

7 Ways to Develop Cognitive Flexibility

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Cognitive flexibility refers to our ability to disengage from one task and respond to another or think about multiple concepts at the same time. Someone who is cognitively flexible will be able to learn more quickly, solve problems more creatively, and adapt and respond to new situations more effectively, which is why it's so important in both educational settings and the workplace.

According to a 2016 [report](#) from the World Economic Forum that looked at the future of jobs across nine different industries in 15 of the world's largest economies, employers will soon be placing more emphasis on cognitive abilities like creativity and adaptability.

So, whether you're a student or working professional, building your cognitive flexibility is a great way to develop professionally and keep up with the ever changing work environment of the future. One of the best ways to become more cognitively flexible is to expose yourself to new experiences and ways of doing things, but if you're not sure where to start, here are a few ideas.

1. Alter your everyday routine.

If you're looking for a simple way to start building your cognitive flexibility, you can start by [changing up your routine](#) and doing everyday things differently. For instance, if you're accustomed to taking the same route to work each day, look for a different route or consider taking the bus instead of driving yourself. If you usually get your exercise at the gym, change things up by running in the park or going for a bike ride. Even making the smallest of changes like sitting at a new spot at the dinner table or using your left hand to brush your teeth instead of your right can help you build and strengthen new neural pathways.

2. Seek out new experiences.

Each time you experience something out of the ordinary or learn something new, the brain creates new synaptic connections. New and interesting experiences have also been shown to trigger the release of dopamine, which not only [increases motivation](#) but also enhances memory and learning. So, going out of your way to experience new things or engage in novel activities can go a long way towards helping you develop cognitive flexibility. This might mean travelling to another country or volunteering in a new industry, but it could also take the form of activities like learning a new language or musical instrument, taking a dance class, or even exploring a part of town you're not familiar with.

3. Practice thinking creatively.

Another way to build cognitive flexibility is to make an effort to think in unconventional and creative ways or practice [divergent thinking](#). One study by psychologist Dr Robert Steinberg showed that when students were taught to think in both creative and practical ways, not only did their [grades improve](#), but they were also able to transfer the knowledge they gained to entirely different areas of learning. Divergent thinking usually occurs in a spontaneous and free-flowing manner and involves thinking in terms of unlimited possibilities rather than a limited set of choices. Want to know more? Check out this [article](#) for tips on how to inspire divergent thinking.

4. Don't always take the easy way.

These days we have technology and apps that make our lives easier in countless ways, from spell check and autocorrect to GPS. But the truth is that making things easier for ourselves isn't always the best thing for our cognitive flexibility. Research shows that introducing so-called "desirable difficulties" can [lead to deeper learning](#), so by making a point of not always choosing the easiest way of doing things, you can keep your mind sharp and even learn through your everyday experiences. For instance, if you're driving to an area you're not familiar with, try to navigate your way using a map and asking for directions rather than using your GPS, or instead of reaching for your phone the minute you need to make a calculation, grab a pen and paper, and do it the old-fashioned way.

5. Go out of your way to meet new people.

Meeting people from different cultures and walks of life whose perspectives and viewpoints are likely to differ from your own can help you to be less rigid in your way of thinking and accept that there may be more than one "right" way of looking at things. Research shows that people who are exposed to situations that challenge their ideas about what's right and wrong tend to have greater cognitive flexibility. One study in particular found that college students who had been [exposed to diversity and cultural differences](#) were more likely to have reached an advanced stage of moral reasoning. So make an effort to meet people outside of your normal social circles, whether that means travelling abroad, volunteering, teaching, or connecting with people through social media.

6. Transfer your learning.

Learning to transfer what you've learned in one context into a new context can be a great exercise in cognitive flexibility, because it forces you to form new connections between previously unconnected networks of knowledge and think more creatively. Without the ability to transfer skills and knowledge to new contexts, your learning won't have as great an impact. For instance, one study found that although street children were able to [perform complex mathematical calculations](#) when selling their wares, they weren't able to answer equivalent problems that were presented to them in a school context. If you want to develop your ability to transfer knowledge, research shows that [explaining a new concept](#) in your own words not only helps you identify any incorrect assumptions, but also helps you to generalise a concept for future application. Once you're sure you understand the concept, you can look for ways to apply it in real-world situations.

7. Challenge your morals.

Research shows that [seeking out experiences](#) that test your morals and expose you to a variety of beliefs, values, and expectations can give you a better understanding of [culturally different perspectives](#) and help you become more flexible in your thinking. Even if you don't necessarily agree with someone's point of view or belief system, being cognitively flexible means you'll be able to think about why they might see things that way and understand their point of view. This ability will make it easier for you to communicate with people, resolve conflicts, and adapt your thinking to various situations. Of course, travel is one way to challenge your way of thinking, but even just reading about moral dilemmas and thinking about them critically can help you develop in this area. Just remember that the more you go out of your way to do things differently, engage in new experiences, and interact with different people, the more flexible your thinking will become.