen in hope of solving them later.
How Flexible Are You?

After all 10 anagrams have come and gone, we have a big debrief on the exercise in which we ask a couple of questions. First, we ask them to imagine that an electronic recording device is connected to their brain and it records every single word that they said to themselves during the activity. Many people have trouble answering this. Others say something like, “Boy, I’m stupid.” Or they offer up, “I can’t believe I’m the only one who isn’t good at this. I’ll just write so that no one notices how much I’m struggling.” The next question that I ask is about the emotions that they experienced. Again, the typical answers are that they experience frustration, anxiety, and a little bit of anger toward me for having them do this in a class!

Then, I reveal that only two of the anagrams were solvable, which usually brings about some laughter. The purpose of the exercise is to create awareness so that people can start to listen to what they say to themselves when things are not going their way. If, after four anagrams, you start saying, “I’m just not smart enough to do this,” it’s a pretty good clue that you are going to give up and miss the two solvable anagrams toward the end of the activity. And these words that we use to describe ourselves and the situations are incredibly powerful. We take them, many times, as truth. We fail to question the validity of the things we say to ourselves.

Perspective and Objectivity

Being aware of the inflexible thinking of another person is usually pretty easy. We’re not the ones focused on an important goal and we’re not dealing with strong emotions. We’re also looking at the situation from the outside. Put these things together and we’re able to see the situation much more objectively. When we’re talking to ourselves and feeling intense anxiety, anger, or disappointment, we don’t consider our thinking. Metacognition is the ability to be aware of our own thoughts, and this is one of the elements of flexible thinking. The real key, however, is to look for signs that you are not being accurate with regard to your beliefs.

How often do you say “I should listen more to my team” or “I have to go to this meeting?” When we make statements using phrases like
“should” and “have to,” it shuts down the discussion. These words create a mandatory response in which you follow through with an activity even if you don’t want to. What if your team is not great at offering ideas? What if you could send someone else to the meeting in your place to free up an hour? These last two questions are not a part of our internal dialogue, so we end up going through the motions like zombies in *The Walking Dead*.

Recently, I had set the expectation with a client that I would send a proposal that she could review on Monday morning. I committed to sending it no later than Sunday night. I had every intention of getting it done on Friday so that my weekend was work-free and I could focus on spending quality time with my kids. Friday was busier than expected and the proposal did not get finished. Sometime in the afternoon on Sunday, I started to feel the urge to work on the proposal right when my son asked me to play *Battleship*. I almost said to him, “Sorry, but I have to get some work done.”

Consider what “have to” is communicating to my son and me. When we use this phrase we are expressing an obligation to do something and we relinquish our autonomy; we are saying that we are powerless to choose another path. This is not the message that I want to send to my son, nor is it what I really believe. Saying “I have to” over and over again creates a victim-like mindset in which we stop challenging the status quo and accept whatever comes our way. What I ended up saying to my son was, “I would really like to play *Battleship* with you and I think we can do that in about 30 minutes. I am going to do some work for a client and I would prefer not to do it late tonight when I’m tired.” Again, occasionally using “I have to” or “I should” is accurate and appropriate. Using it as an excuse and as your default way of describing the situation robs you of your ability to choose a different path of action. It creates a victim mentality that focuses our attention on how the outside circumstances leave us powerless.

As an executive coach and dad, there are two other words that I hear way too often. These two words rob us of our ability to think in a more flexible manner: “always” and “never.” One coaching client recently said the following about her boss to me: “Jan always doubts my
side of the story.” The question I then asked the client was, “Cindy, can you define always?” There was silence on the other end of the phone, as there often is when a client becomes aware of the inflexible language they are using. At this point Cindy and I looked for evidence of how her boss had valued her opinion on multiple occasions. We also talked about the ramifications of using “always” in this case. It simply wasn’t accurate. And it put Cindy in a place where she engaged in ineffective behaviors when she was with her boss. It is very rare that permanent explanations are accurate, but they do set us up for hopelessness. It is an indication that nothing will change no matter how much hard work is done.

