Your Best Thinking in the Worst Situations: Improving Decision Making Under Stress

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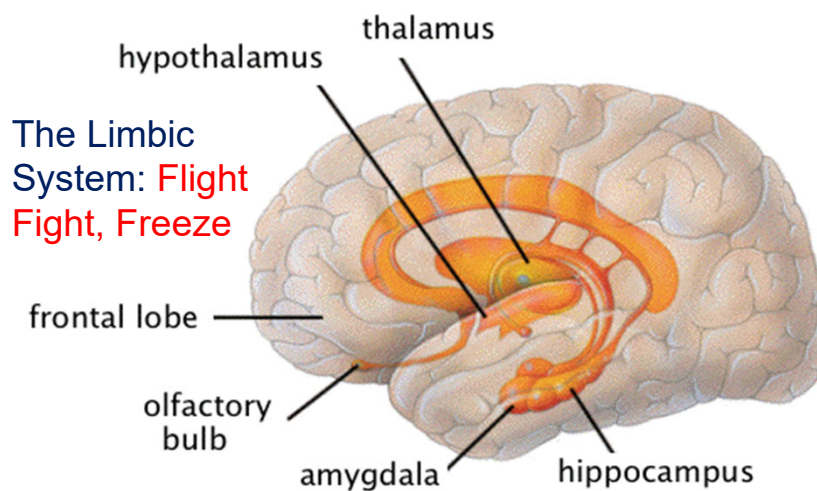illinoisLAP.org   312.726.6607; 800.LAP.1233

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Our GPS Guide

- Describe how stressful situations affect our thinking, judgments, and decisions

- Identify stress reactions: how Flight or Fight response affect mind & body

- Demonstrate three evidenced-based strategies to improve our decision making under stress

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"Anatomy is Destiny?" (S Freud)

The Limbic System: Flight Fight, Freeze

thalamus
hypothalamus
frontal lobe
olfactory bulb
amygdala
hippocampus

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Attorneys Under Stress

Event – Response = Stress

loss aversion effect:
Flight

righting reflex:
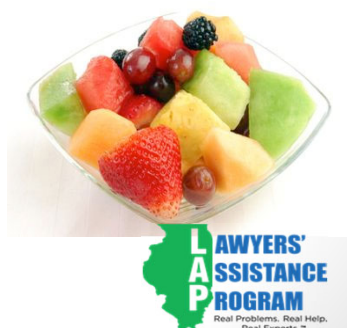*Fight*

uncertainty:
Freeze

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Attorneys Under Stress

Cognitive depletion

Perceptual narrowing

Zero sum encounters

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Evidenced Based Strategies

1. *Mindfulness Stress Reduction (Persistent Patience)*
    - Wide and varied applications
    - 20 plus years of research

2. *Thought Challenging*
    - Based on cognitive restructuring therapies
    - Demonstrated effectiveness for many problems

3. *Managing Uncertainty/Ambivalence*
    - Based on enhancing intuition practices
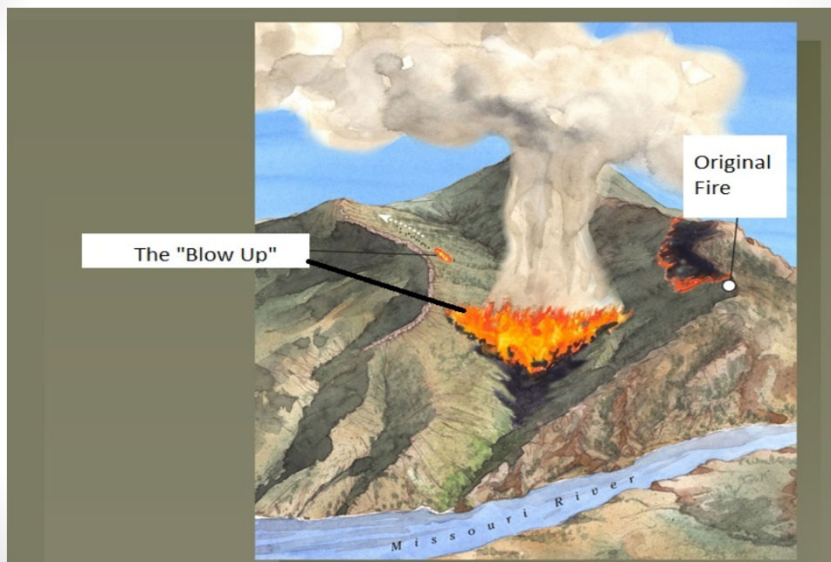   - Change resistive thinking into resilient thinking

