

SEEK



Is it really so hard to just relax, shift gears and roll with it? Um, yeah, sometimes it really is.

Go With The Flow

Grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to read this article about why we should quit being so darn rigid.

BY LINDSY VAN GELDER

When I moved from New York City to Florida in my 40s, I didn't drive. Scratch that. I was, in my own mind, Fundamentally A Person Who Didn't Drive. Not driving had not been that unusual in Manhattan, where I'd lived for my entire adult life, but it was insane in Miami. Still, I held out. I worried that it was too late to learn, that my parents had been right: I was too much of a daydreamer and would undoubtedly wreck any car I got behind the wheel of, etcetera, blah blah blah. Even deeper in my subconscious, not driving was an avoidance tactic. If I

were no longer dependent on my then-partner to chauffeur me around, would it be easier to end our unraveling relationship? On some level, I didn't want to know. Telling myself (and everyone else) I was *waaaaay* too busy to learn to drive, I dug in my heels. And as with most cases of inflexibility, the longer I believed in my non-driverly essence, the truer it became.

"The mind takes great comfort in familiarity," says clinical psychologist Todd B. Kashdan, Ph.D., a professor at George Mason University who studies psychological flexibility. "That can be

a good thing, since thinking in familiar patterns saves time." But those worn-down tracks can also result in "psychological stuckness," Dr. Kashdan says—and that's *not* good.

Your personal sticking point might be a resistance to getting on Facebook, or traveling to a country where English isn't spoken or just trying sushi for the first time. Maybe you're about to reject a guy who is absolutely perfect in every way, except he's short (or whatever) and you Never Ever date short (or whatever). Or you might have a lifelong idea about the way that the

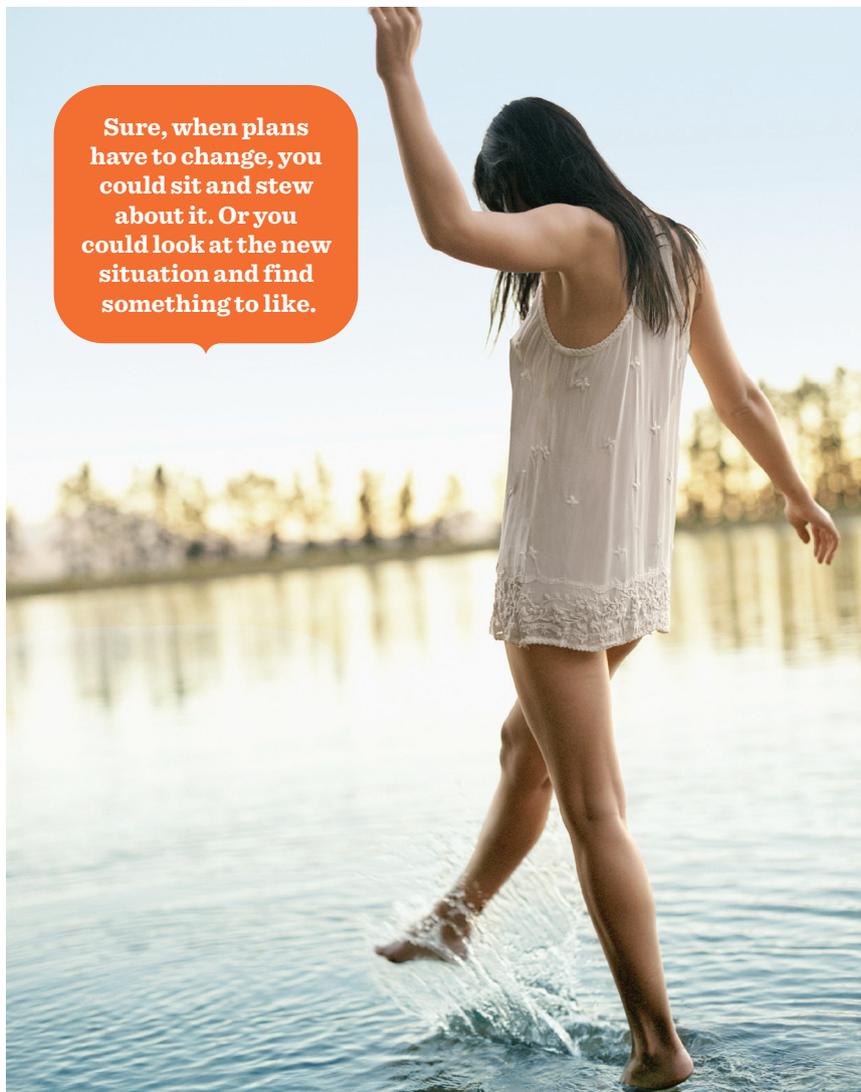
world is run—or should be run—that’s about as supple as a block of cement. It may feel comfortable, but inflexibility can limit your potential both personally and professionally. I was quite literally unable to go anywhere without a driver’s license, but being inflexible can stop you from moving forward in other, more profound ways.