Another way that we put our flexibility at risk is liking other people. More specifically, liking someone too quickly can be an issue. In 2007, while making a pitch to a group of investors for our happiness company, I was introduced to a man we can refer to as Tim.

It was January but Tim had a perfect tan. I noticed he was wearing an expensive watch that perfectly complemented his expensive suit. Tim was tall, had a great smile, and told us that he ran a “global training business” for a Fortune 50 company. Although the meeting was intended to raise money for our venture and we thought of Tim as a potential investor, he said he was so impressed with our idea that he wanted to come work for us. Without my knowledge, our CEO hired Tim a couple of days later and gave him a very generous salary on the condition that he would raise at least $500,000 and bring in several hundred thousand in revenue through his connections in no less than six months. As we were strapped for cash and customers, this sounded like a pretty good deal to me.

When I met Tim at the office later in the week, I remembered our initial conversation and I was eager to pick his brain. At one point in the conversation about our strategy, I mentioned that we had a very interesting product that I believed consumers would pay for if we could just put a little more money into the marketing. Tim’s response was puzzling to me. He said, “Doug, the problem with going after consumers is that if we’re too successful, we won’t have the customer service people to handle all the inquiries. I think we need to stick to selling our
products to businesses.” It turns out that Tim didn’t know much about running an internet-based business and even less about how to quickly and inexpensively use technology to scale up customer service capacity.

I recounted the conversation to our CEO and he said that we should trust Tim with all his connections and experience. A couple of months later, Tim had not closed any business and the one potential investor meeting that he initiated didn’t go so well. Not one person showed up. Tim was clearly embarrassed; he had let us all down. I had another conversation with our CEO who, again, pointed to Tom’s great network and his experience. This went on for another six months before I was able to convince our CEO that Tim was adding no value and had to go. But our CEO was incredibly slow to show any flexibility because he liked Tim so much right from the beginning. Liking Tim caused our CEO to put blinders on and make excuses that cost us hundreds of thousands of dollars. And it caused us to waste almost a year on a hopeless strategy. Unfortunately, a year was more than our existing investors could bear and we had to close down the business.

One coaching client of mine, Betty, was having a hard time getting along with her manager. I sat in on a meeting with the two of them and got a firsthand look at how they interacted. At one point during the meeting, the manager said that she was fully committed to the process of coaching and thought it might be a good idea to set up weekly meetings with Betty to gauge her progress on the goals we had created for the coaching engagement. Because of the strong negative opinion that Betty had toward her manager, she saw this as micromanaging instead of an offer to help and be engaged. The manager was simply offering to be a part of the solution and investing in her employee’s development. My client’s opinion of her manager did not allow for this perspective.

What happened with my CEO and Betty? Actually, they were at opposite ends of the spectrum. The CEO liked Tim so much that he was only able to see information that verified his decision to hire Tim. Betty was only able to see information that corroborated her negative thoughts about her manager. Psychologists like to call this the “confirmation bias.” This is where we exhibit a bias for information that
agrees with our current point of view. When Tim’s investor meeting yielded no results, our CEO only listened to Tim’s excuses and ignored the facts. In Betty’s case, she ignored the kind gestures by her manager, only remembering the instances in which the manager had given her negative feedback. The problem with this type of thinking is that a very strong opinion can lead us to ignore information that could help us make better decisions.

This is why people watch Fox News and MSNBC. As study after study shows, these networks prey on the confirmation bias to make our society polarized. Fox News has a tagline of “Fair and Balanced.” It is anything but this trying to portray all sides of a given story. Multiple studies from non-partisan think tanks, such as Pew Research, offer evidence that Fox repeatedly takes a conservative point of view and even promotes the conservative agenda. MSNBC, on the other hand, may not have a false tagline but the effect is the same. Commentators are masked as reporting the news. The majority of time is spent confirming liberal agendas and points of view. How does this affect our flexibility? Just like Betty and the CEO, we watch these stations and vote for candidates who oppose our best interests, for instance. And these stations do such a great job of preying on us that they ignite anger that clouds our decision-making.