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The Mann Gulch Fire, Montana
August 1949: Tragedy & Triumph
(image: US Forest Service)
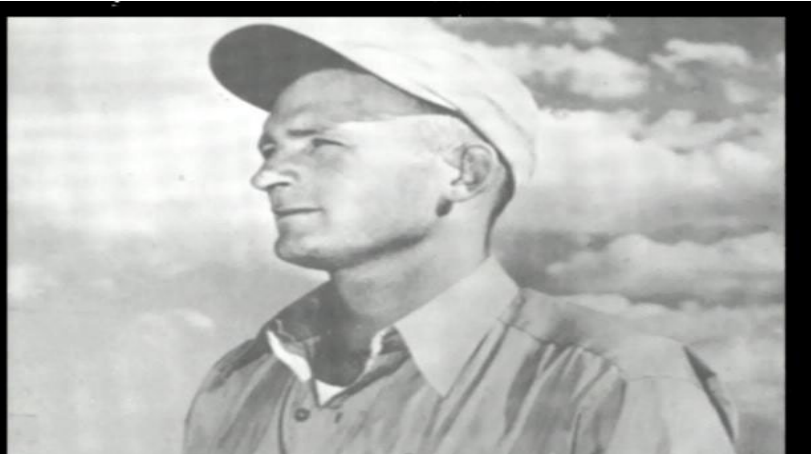

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Mann Gulch Fire - Tragedy

(image: US Forest Service)

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Robert Wagner (Wag) Dodge – Triumph "The Escape Fire"
(image: Dodge Family Website)

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E-B Strategy 1: *Persistent Patience*
Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction

J Kabat-Zinn, 1990

Skills and Principles:

1. Non-judging
2. Patience
3. Beginners Mind
4. Non-striving

5. Acceptance
6. Letting Go
7. Trust

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Non-judging/Non-striving

- Non-judging attentiveness
  - Observing while being aware of judgments
  - Perceiving vs Reacting (objectivity?)
  - "Judge less, observe more"

- Limit multi-tasking ("really doing what you are doing")

- Skill sets employed
  - Letting go
  - Fresh Mind
  - Non striving

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Patience& Non-judging: Meditation Practice

- Awareness of
  - Mind wandering
  - Where the mind went
  - How you returned it to the here and now

- Skill sets employed
  - Non-judging
  - Patience
  - Letting go

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Meditation Practice: Insight & Problem Solving

Immune Function
Kabit-Zinn et all, 2003

Problem Solving
Newberg & D'Aquili, 2001

Insight
Davidson, 2004
Kounios, et al 2006

Reduce Reactivity
Keng, et al 2011

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Eliminating Auto-Pilot

More aware, more often
- Fresh Mind; Non-striving

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Acceptance/Let go: Finding Comfort in Discomfort

- "Sitting with" vs avoiding

- Using a gentle curiosity to observe self

- Pain vs Suffering

- "Persistent Patience"

- More discomfort = less insightful/intuitive (Kahneman, 2011)
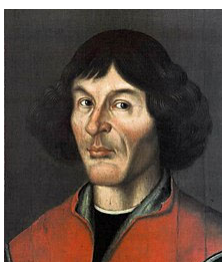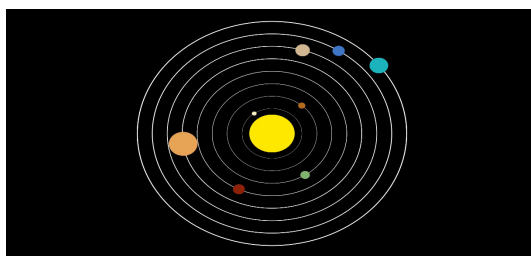
- Skill sets employed
  - Acceptance
  - Trust

