

SELF-EMPOWERING WAYS TO PRACTICE FLEXIBLE THINKING

Many autistic individuals have a strong preference for routine and similarity. It can be overwhelming and stressful when things change, when we need to do things differently, or when we're confronted with new ways of thinking. This resource will help you practice flexible thinking in ways that are self-directed and focused on the goals you want to reach.

WHAT IS FLEXIBLE THINKING?



Seeing Different Perspectives



Considering Alternative Options or Ideas



Adjusting Plans



Being Open to Change



Transitioning Between Activities

Flexible Thinking Strengths and Challenges



Change is inevitable, but it doesn't have to be unpleasant.

While it's true that wanting things to always stay the same can cause some problems, it's also true that the autistic tendency towards routine can be a strength. There are a few elements of routine that are especially helpful for the autistic neurotype:

- Routines can help with executive function challenges by reducing the amount of focus you need to spend on tasks you do repeatedly.
- Routines help make the world more predictable, which is especially important if you struggle to understand neurotypicals.
- Things that are familiar create a sense of comfort: coming back to a familiar routine can help to regulate your emotions.
- Routines can bring joy.

Despite the fact that routine can be useful, there are times when everyone needs to be able to deal with changes. A common challenge for autistic folks is flexible thinking, whether that's transitioning between activities, dealing with a change in your schedule, adjusting your approach, or thinking differently about something. This can lead to anxiety, frustration, and interpersonal problems. It can even interfere with school, work, or relationships.

Flexible Thinking and Autism

Routine and sameness are a large part of the autism diagnosis. In the DSM, this is described as: "Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities." One of the specific examples of this is: "Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day)."

While the DSM describes this in a deficit-based way, you don't have to see your desire for routine as a problem. Almost everyone in the world relies on routines sometimes.

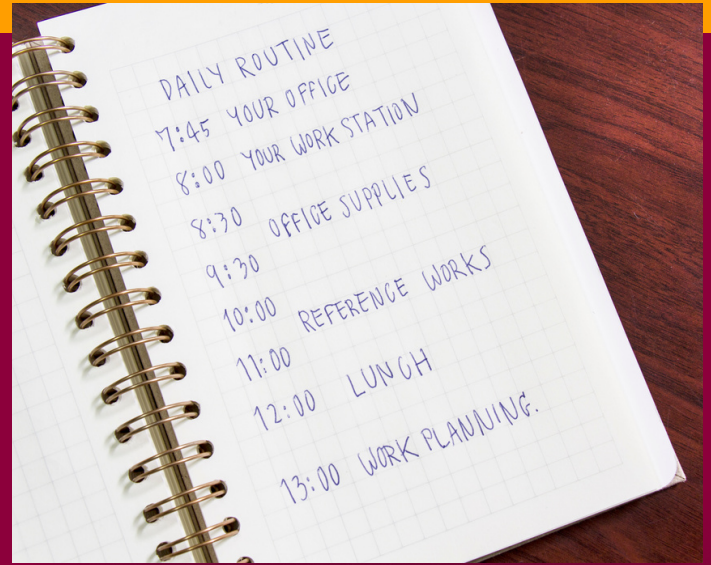
Change is inevitable, but it doesn't have to be unpleasant. While routines can be helpful, no routine will stay the same forever. That's why it's important to work on your flexible thinking before you need it.

This guide will help you to work on building your flexibility so that you can cope more easily when you have to use those skills.

General Strategies

These general strategies are the heart of making sure you're practicing flexibility in an affirming and self-directed way. They'll help you feel in control, regulate your emotions, and build skills in your own way.

- Practice flexibility because you want to. If someone else is pressuring you to be more flexible, you'll be starting with a lot of stress and anxiety. Think about why flexibility is useful for you and set goals that reflect what you want to achieve. That internal motivation will help you when you have to do hard or stressful things.
- Remember that all your favorite things were new at one point. You had to try something new to discover your favorite food, your favorite person, or your favorite hobby. Not everything you try will be great, but you might find something you truly love when you explore something new.
- Reflect on WHY changes happen. Especially when change is coming from another person, it can be useful to figure out what their motivations are and why they need to make a change. That empathy can make it easier to respond calmly.
- Aim to practice in times and ways that feel safe. If you're already having an emotional or overwhelming day, it may not be the time to practice flexibility. You probably won't feel comfortable while you're practicing flexibility, but give yourself the support to feel as safe as possible.
- To help yourself feel safe, prepare supports in advance that will help you to calm down if you start to feel escalated. Any time you practice, follow up with one of these supports. See the next page for more ideas.
- Honor the feelings that come up. You probably will find yourself getting stressed out or uncomfortable throughout this process. That's ok! Just because something feels uncomfortable doesn't mean you have to stop.
- Notice when you do well and celebrate it! Treat yourself to something fun or exciting, share your successes with a friend, or just pause to feel pride in the moment.