Betty, for example, would say the following about her manager: “She makes me feel inadequate,” or, “She thinks that I don’t care about my team.” These two phrases are usually a sign of rigid thinking. When you say that your manager makes you feel a certain way, you are giving him power that he does not have. Although it is true that others can have a positive or negative impact on our feelings, stating that someone else makes you feel a certain emotion puts you in an inferior position. In many cases, this leads to giving up on seeing the other person from a different point of view. It usually leads to labeling the other person as “bad” or “inferior” and we discount honest gestures to improve the relationship.

The second phrase from above (she thinks) is a marker for inflexible thinking because it’s making a pretty big assumption. I have yet to find a person who can read my mind. Those who know me well can
probably gauge my mood as I walk in the room, but the reasons for being upset or happy are simply guesses. Beware of claiming to know what other people are thinking. There are two reasons for this: First, it’s impossible. Second, when we state how another person thinks, we place an undue amount of emphasis on internal, permanent characteristics when explaining someone else’s behavior. In short, we attribute their actions to a flawed personality. We say things like, “He’s disorganized,” when someone shows up late for a meeting and is missing a key document. We fail to recognize that he is doing the work of three people, his wife just left him with four kids, and it took him two hours to get to work because of traffic this morning. We say, “She is rude,” when someone interrupts us three times in a team meeting. However, her interruptions may stem from the fact that someone told her that you were lobbying for her best projects, her manager interrupts others, and she has been told that if she doesn’t get her point across, people will see her as weak. When we are late for a meeting, forget a document, and fail to let someone finish their sentence, we are very quick to explain how stressed we are at the moment. Labeling someone with a negative personality trait leaves us blind to her good ideas. It is a failure to recognize alternative reasons for someone’s behavior and it makes it much more difficult to connect with this person or benefit from their wisdom.

Finally, many situations that require our attention have us saying, “Either I choose Option A or Option B.” As Chip Heath and Dan Heath write in Decisive, when you frame a decision or a problem in this way, you severely limit your flexibility to think and act.¹ The “either/or” statement creates a binary choice that, in most instances, is false. Imagine a simple example. It’s a Saturday afternoon and you have no pressing obligations. You ask yourself, “Should I read a book or go for a walk?” This question, of course, tries to create a dichotomy where none exists. You have an almost infinite choice of activities. Strong negative emotions are the fertile ground where the seeds of the “either/or” framework are planted.
When Enough Is Enough

Is there such a thing as too much psychological flexibility? There are at least two instances when this can indeed happen. First, if we are considering so many options that a decision gets delayed beyond what seems reasonable, it can be a signal that we’re being indecisive. In some cases, we’re trying too hard to make the perfect decision regarding our situation. Remember Barry Schwartz’s research on Maximizers and Satisficers? Maximizers try to make the “perfect” decision and usually end up less satisfied when all is done.

The second instance in which we can have too much flexibility has to do with time. First responders, military leaders, and others in fields that require quick decisions tend to require less evaluation and more action. However, this can be a little deceiving. It is usually through hundreds (if not thousands) of hours of evaluation that instincts kick in for quick decisions. It is flexibility in the moment that can be the difference between life and death.

When it comes to the “right” amount of flexibility, it’s a judgment call. It would be great if there was a formula to help us evaluate more options and teach us when to stick to your guns, but this comes with time, experience, and wisdom. Life is messy and we’ll learn some more skills in the following chapters to build more optimism, peace of mind, positive emotions, and a support network.

