



Flip a Sailor's Perspective With Flexible Thinking

Sailors may be caught off guard by a sudden change and wonder how best to respond.

They may also find themselves stuck in a rigid mindset when a fresh perspective is needed.

That is why flexible thinking is vital. At its core, flexible thinking is the ability to shift perspectives, manage stress, and find alternative solutions when faced with unexpected challenges. It is not about always having the right answer. This article explains how to build the resilience to adapt, decide, and move forward with confidence, no matter what the situation.



Sailors training at sea

What Is Flexible Thinking?

Flexible thinking is the ability to think about new or different ways to approach a situation while also managing stress and optimizing performance. Flexible thinking enhances the ability to quickly weigh the merits of multiple perspectives and decisively respond to the unique challenges of any situation.

Ultimately, it will not only decrease unhelpful stress but also improve toughness and increase resilience. Sailors who develop this critical skill can better adapt to change, embrace alternative solutions, and respond quickly.

Why Is Flexible Thinking Critical for Warriors?

A Sailor's thoughts impact how they feel and behave at any given time, which ultimately affects their performance.

According to SOCM AJ Durr, "I know a lot of Sailors get stuck not knowing what to do next. But when you can actively think through the alternate solutions, you're able to become a stronger flexible thinker. So, get out and manage your emotions. When things are overwhelming you, and this can be highly overlooked, you can be free within your own thoughts, and emotions are sometimes prisoners to those thoughts. Finding creative ways to help you get through difficult times can aid in handling disappointment and stress at every level."

What Are the Benefits of Adaptability in High-Stress Environments?

Changing one's perspective on a situation leads to more helpful behaviors and can create an upward spiral.

The Self-Talk Model shows how the thoughts individuals tell themselves influence their emotions and behaviors.

Flexible thinking helps individuals recognize when their self-talk is unhelpful or overly rigid, and then adjusts it to be more balanced and constructive.

Thoughts, emotions, and behaviors all occur in response to internal or external stressors and each one can trigger the next, forming a loop. Sometimes this loop is helpful but at other times, it is unhelpful.

Shift the Loop Toward More Helpful Outcomes

The key to altering the loop is awareness of patterns and associations between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.



Self-Talk Model with sea and horizon in background



Feedback loop with sea and horizon in background

The mind and body can be thought of as part of a loop. It begins with a situation, something happening in the environment. Most situations are outside an individual's direct control, but behavior can still influence how they unfold. From there, thoughts emerge. These are the beliefs or interpretations attached to what just happened, and they shape not only how a person feels but also how they respond.

Emotions follow. They reflect how an individual feels about the situation, often influenced more by thoughts than by logic. Emotions can linger and grow into more sustained moods like depression, chronic anger, or ongoing anxiety.

Finally, those emotions lead to behaviors. This is the outward response, whether it is what a person says or does, or even what happens inside the body, like a racing heartbeat or tense muscles.

The key to breaking unhelpful cycles lies in awareness. By paying attention to how situations, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors feed into one another, individuals gain the power to step in and shift the loop toward more helpful outcomes.

Mental Blocks and Habits That Hinder Adaptability

Human brains are wired to use different mental shortcuts, or heuristics, to save energy. For example, when scrolling social media, individuals quickly decide which posts to like or skip without deeply thinking about each one, or they use emojis or shorthand to communicate feelings instead of typing full explanations. Heuristics simplify decision-making and conserve mental energy.

However, when these shortcuts are relied on, especially without awareness, they can lead to walking into a hazard that negatively impacts performance through effects on emotions, decisions, and behaviors.

When Do Thoughts Become Unhelpful?

In the correct situations, self-talk can be helpful, but negative self-talk can lead to a decrease in self-confidence and poor performance if it dominates one's thinking.

Sometimes thoughts work against individuals. When they get hooked on rigid thinking, minds become less accommodating and more restrictive, which only adds to stress. At other times, individuals may find themselves fighting battles they cannot control, or relying on unhealthy coping strategies like avoidance to escape uncomfortable thoughts. Blaming others can also creep in, which takes the focus away from accepting responsibility and moving forward.



You're shifting your mindset, shifting that thought process, and accepting those better outcomes.

CMDM David Marcus

What Is the Key to Shifting This Pattern?

The key to shifting this pattern begins with awareness. Reflection helps individuals notice the moments when strong emotions, or less-than-ideal behaviors took over, and invites them to examine the thoughts they had at the time. With practice, this awareness reveals the patterns behind their thinking and shows them how closely those thoughts are tied to their performance.

Tools and Strategies to Cultivate a Growth Mindset

The following tools can help Sailors enhance flexible thinking:

Challenging Thoughts is the practice of recognizing and confronting irrational beliefs or statements.

Reframe encourages identifying unhelpful thoughts and replacing them with more positive or adaptive ones.

Acceptance acknowledges that certain circumstances are beyond personal control and shifts thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to focus on elements that can be controlled.

Defuse is the practice of recognizing that not every thought requires a response or action, creating opportunities to explore options and consider different perspectives before making a decision.

Action Counter Action (ACA) requires taking an intentional action that opposes the automatic behavioral response.

Self-Talk and **Performance Statements** are phrases used to regulate feelings, thoughts, and emotions.

How Does Flexible Thinking Fit Into a Sailor's Daily Life?