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E-B Strategy 2: Thought Challenging
based on CBT, J Beck, 1995

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Automatic Thoughts/Feelings (Auto Pilot):

- "Mental" reactions to situations
  - Real; imaginary/perceived; anticipatory

- Not fully conscious or deliberate

- Instantaneous and immediate

- Intense emotional associations

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Self - Guided Process EBS-1 + EBS-2

1. Observe thoughts
   Non-striving/Non judging
2. Identify thinking patterns
   Patience
3. Identify cognitive distortions
   Non-judging/Accepting
4. Challenge cognitive distortions
   Letting go

5. Construct alternative thoughts/beliefs
   Fresh mind
6. Behavioral Experiments
   Trust/Patience
7. Re-calibrate (step 1)

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Thought Record
27 y/o female attorney (Steps 1-2)

Situation/Event	Automatic Thought	Feeling/MFN	Emotion (1-10)
Started new job; increasing work load, little support	"If I'm competent and want to be successful, I can't ask for help."	Fear Depression Patience/Non-judging	Righting reflex 8
Recommended to take time off work for treatment	"I will probably lose my job if I'm off of work for more than a few days."	Fear/Panic Non-striving/letting go	Loss aversion 8
Overwhelming work load and expectations	"I can't keep up; I'll be judged a 'loser'."	Depression/Anxiety Trust/Fresh Mind	Perceptual narrowing 10
Father's illness, work more hours	"Must do it without support; can't burden my family/friends"	Guilt/Anxiety Non-striving/Trust	Panic vs urgency 10

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Challenging Automatic Thoughts

Using I.C.E. to cool off 'Hot' thoughts (Steps 4-5)

Thoughts are NOT Facts

- **I** – Identify the Thought

- **C** – Challenge the Thought

- **E** – Evaluate the Thought

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A Pacione, 2003

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I. C. E. (Step 4-5)

Identify and rate the thought:

- "I'll lose my job if I take time off to recoup now."

- Certainty rating = 80%

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I. C. E. (Steps 4-5)

Challenge the thought:

Evidence For (Loss Aversion)

- I've seen my boss get rid of someone else before

- There's been threats of lay offs

- If I lose my job, I'll burden others

- The partners have been watching me lately

Evidence Against

- The HR staff encouraged me to get help if I need it

- The managing partner told me "we support you"

- They told me "I'm a valuable employee"

- Boss won't talk to me about returning to work now

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I. C. E. (Step 5)

Evaluate the thought:

a) Post challenge certainty rating = <u>45%</u>

b) Revise thought to make it more truthful:

"There is a higher probability I can lose my job if I don't get help and continue to slide, than if I take time off now to get help"

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E-B Strategy 3:
Managing Uncertainty & Ambivalence
Improving Intuition

in·tu·i·tion
int(y)o͞oˈiSH(ə)n

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Managing Uncertainty & Ambivalence

"… she just kept saying,
'We've got to find the child.'"

The story of a two-year old girl who miraculously survived a horrible crash that killed her parents captivated the nation in March 2003. But if it were not for the determination of Wisconsin State Patrol troopers and others at the crash scene, the story might not have had at least one fortunate ending.

Before dawn on March 7, Troopers Sean Berkowitch and Rhonda Waldera, of District 5—Tomah, were at the scene of a fatal crash on a rural stretch of Interstate 94 in Jackson County. A westbound semi-truck had jack-knifed on the icy road and crossed the median into the eastbound lanes. A Honda with Minnesota license plates hit the semi's trailer and then passed underneath—shearing off the top of the car. It traveled another 700 feet before ending up in the median. Both adults inside the car were dead. That much was known.