We have identified some of the major markers that indicate our flexibility is at risk. The good news is that there are a number of strategies to effectively challenge your own thinking and expand your ability to think and act based on the circumstances. In all cases, of course, being conscious of the fact that “something isn’t quite right” is the first step. And simply being aware of our thinking is, in fact, a strategy with a tremendous amount of power. When we have a nonjudgmental awareness of our thoughts, they cease to have power over us. We are free to act but not compelled to react to the circumstances. In order to bring these thoughts to our consciousness, it can be helpful to hit the proverbial “pause” button. The ability to pause is distinctly human. It’s one of the major differences between human beings and the rest of the animal kingdom.
Several years ago, my sons were playfully wrestling in the family room. At one point, I turned to see if it was getting a little too rough. Right at that moment, my youngest threw a punch that landed squarely on the side of my other son’s head. After making sure my oldest was okay, I asked my youngest to join me in the kitchen. With his shoulders slumped and a look of resignation on his face, he blurted out, “Dad, he made me do it! He started trying to hurt me....” I let him finish and I walked over to our hermit crab, pulled him out of the cage, and asked my son, “What does the crab do when someone puts their finger near him?” We both agreed that the crab immediately slinks back into his shell. I then explained to my son that the crab actually has no choice between stimulus and response; he has a brain the size of a comma on this page. “The difference between you and the crab,” I said, “is that you get to choose how you act in just about any circumstance.”

And so it is with you. The next time you feel compelled to act in a way that may be unproductive or you recognize that your thinking is not considering your options, try the following steps.

1. **Pause.** Simply stop what you are doing, whether that is thinking, talking, or behaving. Reflect on your state of mind and pay attention to the thoughts occurring in your mind. Do not judge them as good or bad. Just observe.

2. **Consider.** Now that you have slowed down your thinking, recognize that you have options for your next thought, your next word, or how you will act. Consider the fact that you have multiple ways to view the situation.

3. **Choose.** Unlike the hermit crab, you get to choose how you think and act. Based on your context, pick the view and/or behavior that best suits you.

This may seem like an oversimplified way to gain flexibility in your thinking, but that is the beauty of **Pause. Consider. Choose.** In all the years that I have been coaching and training some very educated adults, these three words are often seen as the favorite part of a workshop or coaching session.
Wear Multiple Hats

In the workplace, we say that someone wears multiple hats when she is working in several areas of expertise or doing the job of numerous people. Although this is usually seen as stressful to the point of draining her resilience, the analogy can serve us well when our thinking is at risk of being close-minded.

In the heat of the moment, we tend to consider just one point of view: ours. When we intentionally put on multiple hats, however, we force ourselves to take different points of view. This can be invaluable when we’re in need of a different perspective and don’t have the time to gather a group of intelligent colleagues for their observations.

Imagine for a second that you are asked to describe the house next door. If you are in the front yard, you might point out the color of the front door, the big bay window in the living room, and bushes lining the front walkway. If you then walked to the garage side of the house, you might describe the garage door big enough for two cars and the pointed view of the roof. As you move around the house, your description of the house changes. It’s still the same house but the picture you paint is very different each time you move. To add this tool to your resilience toolkit, try the following steps.

1. **Pessimistic Hat.** Go ahead...that’s right, just consider the worst-case scenario for a couple of minutes and write down your thoughts about what might happen. Don’t inhibit your feelings or thoughts on the situation. Honor your negative thoughts. In fact, it might be helpful to just let yourself imagine the worst possible case happening. Honor your negative emotions as well. Finish by naming the emotions you are feeling in the moment.

2. **Detective Hat.** In the late 1960s, a television show called *Dragnet* featured a fictitious detective named Joe Friday. Joe would arrive at the scene of a crime to interview witnesses. When a witness would start adding his or her story about the suspect’s possible motive or get too descriptive, Joe was quick to say, “Just the facts, ma’am, just the facts.” As we mentioned earlier, words such as “always” and “never” are
usually not true. Stick to the facts. List only that which can be verified and not argued.

3. **Cowboy Hat.** Think back to a specific period of history, maybe the Old West, for example. Ask yourself what history can teach you. Have you been through something similar? What lessons can it teach you?

4. **Optimistic Hat.** The goal of this hat is to reverse the trend of negative emotions and inject a little positivity to get you thinking about possible solutions. Feel free to be a little goofy. Ask yourself what’s good about this situation. How could this situation make me stronger?

5. **Green Hat.** It’s time to plant the seeds of something that will take root. You have looked at the problem from several perspectives. List as many solutions to the problem as you can and don’t filter the crazy ones. This is not easy and it really stretches your mind to start thinking about some unrealistic ways to address the situation. It becomes increasingly likely that you find your best answer or you combine two or more items on your list for something more practical.