The following tools can help Sailors enhance flexible thinking in their daily lives:

Challenge Assumptions encourages questioning things taken at face value and considering alternative possibilities.

Embrace Uncertainty supports stepping outside the comfort zone and engaging in activities that push the brain to think in new ways.

Shift Perspectives focuses on understanding different viewpoints, even when there is strong disagreement, to become a more versatile thinker.

Play With Possibilities promotes brainstorming multiple solutions to a problem without immediate judgment, fostering creativity, and open-minded thinking.

Sailors who excel in these skills can swiftly adjust to changes, readily consider new solutions, and respond promptly.



Flexible thinking means not taking everything at face value. Ask yourself, 'what if the opposite were true?' This challenges both your assumptions of others and your own perspectives.

SOCM AJ Durr



A Sailor on a ship looking at a sunset

Beyond the Checklist

"I think as Chiefs, we overlook the Career Development Board aspect. That's a perfect opportunity to use flexible thinking in the sense of how you can apply outside the box thinking to your daily life as well.

Navy career counselors want Sailors to have a checklist because we have certain things we want to accomplish. But then what does the rest of your life look like? How can we help you be a better version of yourself?

You start talking about other things in Sailors' personal lives and helping them to just think about it differently. They start to open up, and whether they share that with you or not, it's not as important for me as a Leader, but I can see that little glimmer in their eye that says, okay, there might be a different way to think about this, and they can move forward with it.

It's a skill set that Sailors can take forward. They also are now willing to share that with somebody else. Hey, this Master Chief, this whoever, is willing to discuss something that isn't always just about the Navy way! And now we've also built a connection, which is super important to me, for the Navy, and for human interaction, and treating people better." – CMDCM David Marcus

What Are Strategies for Thoughtful Decision-Making Under Pressure?

SOCM AJ Durr says, "My community is big on getting ready for time-sensitive targets and we have to move quickly. Adapt to change, right? Some folks refer to it as embrace the suck, when things are not going as expected, and you just have to roll with the punches, but be ready for the unknown to happen to you. This is going to enable a calmer thought process for you, and things like timelines, orders, and expectations change."



A senior Sailor counseling a junior Sailor

How Does Flexible Thinking Relate to the Warrior Mindset?

According to SOCM AJ Durr, "From a Warrior Mindset lens, when you are committing yourself to learn, preparing yourself to be challenged, executing to the best of your ability, and then reflecting on how to do it better next time; that's the best way to move forward with it.

Because if you have solid performance statements and a sound Warrior Ethos, and the desire to continuously learn after every difficult dynamic that you meet, you'll be a stronger version of yourself, and you can react to stress a lot better as it comes.

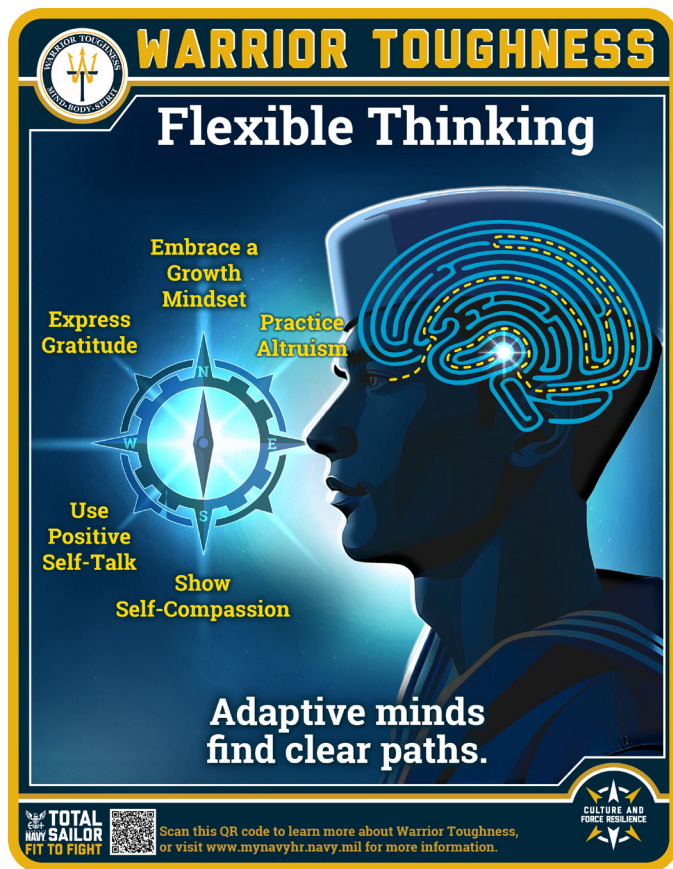
So, think about the type of warrior you want to be on the other side of that stress, and get there. You'll grow; you'll learn. But most importantly, you'll have a stronger message for yourself the next time around."

Wrap-Up

Flexible thinking enables Sailors to adapt and overcome challenges in everyday life, not only during high-stakes missions. It is a mindset that strengthens performance, lowers stress, and builds resilience in everyday life.

By challenging assumptions, reframing setbacks, and staying open to new perspectives, Sailors create space for growth and stronger decision-making.

Flexible thinking helps Sailors not only manage change but also find ways to thrive in it.



Warrior Toughness Flexible Thinking infographic

For more information, check out the videos and podcast about Flexible Thinking.



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