

How's Your Flexibility?

If there is one thing the pandemic has taught us, it is the importance of being flexible. Flexibility is the mindset which allows us to temporarily adapt our way of life, to exercise perspective and nuance.

When it comes to learning, cognitive flexibility is as important an ally. It allows us to be creative in searching for solutions and solving problems, to easily switch from one activity to another and to rapidly adapt to our environment as well as changes.



For adult learners, cognitive flexibility especially helps to perceive situations from different viewpoints. This capacity, also referred to as decentring, is necessary for several aspects of daily life.

For learners who have difficulty with mental flexibility, it can be difficult to change behaviours, habits, or beliefs. Even when a strategy has proven ineffective, it can be hard for the learner to modify their approach, to proceed differently.

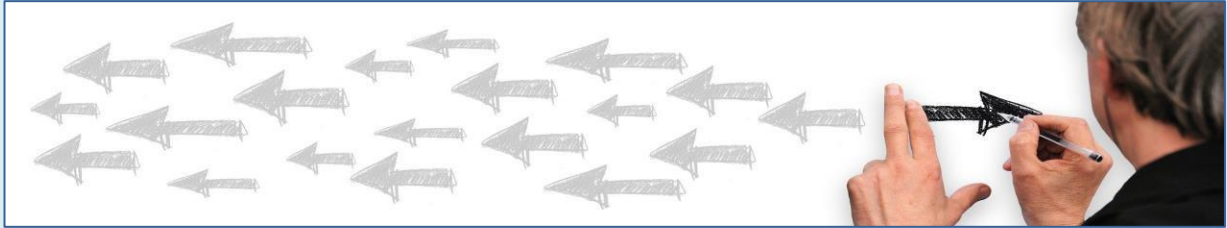
These learners often feel like they are blocked and lack ideas. They can also have difficulty switching rapidly from one subject to another. Therefore, it is easy to confuse lack of flexibility with activation difficulties.

We also notice that these learners have certain issues transferring what they have learned into a new context. For the most severe cases, the same notion presented in the same way, but in a different workbook for example, can cause the learner to experience problems. As well, some other learners have a hard time interpreting idiomatic expressions and will therefore have a tendency to take things literally.

A lack of cognitive flexibility can have important impacts on learning. Consequently, knowing how to support our students is very important. Here are some strategies to prioritize:

- **Encourage** learners to step out of their comfort zone and expose themselves to various situations. Do not forget to congratulate them and highlight their courage when they take risks!
- Establish a **stable and predictable schedule**. Make it visually available and let learners know well in advance if you must make changes.
- Think about **warning** the students when **transitions** are coming and give them time to change one task to another.
- Present new situations and learning by **highlighting differences** and **similarities** with situations they have already experienced.
- **Make links** between situations and allow students to verbalize what effective strategies they used in the past to make them feel competent and secure.
- Do not hesitate to **explicitly teach flexibility**. Students need models to understand that not everything magically happens; achieving flexibility involves hard work as old habits die hard!

Just like several other cognitive functions, flexibility must be exercised in a targeted manner to be developed. Progressing one step at a time by modifying one specific behaviour remains the most realistic plan. Seems easy enough, right? Give it a try and see if you can change seat at the table for tonight's dinner!



Suggestions from l'Équipe-choc des services éducatifs complémentaires:

- An In-Depth Look at Executive Functions: <https://www.ldatschool.ca/learning-modules/executive-functions/eight-pillars/cognitive-flexibility/>
- Cognitive Shifting: <https://www.cognifit.com/science/cognitive-skills/shifting>