**Emotionally Expressive Journaling**

Psychologist and researcher James Pennebaker has been studying the effects of writing for more than 30 years. His research indicates that writing about your emotions can improve your physical and mental health. This strategy works for several reasons: It reduces inhibition, as we can be predisposed to ruminating about how bad things are for us, and it can lead to new understandings about adversity. These new understandings can be about you as well. Writing brings structure to your thoughts, which allows you to follow an idea to the finish line. Finally, putting your thoughts on paper can lead to a sense of detachment and objectivity. Here are the instructions that Pennebaker offers to make this work for you: Throughout the next four days, I want you to write down your deepest emotions and thoughts about the most upsetting experience in your life. Really let go and explore your feelings and thoughts about it. In your writing, you might tie this experience to
your childhood, your relationship with your parents, people you have loved or love now, or even your career. How is this experience related to who you would like to become, who you have been in the past, or who you are now?

Many people have not had a single traumatic experience, but all of us have had major conflicts or stressors in our lives; you can write about them as well. You can write about the same issue every day or a series of different issues. Whatever you choose to write about, however, it is critical that you really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts.

Listen Closely
A theme of flexibility is listening to the language we use when talking to others and when we’re just talking to ourselves. How often are you unjustly putting pressure on yourself? How often are you making demands of yourself without even being aware of them? To help answer these questions, identify a phrase that you use regularly. Consider one of the following:

1. “I need to...”
2. “I have to...”
3. “I should...”

For one week, count the number of times you say the phrase (or phrases) out loud or to yourself.

Talk to Your Opposite
What’s important to you? Family? Friends? A balanced life? Find someone in your network who may not be connected to their family, doesn’t work hard to make friends, and values work above all else. You probably don’t agree with this person on some major aspects of your life. Focus on finding someone who thinks differently than you. For instance, if you are someone who tends to consider people’s feelings when making a decision, reach out to someone who finds it more important to first consider facts and data while being objective.
Take a curious perspective when engaging him or her and do your best to suspend your judgment. Don’t make this a debate. You’ve asked for a different perspective; just ask your questions and listen with an open mind.

Turn Your Stories into Facts

A coaching client of mine (we’ll call her Barb), once said the following about her team: “They’re all just waiting for me to fail.” When we assume we know what someone is thinking or what is motivating another person, it’s time to pause and recognize that we’re telling a story. And the stories we tell ourselves are usually designed to justify our anger, embarrassment, or fear. They demonize someone else, make us the object of unruly behavior, or paint the entire situation as being miserable.

These stories are so damaging because they take a very firm point of view that puts someone else, ourselves, or the situation in a box. It’s a box that we can’t see many times, and one that exists right below our consciousness, and we accept them as facts. We feel good for a moment because we’re labeling someone else as bad and we’re the good guy. In the long run, however, stories prevent us from seeing different perspectives and choosing.

Try this: Put a rubber band on your wrist. Start paying attention to how you explain situations that do not meet your expectations. This could be how others treat you. It could be how management leads your company. When you identify a story, simply move the rubber band from one wrist to the other. The basic concept is to become more aware of the stories you tell that are not necessarily accurate. The awareness of our stories robs them of their power over us. When we become aware of our stories, we start to see there are multiple explanations that broaden our ability to think and act.

Sometimes, just generating other reasons for an adversity can dig us out of a hole. In particular, when we point the finger at ourselves for all the blame, there is a good chance that we’re missing other causes. Several years ago, my son was playing recreation league basketball. In this league, the defender was not allowed to pressure the player with the ball until it crossed mid-court. My son took about two steps over
How Flexible Are You?

mid-court and the defender stole the ball and made an easy layup. My son took the ball up the court again...only to have it stolen shortly after crossing mid-court. At this point, his head was hung low and he pleaded with the coach to have someone else bring the ball up. The coach encouraged him and he gave it another try. Unfortunately, it was stolen, again. At this point, my son fell to the floor and grasped his ankle as if it had been twisted.