But Trooper Waldera also was concerned about the unknown. While investigating the scene, she found a coat, blanket, a "sippy" cup and some pull-up diapers in the car. These items indicated that a small child
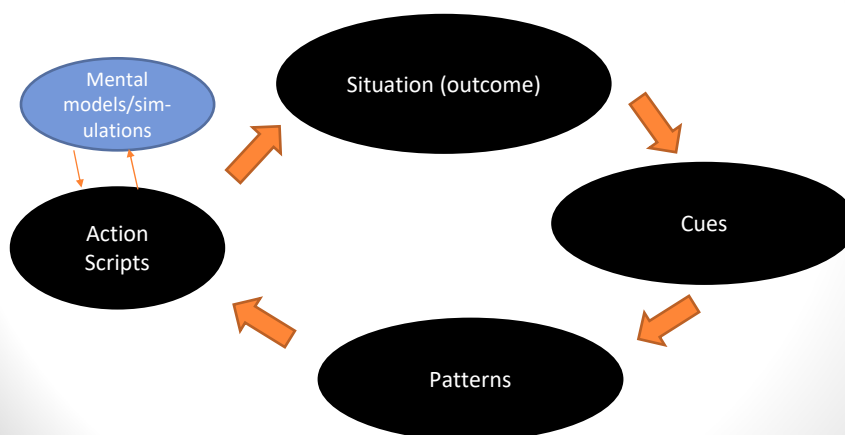
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Managing Uncertainty & Ambivalence

Intuition: Deliberate Practice Model

G Klein, 2004

Mental models/sim-ulations

Situation (outcome)

Cues

Patterns

Action Scripts
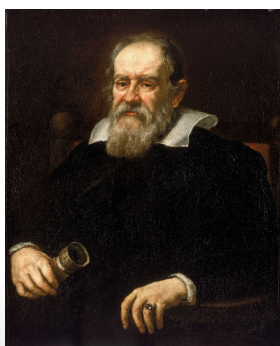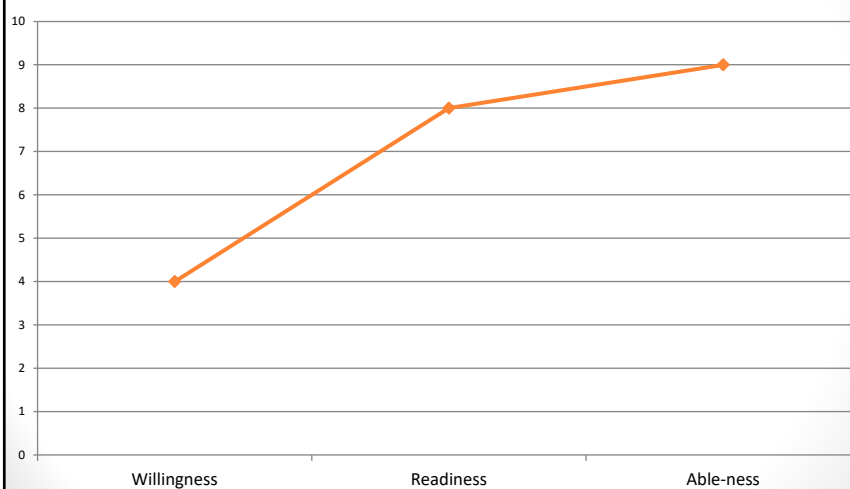
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Building Intuition

"The book of nature is written in the language of mathematics" Galileo

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Decisional Assessment
31 y/o attorney: "break-up"

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Getting started...

- Choose 1 or 2 EBS or techniques

- Become more aware more often

- Create more comfortable

- Use I. C. E.

- Measure progress (persistent patience)

- Meditation Practice: 3 X's weekly/15 min

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The Limbic Lyric

Always on, and ready for a fight,
my limbic system is rarely set for flight;

It suppresses doubt and jumps ahead,
Always searching for threats and things I dread;

Once it's on the trap is set,
I may act in ways I'll soon regret;

Slow my breath and become more sane,
Then I'll remember thoughts and facts are not the same!

T Pacione, 2018

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Suggested Readings

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    New York: The Guilford Press.

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    Publishing.

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