

In this Resilience Insight we look at how we harness the mind to change-grow-transform.

Change - a tale of two systems

Change is not straightforward – our default position is to operate much of the time on ‘auto pilot’ playing out behaviours that are well established without even thinking about them too much.

The brain has two fundamentally different operating modes – the first being the instinctive/auto-pilot system. This is a very efficient system that takes little energy for us to operate. This can be the most useful way to go if we want to ‘do more of the same’, but when we want to change our behaviour, this system can lead us down the vulnerable ‘low road.’ When this happens the ‘fight/flight/freeze’ reaction triggers a physiological response that decreases our ability to move towards change.

When we want to engage in some sort of change we need to access the ‘mindful/reflective’ part of the brain, which involves a whole separate system. When we understand how to access this system we can choose to go down the resilient ‘high road’.

The performance supply change

To make changes we need to engage this different part of the brain and understand ‘the performance supply chain’. If we can do this we significantly increase our ability to bring about real change.



All aspects of what we refer to as ‘the performance supply chain’ interact with each other to lead to the actions necessary to produce change. When we go down ‘the low road’ our body is switching on some aspect of the ‘fight/flight/freeze’ reaction that means the sympathetic nervous system is in the driver’s seat. This then colours our emotional reactions (heart), which in turn impacts on our style of thinking (mind).

To break the loop we need to ‘reframe’ at each level of the ‘performance supply chain’.

Begin at Base camp

The first link in the chain is the body. We often refer to this as ‘base camp’ – because without paying attention to our physical state and dealing with it first, we can not sustain the effort needed to change.

To sustain efforts to change we need to engage our ‘willpower’, which involves locking in the ‘mindful/reflective’ system we referred to earlier. Research shows this is an ‘energy hungry’ system and that some key aspects of the body need to be taken care of before we can sustain the effort to produce lasting change. Four key factors that the research shows support willpower are:

1. Sleep
2. Meditation/mindfulness
3. Physical Exercise
4. Low glycaemic, plant based diet

These are corner stone practices within The Resilience Institute’s approach.

The other key here is that it is often the physical reactions of the body, and the emotions linked to them that we notice first and give us the clue that we need to switch ‘systems’. When we notice these cues we can start to intervene to ‘take the high road’.

Pause and plan

When we can notice signals from the performance supply chain (physical sensations, emotions, un-useful thoughts) that cue us we are heading down the ‘low road’ we can pause and start to ‘reframe’ starting with the body link in the chain.

This involves intervening to deactivate the sympathetic nervous system and activate instead the parasympathetic nervous system. We can ‘breathing our way to self-control’. By breathing with our diaphragm, slowing both our inhale and exhale, we can even out our heart rate variability.

By calming ourselves in this way, we keep the prefrontal cortex of the brain active and from this space can make choices of action that are more flexible and adaptive (activating the parasympathetic nervous system). This is a very different way of responding than when we are on autopilot or when the fight/flight/freeze response is warmed up in some way (activating the sympathetic nervous system).

A key aspect of this 'consciousness' is that we are more able to be aware of what we are thinking and feeling – and therefore are in a position to reflect and then choose a different path for our behaviour. From this position we can 'Pause and Plan' – choose not to drink of alcohol, eat that piece of cake, shout at a colleague, continue to ruminate and beat ourselves up over something that can not be changed. To do this, the next step is to build a different relationship with our thinking and emotions.

A different relationship with thought and emotion

We can easily get caught up in treating our thoughts and feelings as if they are 'reality', as if they are an actual external threat. This then triggers some aspect of the 'fight/flight/freeze cycle'. When we can identify that our thoughts and feelings are purely 'internal' we can evoke a different response

The first step is to train up the 'watchman' or 'witness', to be able to stand back and observe our thoughts and feelings and as a result to experience more clearly the part of us that can take this perspective. This builds on the concept of 'open monitoring' raised in the 'Awaken the Mind' Resilience Insight.

Try this simple exercise – do this for a couple of minutes at least 3 times a day. Stop and become aware of what thoughts are passing through your

mind. For each thought/feeling you are aware of, think to yourself; 'I am having the thought that the deadline for the report is coming up' or 'I am having the feeling of anxiety' or 'I am having the thought I am not very good at observing my thoughts'. This first step is just to strengthen the 'watchman/witness'.

The next step in strengthening this new perspective is to add to the same exercise an extra step. 'I am having the thought that the deadline for the report is coming up – that is just a thought – it does not control my action – what is important to me/what do I value – and therefore what action do I want to focus

on'. The same with the feeling of anxiety – 'this is just a feeling – it does not control my action – what is important to me/what do I value – and therefore what action do I want to focus on.'