Within a couple of minutes, the game was over and my first instinct was to comfort my son and tell him it was okay. I wanted him to know that there were tactics he could use to prevent the ball from being stolen, but I know that was probably not what he wanted to hear, so I didn’t start the conversation.

A couple of hours later, I noticed he was playing with some toys and seemed to be in a much better mood. I decided to try an exercise from Martin Seligman’s *The Optimistic Child* in which you generate multiple causes for misfortune or adversity. First, I asked Nick if he was willing to talk about the game. Next, I asked him why he thought the other player kept stealing the ball from him. His response was, “I’m not very good.” I drew a circle on a blank piece of paper, wrote those words in the middle of circle, and told him this was how he was seeing the issue.

I then took out another piece of paper and drew another circle. This time, however, I asked him how many slices usually come with a pizza. We both agreed that most pizzas come with eight slices, so I drew a series of lines within the circle so that we had eight slices. I then wrote, “I’m not very good” in one of the slices. I asked him what else might have contributed to the ball being stolen because, in most instances, problems have multiple causes. He paused and then said, “I think I went to the right side of the court every time so the defender knew where I was going.” “Exactly,” I said, and then I wrote, “Went right every time,” in another slice of the pizza. At this point, Nick caught on and mentioned that he could pass the ball before he got to mid-court and that he might be more effective if he learned to dribble with his left hand, too. And so it went until the pizza was full of reasons. I could see how empowered he felt and he asked me to go play some basketball to improve his skills.
The next time you find yourself blaming yourself for the entire problem or even putting all the blame on someone or something else, try generating multiple reasons for the issue. Another twist on this is to generate multiple solutions to a problem. Anne Loehr is an executive coach in the northern Virginia area who has clients from some of the world’s best-known companies. Several years ago, before Anne was a coach, she was stuck. She was thinking about her next career move and couldn’t figure out what to do. She reached out to her coach and asked him to give her some advice on the matter. He responded by asking her to identify 15 professions that might be interesting to her. She got 14 down on paper and nothing seemed to really fit. The coach urged her to consider just one more and he said, “What about being a coach?” Anne relied on her coach for support but had never considered actually being on the other side of the equation. All these years later, she has found her calling and is coaching executives all over the country. Anne stretched herself and results have been impressive to say the least.
How Flexible Are You?

Take It Or Leave It

• Learn how to argue with yourself. When anger, sadness, frustration, or another negative emotion has you in its grip, stop and argue with yourself. Try to identify the evidence for your current state. Look for alternatives and bring some objectivity to the situation.

• Don’t be a slave to your emotions with immediate reactions. Take more control with a simple, three-step process: 1) Pause: Just sit still for 10 to 15 seconds; 2) Consider: Come up with as many ways to react as you can think of in 30 to 60 seconds; 3) Choose: Select the best path forward.

• Pay attention to the times that you say, “I should...,” “I need to...”, or “I have to....” These phrases limit our ability to think of other options for action in our current situation.

• Be judicious with the words “always” and “never.” They are rarely true and they create a false sense of certainty. Be more flexible by limiting their use and reflecting on accurate time frames.

• Consider how quickly you judge other people. Did you like your boss the minute you met her? Did you dislike your neighbor the first time you met in the driveway? Both of these may be clues that you have not considered the “whole” person and you may be missing out on other aspects of their personalities.

• Get your news from multiple sources. Challenge what you read and or hear; do not blindly accept it.

• Stop saying, “He thinks...” or “She thinks...” In almost every case we are guessing at what the other person thinks and what his or her motives are. This only fuels the fire for beliefs that are largely inaccurate.

• Be wary of “either/or” situations. It is rare that we only have two options in any situation. Challenge yourself to think of more alternatives. Write them down.
• Are you trying to make a perfect decision on a car, a house, a job, or something else of importance? Stop trying to be perfect and consider making a “good” decision to help you move forward.

• Review James Pennebaker’s instructions for emotionally expressive writing. Commit to doing it for three to four days and 15 to 20 minutes per session.