Does it really need to change?

It's common for providers or support people to promote flexibility, or to ask autistics to be comfortable moving away from their routines. However, routines in and of themselves are not negative. In fact most people use routines every day to make life easier, whether it's the things you do before you go to bed or the route you drive in to work.

If you have decided you want to get better at flexibility, remember that not everything needs to change. Think about what routines are working well for you, and which ones may be causing you challenges. If you have a routine that regularly needs to change, it may be a good place to start practicing flexibility.

Planning Ahead

As you practice flexibility, try using these supports to make it easier.

Simply trying to change your routines or try something new without preparing in advance is not likely to succeed. Instead, spend some time preparing supports so that you'll be as comfortable as possible when you start practicing flexibility.

Different people may need different supports. One way to figure out which supports might help you is to think about what is difficult for you when it comes to flexibility. Some possibilities may be:

- Not knowing what to expect/feeling out of control
- It takes a lot of executive function to plan and execute tasks: routines and rituals make it simpler
- Consistency helps you to manage your sensory needs
- You feel there is a "right" way to do things and doing something differently feels like breaking a rule



Different Approaches

If you feel anxiety about not knowing what to expect, or struggle with executive function, some supports include:

- Creating lists of possible activities, organized by type (social, relaxing, cleaning, etc.) to help you re-plan after a change
- Visuals you can swap out to signal an upcoming change
- Having a written plan that you can adjust if it changes
- Use "simple decision" apps that let you input the options and make a decision for you
- Practice making pro and con lists to decide what you need to do

For sensory needs, you may want to brainstorm multiple ways to get your sensory needs met, or create a sensory kit that helps you to manage harder sensory inputs.

To help feel more comfortable with "rule breaking" or doing something "incorrectly," you may want to take time with a friend or trusted support person to understand why a change happened and how the people around you are thinking. Try coming up with an explanation for why someone might prefer a different method.

No matter why you struggle with change, it's also a good idea to prepare some emotion regulation strategies before you practice changes. Get in the habit of focusing on emotion regulation first when you hear about a change, then thinking about what you will do. You could use sensory tools, a special interest, mindfulness, or just an activity you really like.

It can also be helpful to have a trusted support person with you — they can act as a "body double" to practice with you, or help you with emotion regulation support.

Practice Activities

When you're ready to start practicing your flexible thinking, try one of the activities from this list. Give yourself time and support to regulate, and when you're ready, try again.

- Try a new food.
- Read something you disagree with.
- Break a rule (make sure it's one that's unimportant or won't have negative consequences for you).
- Set aside a specific amount of time when you won't plan ahead what you're going to. Start small (maybe an hour). Try working up to a day where you don't have a plan or routine.
- Try a new hobby/activity/experience.
- Take a task you always do the same way and try doing it differently.
- Drive a different route to a familiar place.
- Talk to someone new.
- Give yourself a set of options to choose from. This could be activities to do in your free time, meals, or something else.
- If you have the same schedule every day or week, try making a new one and test it out.
- Take a game you know and make up new rules. Play it with the different rules. Alternatively, try playing a game where the rules change.
- Try sitting in a new spot (at lunch, a meeting, etc.).
- Play different types of games that engage your mind in different ways, for example do a Sudoku and then a Kenken (both number puzzles that make you approach them differently).
- Do an activity you typically do alone with someone else.
- Move your furniture to a new place.
- Take a routine from your daily life and change the order.
- Prepare a food you always make the same way differently.
- Incorporate a variety of activities into your day-to-day life.
- Try asking someone else their opinion about something you already know or believe.
- Try to find two different solutions to the same problem. If you get stuck, ask someone else for help.

Resources

- [Creating Autism Interventions That Promote Flexibility](#)
- [Need for Closure and Cognitive Flexibility in Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder](#)
- [Dealing With Change](#)
- [Why Autistic People Find Change Difficult](#)
- [10 Tips for Coping With Change as an Autistic Person](#)
- [Learning a Flexible Routine](#)
- [What To Do When You Have Trouble Switching From One Task to the Next](#)

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