Relax Your Grip

Rigidity can be rooted in fear of being hurt or the need to be in control, says Jiovann Carrasco, a therapist and marriage counselor in Austin, Texas. The need for control sounds familiar to Jenni Person, 44, a graduate student, arts event organizer and married mother of two in Miami. “I’m a Type-A perfectionist, and sometimes my attitude has been, ‘If things can’t be perfect, why bother?’” Person admits. A big breakthrough came for her one night years ago when she was adamantly resisting a game of putt-putt golf that her friends spontaneously decided would be fun. “I couldn’t think of anything I would less rather do. I thought I’d be miserably bored, and it wasn’t the evening that I had planned,” she says. “But one of my friends looked me straight in the eye and said, ‘Jenni, it’s one hour of your life.’” And in the end, Person found herself having a pretty good time. “People who are psychologically flexible are more able to enjoy life as it is, stay in the moment and cope better with life’s challenges,” says Anthony Biglan, Ph.D., a social psychologist at the Oregon Research Institute. Person certainly has found this to be true. “My friend’s comment about the putt-putt golf was an epiphany for me that I’ve since carried into other parts of my life,” she says. For instance, when her husband recently dealt with a period of unemployment, Person was able to roll with it, knowing that it would pass. “Flexibility is often mostly about acceptance,” she says.

Bend A Little

For any kind of relationship to be successful, flexibility is key. If you’re a parent, you’ve probably encountered the Dr. Seuss story, “The Zax,” from



his book *The Sneetches and Other Stories*. The Zax are a pair of stubborn creatures, one of them headed due north, the other due south. Their paths meet on the Prairie of Prax, and both refuse to alter their course by so much as an inch. They stay locked in their standoff for years. Meanwhile the world around them grows and changes, eventually leaving them stuck on a tiny plot of land as highways and overpasses are built around them. They are poster children for inflexibility. But although it takes two not to tango in the story, even one inflexible person in a relationship can spell trouble.

“Fifty percent of the time when couples come in to see me, one person drags in the other and insists that he or she needs to change,” says Carrasco. The my-way-or-the-highway attitude

is toxic to relationships. “Both people have to be ready to change a little in order to work things out,” he says.

For Miven Trageser, a therapist in Los Angeles, a little willingness to bend made for a better marriage. “I’m very happy in the kitchen,” she says, “and when I’m in the flow of cooking, I tend to leave the cabinet doors open. I don’t even notice it.” Her husband did, though—and it drove him nuts. “He’d walk through the kitchen and shut the cabinets in a pointed, irritated manner,” Trageser says. “Sometimes it would lead to spats.” Her reaction was that he was being annoying and rigid and should stop being that way—or keep out of the kitchen. But after a while, she realized that adapting to his needs would be a small gesture of kindness and a way to bypass the

pointless friction. So she tries her best to remember to keep the doors closed. “I quit holding on to my agenda that he needed to change his attitude,” Trageser says, “and I think it’s improved our marriage.”

