

WORKSHOP – MODULE 6

Self-Improvement

Becoming superior to your former self

A Brief History of Us

Three phases of the operating system we inherited

1

Survival

Built to survive scarcity: seek the next find, never stay satisfied, keep solving a changing world.

2

Dominance

Abundance destabilizes us. The brain rebalances pain and pleasure to keep us in seeking mode.

3

Mindfulness?

Use the prefrontal cortex to act on our values - not just protect the ego with comforting stories.

What is your definition of success?

We are all different, but none of us are special as individuals.

But our species is special as the most advanced living organism in the known universe (even though we share 60% of our DNA with a banana and 98.7% with a bonobo).

"There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility is being superior to your former self."

Ernest Hemingway

QUESTION

What one thing could you change that would make a major positive change in your personal or professional life?



Some Basic Principles

Setting the right expectations.

Lessons from a self-improvement junkie

No one's coming to save you

Don't delegate solving your problems to external factors (promotion, new house, therapy, etc.)

Not all problems are meant to be solved

Many problems we are meant to learn how to live with, rather than remove them. Solving problems can become addictive.

Your inner voice is lying to you

Depression lies about life not being worth it. Anxiety invents risk factors that aren't there. Insecurity lies your not good enough.

Mind what goes in and out

Stop the wrong inputs

News, doubts, cheap dopamine.

Start the right inputs

What interests and inspires you.
You choose what to attend to.

Take out what shouldn't be there

Bad habits, fears, traumas.

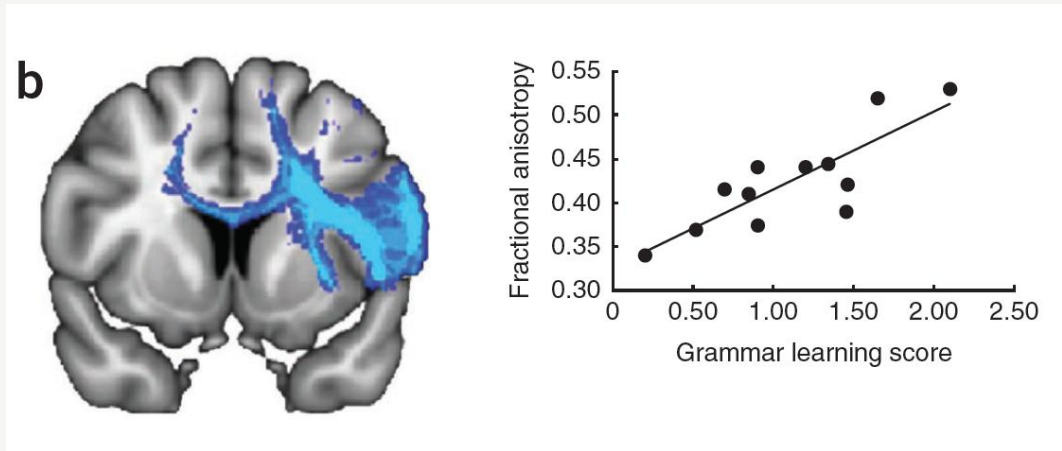
Most of our skills exist (or do not) because of what is already in us, e.g. time management trouble often comes from a fear of rejection and of saying no.

Neuroplasticity

The brain rewires - so any skill can be built

Experience reshapes the brain

Brain scans show measurable structural change from learning - here, learning second-language grammar. If the brain can physically rewire, any skill can be developed.



White-matter integrity (fractional anisotropy) rises with grammar-learning score.

