

Stuck in Unhelpful Stories

If our stories determine our experience of reality, we can improve our reality by improving our stories. And that creates a positive feedback loop that ‘rewires’ our brain, making us stronger, more resilient, and more capable of addressing the choices, changes, and chances of life. There is practically no limit to the number of thoughts we can think. So why do we so often get stuck thinking the same unhelpful thoughts or creating bogus barriers to achievement? As people, we’re largely unaware of where our thoughts come from and how they affect our subsequent thinking and problem-solving.

Much of our unhelpful thinking has already been done for us. Our brains are masters at labelling problems, which they do mostly in the vast background of our subconscious minds. As a result, we take most of our thoughts for granted. Our brain presents them to us as settled facts, and we never think more deeply about them – even when we really need to. What do we do when those paths our brain knows so well don’t lead us where we want to go? We take it all the way back to the source. When our stories leave us in a rut, we need to rethink our thinking.

First, identify your problem and your story about it. Improvement begins with awareness.

The stories that are automatically formed in our brains are influenced by positive and negative experiences. They simultaneously facilitate and limit our responses to our environment, and we can improve our results by improving our stories.

Second, interrogate the story. We need to separate what’s factual from what’s merely opinion, inference, conjecture, and the like. This isn’t always comfortable. Sometimes our intuitions lead us to assume our conclusions are certain. Challenging them can feel risky. Our success often depends on our willingness to accept the discomfort of uncertainty while we press toward better solutions. And that leads to the final step.

Third, imagine something that works better. Once we’ve exposed our faulty stories, we can use our brain’s natural ability to rewire itself to find new paths and solutions. These solutions often require us to look outside ourselves, to draw upon the help of our spouses, friends, teams, coaches, and other external sources for insight and new stories. Very often, the solutions we need are found not in one moment but in following a chain of new insights and next steps.

Unsettling as it may be, uncertainty is not the enemy; it points not to chaos but to possibility. To have the confidence to engage the world and reshape our stories as needed is a far more valuable and reassuring asset than is certainty. Once we accept the inevitability of change, we have no need to remain tied to ineffectual strategies and actions. Instead, we can respond effectively to whatever comes our way.

Of course, the reverse is also true. We can refuse to engage in the dynamic process of rethinking and imagining new solutions. But where would that leave our students who need educators to experiment with better strategies? More directly, where would that leave you- right now- with whatever challenges you’re facing today? Will you accept the challenge of uncertainty, resist the fear that would keep you passive, embrace an attitude of possibility, challenge your stories, and imagine new and more empowering narratives? Extraordinary results in work and life are on the other side of your yes.

Adapted from: Hyatt, M., & Miller Hyatt, M. (2023). *Mind your Mindset: The Science That Shows Success Starts with Your Thinking*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI.



Three Levels of Text Protocol

Adapted by the Southern Maine Partnership from Camilla Greene's Rule of 3 Protocol, 11/20/03.

Purpose

To deepen understanding of a text and explore implications for participants' work.

Facilitation

Stick to the time limits. Each round takes up to 5 minutes per person in a group. Emphasize the need to watch air time during the brief "group response" segment. Do 1 – 3 rounds. Can be used as a prelude to a Text-based Discussion or by itself.

Roles

Facilitator/timekeeper (who also participates); participants

Process

1. Sit in a circle and identify a facilitator/timekeeper
2. If participants have not done so ahead of time, have them read the text and identify passages (and a couple of back-ups) that they feel may have important implications for their work.
3. A Round consists of:
 - One person using up to 3 minutes to:
 - LEVEL 1: Read aloud the passage she/he has selected
 - LEVEL 2: Say what she/he thinks about the passage (interpretation, connection to past experiences, etc.)
 - LEVEL 3: Say what she/he sees as the implications for his/her work.
 - The group responding (for a **TOTAL** of up to 2 minutes) to what has been said.
4. After all rounds have been completed, debrief the process.