Learn To Let Go

Inflexible ideas don’t just cause trouble in relationships: They can damage your self-esteem. Gina Dohi believed absolutely that a woman who follows the rules will have a happy marriage. When her husband left her for another woman, “my heart was ripped out,” says Dohi, a 43-year-old medical staff assistant in Kayenta, Arizona, and the mother of five. “I had been a good wife and a loving mother, so I viewed it as being a failure.” After months of feeling that she was the one who was responsible for the breakup (and therefore weak and worthless), it was her religious faith that helped her get a less rigid perspective. After a long session of prayer, “I realized I can’t change him, but I can change myself,” she says. “I am trusting God to deal with him. And I made a mental agreement with myself to become more accepting and learn to let go.”

Since then she’s been more relaxed not only in her thoughts about her ex, but in other areas in which she’s been able to admit she doesn’t have absolute control. When her teenage son recently came home with a tattoo—something that once would have switched on a voice in her head accusing her of being a bad mother—she went to her bedroom briefly to cry, pray, calm down . . . and gain some perspective. “I didn’t like the tattoo, but I was able to look at it and see that at least it was a cross—it could have been much worse,” she says. “I went back out into the living room comforted, with a feeling of peace.”

Watch life coach
Liz Nead help real
women loosen up at
LHJ.com/lifedare.



Flexibility may even improve your job security. “The great need today is for workers who can handle uncertainty,” says Dr. Kashdan, since whatever machine you operate or computer program you use today is probably going to be obsolete in a decade. Amy McGee, 41, of Houston, had her professional moment of truth four years ago when she left the public relations field to become a real-estate agent. “In real estate you have to learn to be flexible or you might as well go home,” she says. “You can’t control whether the client is going to show up, or the condition of the next property you’re showing, or what’s going on with interest rates or when a deal is going to close. Your calendar is in pencil, not permanent ink.” McGee quickly adapted to rolling with the punches and now considers it part of her job to help stressed-out clients do the same. “I tell them we only do a small happy dance when a contract is signed; we save the big happy dance for after we close. You have to learn to expect the unexpected.” Her secret? “I probably say the Serenity Prayer five times a day.”

Stretch Yourself

Most of us can’t force our personalities to pretzel themselves into the psychological equivalent of the lotus position overnight. But there are tricks to loosening up faster. “If you want to learn to be more flexible, put yourself in a situation where you have to be flexible,” says Ivars Ozolins, a leadership and life coach in Encinitas, California. “A new challenge will often unlock a new mind-set.” Ozolins believes that developing physical flexibility can help unlock psychological flexibility. Psychologically inflexible people often carry themselves as if they were girding for combat, he explains—tensing up, breathing shallowly and using short, choppy movements like pointing or poking when they’re under stress. When Ozolins’s clients fit this profile, “I’ll have them change their perspective by imagining they are someone who is very physically flexible,” he says. (Clients often pick

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Ellen DeGeneres, Madonna or Lady Gaga.) “I’ll ask them to show me how that person walks or stands, and what gestures they use. Then I’ll ask them the psychological question: How would that person approach whatever issue is challenging you?” People frequently burst out laughing, Ozolins says, but they loosen up . . . and having thought about what it might feel like to be a different person, physically, they can often reframe their problems and come up with new solutions.

Learning to be more open doesn’t mean becoming a doormat and it certainly doesn’t mean ignoring your moral code. But it does involve learning how to engage with life as it comes, in each moment, rather than focusing on baggage of the past or fear of the future. Luckily, says Carrasco, “anybody can learn to be more flexible, and at any age.” Which is a good thing. For me, getting behind the wheel of a car took mindfulness, prayers, many deep breaths and, of course, driving lessons. For a while I kept a Post-it note on the dashboard with step-by-step instructions on parallel parking. But now that I am passing, parking and pumping gas like a real Floridian, I can see that the ability to change seems to be just another muscle. And it needs regular workouts.



Lindsay Van Gelder lives in Miami Beach with a colony of formerly feral cats, a Mini Cooper named Macaroon and a hot-pink kayak named Rosebud.