The brain has a braking system

Motor

don't move

Cognitive

don't think of a white bear

Emotional

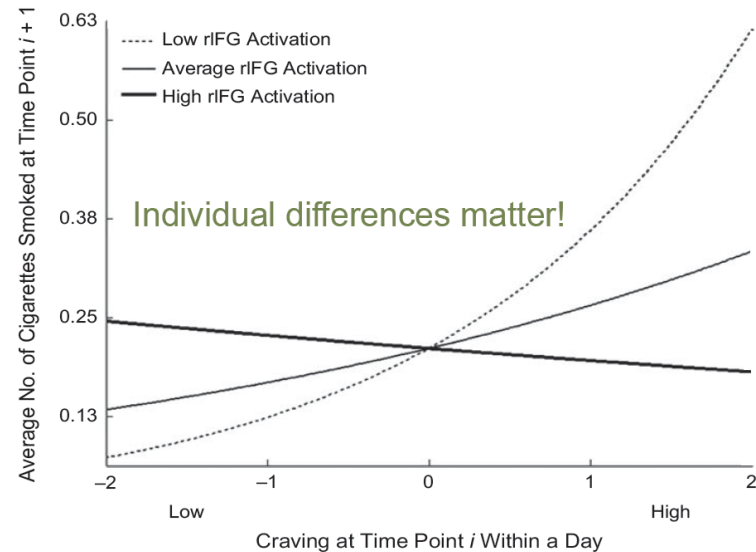
hold your response to a provocation

Nutritional

skip the cake while dieting

Financial

choose 15€ next month over 10€ now





Four principles for rewiring

Use it to improve it

Everything you do, think or feel changes your brain.

Use it or lose it

Avoiding unwanted behaviors and thoughts makes sense - they fade.

Salience matters

Design tasks and use cues to orient attention.

Repetition matters

Practice, practice, practice - then relax.

A precious resource to manage well

Attended stimuli

- Get more brain activity
- Faster detection, lower thresholds
- More accurate identification

Unattended stimuli

May never reach consciousness at all - they simply do not register.

Shifting attention, on purpose

A conscious decision

You choose, moment to moment, what you pay attention to.

Reinforce it with action

Turn your body, head and eyes - or ask an explicit question.

Use external cues

Calendar reminders, images at meaningful spots, ask people.

Impact is immediate

The instant you shift, other data gets preferential processing.

Define and measure



What it means for me:

- Speaking up more often in team meetings
- Sounding more sure of myself

What to pay attention to - turn each into a KPI:

- Number of times I speak up in a meeting
- The space I take up (posture: straight vs hunched, arms open vs closed) - scale 1-3
- The reach of my voice - scale 1-3: close neighbors / part of the team / everybody

Practice and goal



Create regular practice:

- Check the space I take up on the hour for 3 weeks, and shift if I'm not taking enough.
- Project my voice at different distances 5 minutes a day, using real meeting lines.

Goal by the end of the project:

- Speak up at least 3 times each meeting, heard clearly, with an open body position.
- Milestone 1: open posture most of the time by the end of the month.
- Milestone 2: reaching everybody in the room when I speak, by the next ExCo meeting.

The Big Five (OCEAN)

Three levels of a person - and where change lives

Three levels of a person

We are not one thing. Personality works on three levels.

Level 1

Traits who you are at a glance

Level 2

Adaptations what you're doing about it

Level 3

Story who you believe you are

Stable at the top • malleable at the bottom

Dispositional traits (OCEAN)



Openness

Curiosity and openness to new ideas. *e.g. eager to pilot a new method vs prefers the proven one*



Conscientiousness

Organisation, discipline, reliability. *e.g. plans ahead and hits deadlines vs improvises*



Extraversion

Energy drawn from people and action. *e.g. recharges in group work vs in quiet focus*



Agreeableness

Warmth, cooperation, trust. *e.g. seeks harmony and compromise vs blunt, competitive*



Neuroticism

Sensitivity to stress and emotion. *e.g. rattled by setbacks vs stays even under pressure*

What a trait really is

Broad and comparative

Fairly stable dimensions you can rank people on.

Psychology of the stranger

What someone could guess about you from a short sketch.

Dimensions, not boxes

Everyone sits somewhere on each - no one is purely one type.

Stable, not fixed

A dial that turns slowly with age and effort, not a wall.

LEVEL 2

Characteristic adaptations

What they are

Goals, motives, values, habits, coping styles, relationships.

Contextual

Tied to a specific time, place and role.

The lever

Where most real change happens.