This seemingly simple exercise starts to strengthen our awareness that there is a calm and focused 'observer' available to us all the time – a part of us we can keep 'in the driver's seat' by developing a different relationship with our thoughts and feelings. Doing this also brings our attention more often to the 'present moment' and enables us to choose action that lines up with what is important to us rather than being pulled off target by the 'instinctive/autopilot' system. This gives us 'behavioural flexibility' - we are consciously choosing our path – taking the 'high road'.

Where do values fit in?

Ultimately the goal of having the behavioural flexibility to make changes is to be able to follow a path in our lives that lines up with our values. If our motivation for stopping smoking is a result of our GP saying it would be good; to lose weight so we can look like the person in the magazine ad; to improve our relationship with a work colleague in

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another department to meet a target set by our boss – all these have the danger of being driven by what others expect of us rather than something we are personally motivated to do.

When we are on 'auto pilot' we are more likely to respond to things that provide instant gratification and to respond to what others (bosses, partners, advertisers etc.) expect of us. Part of the usefulness of engaging the 'Pause and Plan' part of our brain is we can think longer-term and reflect on what is really important to us.

Before we can do this we need to have spent some time reflecting on what is really important to us – and this is not a one off exercise, because that changes over time and often has to take into account others that are important in our lives (if that lines up with your values). A web search for 'what are my values' bring up a number of lists/questionnaires that can be a starting point.

One technique that I have used with some of my coaching clients to get them in touch with their values involves getting them to have a conversation with their future self. The first step is imagining yourself 10 or 20 years from now and asking that future self to comment on the issue you are addressing – you then 'keep the conversation' going until you feel you have got the information you need. E.g. "Future Self – how do you feel about the amount of exercise I am doing?" "Well Present Self, I am going to have to live with what ever body you leave me with 20 years from now – I still want to be in shape to tramp and mountain bike – the way things are going I can't picture I will be in shape to do that – here is what I suggest..."etc

Getting a clear picture of why you want to make the change you are focusing on, how it links to your values and future and developing a 'mental touch

stone' to remind you of why you are going down this road is a key element in keeping us on track. We end up with a 'personal GPS' that helps us navigate a path that aligns with what we value.

How this 'Reframing' looks in practice

Tim is part of a 'virtual team' tasked with delivering a complex project for the business over the next six months. The pressure is on and this morning his boss had a go at him about complaints that have been coming from Sally who is the Marketing

team's member on the project team.

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Response 1: "I am sick of the boss blaming me! Bloody Marketing again – Sally is going behind my back" = Instinctive/autopilot system = un-useful rumination=sympathetic

response =fight/flight' activation – going down the low road.

Response 2: Tim notices! and starts to reframe at the body level – Pause – 'need to calm myself – use my breath' – Breath= calm= parasympathetic response= 'Pause and Plan' "I am having the thought that the boss and Sally are blaming me. I am having the feeling of anger. These are just thoughts and feelings – they do not have the power to control my behaviour - I can calm myself. My personal values include being a good team player. I personally believe in the benefits this project will bring to the business. The boss's response is more about his/her short fuse rather than anything I have actually done wrong – maybe Sally did not feel confident to raise the issues with me directly (having reframed at the 'heart' and 'mind' levels of the performance supply chain we can more clearly see things from the point of view of others). I need to get along side Sally – I will suggest we have a weekly one on one review of how the project is tracking and give each other

feedback on what is working well/not so well in the way we are working together. This feels more like the way I want to be.”

These same principles can be applied to a whole range of changes:

- Responding differently in a relationship
- Building a regular exercise routine
- Stopping smoking
- Being able to focus more on our positive vs. negative thought
- Staying calm yourself and helping others to understand and engage in a change project

Building Skill

Just having an intellectual understanding of this process is not enough – all of these things take practice. There are some key skills to build to be able to ‘take the resilient high road’ and operate more often in the ‘Pause and Plan’ mode.

1. Shifting from ‘sympathetic’ to ‘parasympathetic’ response. We need to practice using our breath to make this switch.
2. Mindfulness. Understanding that the basics of a simple mindfulness practice is like taking your prefrontal cortex to the gym. It directly strengthens our ability to keep the ‘Pause and Plan’ system active when we need it.

3. Building a different relationship with our Thoughts and Feelings. Regularly stepping into ‘observer mode’ strengthens our ability to activate this reflective stance.
4. Clarifying Values. Without our ‘personal GPS’ we are less likely to make good choices around our actions.
5. Making a Plan. When wanting to institute a change in your behaviour – make a plan. Reflect on why this is important to you personally – think about what disciplines need to be applied and what ‘tricks’ or techniques might aid you in the early stages. Don’t try to make too many changes at once.

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