In practice

Same trait, different expression

High conscientiousness becomes a fitness routine in one person, anxious over-control in another.

A block you can work on

The fear of saying no is an adaptation, not a trait - which is exactly why it can change.

LEVEL 3

Narrative identity

What it is

The story you tell about who you are, where you came from, and where you're going.

Why it matters

The most malleable layer - and the most powerful. Behaviour follows the story.

Rewrite the story

"I'm not a natural leader"



"I'm someone my team learns from"

"I'm bad at hard conversations"



"I address issues early"

"I'm just a manager"



"I'm a leader who grows people"

Where to push

Don't fight your traits

Work the layers above them.

Adaptations

Change what you do in context.

Identity

Change the story, and behaviour follows.

Self-improvement is editing Levels 2 and 3 - not replacing Level 1.

How to Change

Bring what you already do to a conscious level

Why we don't change

1

It's emotional, not rational

Make it more costly - emotionally - NOT to change than to change.

2

We expect a spectacular moment

Real change is gradual improvement on several fronts. In a word, boring.

3

It's hard

We often know we need to change, but lack the time, courage, energy or belief that we can.

Four levers that work

Add cues

Nurses told to interrupt doctors who skipped a step of the IV procedure; the word "attach" in an email as a cue to attach the file.

One change at a time

Many at once dilutes attention and drains resources. Like dominoes - focus on the first one, and the rest get easier.

Action comes first

"Just two minutes." Action breeds emotion and motivation. One bite, one step uphill, builds momentum.

Environmental design

Treat yourself as the professional you want to be: calendar slots, a desk, a system. Or put your running shoes by the door.

Even your posture moves the needle

Just 2 minutes of holding the pose is enough to shift your chemistry.

Open / Power pose



+20% testosterone
-25% cortisol
86% take the gamble

Closed pose



-10% testosterone
+15% cortisol
60% take the gamble

Phases of Change

An upward spiral, not a straight line



Six phases of change

1) Pre-contemplation

Not yet on the radar - unaware or resistant.

2) Contemplation

Aware but ambivalent. "Maybe someday."

3) Preparation

Decided. Planning and first small steps.

4) Action

Visibly changing behaviour and environment. High energy.

5) Maintenance

Sustaining it, guarding against slipping back.

6) Relapse

Expected, not failure. The question is how fast you re-enter.

**It's a spiral staircase – a loop from one angle and an incline from another.
Self-compassion is what shortens a relapse.**

Understanding Dopamine

The molecule of pursuit, not pleasure

What it actually does

Anticipation > consumption

Spikes when we expect a reward, not when we get it. Planning a holiday or waiting for a package often beats the arrival.

Built for novelty

The "figure this out so it stops surprising you" hormone. A new hobby or place gives a burst of focus - also why we stay stuck in feeds and gambling.

Learning booster

Better-than-expected results, physical or intellectual, strengthen the neurons and connections to enable a repeat success.

Quite special

Of ~86 billion brain cells, only ~400-600k are dopamine neurons, among the largest and most connected. They also touch blood pressure, gut motility and inflammation.

Two ways to picture it



The glass

Dopamine is a finite pool. Constant short hits drain it faster than it refills.



The scale

Push the pleasure side and "gremlins" camp on the pain side - you need ever more just to rebalance.

What happens without it

Rose R.

Frozen by encephalitis for decades, described it as “being imprisoned in an inaccessible, body-shaped castle”. Without dopamine, the person is still there but cannot start.

Starving rats

With dopamine depleted, rats won't cross a short gap to food inches away - and effectively starve beside it. Without the "go" signal, even survival behaviour stops.

DOPAMINE

Replenishing it, the healthy way

Exercise

Raises baseline and sensitises receptors.

Healthy food

Protein gives dopamine its raw material.

Quality sleep

Restores receptor sensitivity overnight.

Creative work

Earned, effortful reward - the lasting kind.

Cold exposure

A long, clean rise without the crash.

Slow, earned sources replenish the pool. Fast, cheap ones drain it.

Thank you.

The important things we rarely think about.

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