



'Who knows': Building Psychological Flexibility and Resilience by Letting Life

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The 'Who Knows?' Mindset: Why Your Mind's First Story Isn't the Final One

I came across a Chinese parable recently on a science and psychology forum that stayed with me because it captures something I see regularly in clinical work. When something unwanted happens, the mind has a tendency to quickly conclude 'this is bad'. It jumps to the worst-case scenario before we even know what comes next. I have noticed over the years of practice that for people who have experienced repeated negative events across their lives, this becomes more habitual and shapes how they see future events. Positive experiences get filtered out or discounted. The mind sees trends in events or outcomes, learns to anticipate threat, and then anticipates bad outcomes. This pattern starts to feel like clarity, and a logical way to make sense of the world.

I see this frequently with clients who experience anxiety or depression. Many years ago, I worked with an older patient who had accumulated a number of health diagnoses over time, leading to her feeling severely depressed. As a result of her various medical problems, she experienced pain daily and reported that it stopped her from doing anything other than sitting down and watching TV. She would tell me that her whole body was in pain and that she could not do anything because of it. She reported that she had no joy in life, that she would never get better, and that she did not

see the point in living anymore. What we worked on together was not the pain itself, but her relationship to it. Using mindfulness, I asked her not only to notice where the pain was present, but where it was not present in that same moment. We worked on her holding her conclusion of “this will never get better” lightly, so that she could be more open to her overall experience. We then worked on expanding her awareness around the pain rather than just noticing it and filtering out the experiences she had that were actually comfortable. Over time, she began to see that the pain was part of her experience, but not all of it, and that the mindset of “this will never get better so what is the point in living” was what had been blocking her from taking action toward things that made her life feel meaningful and worthwhile.

When I read this parable recently, that patient was one of the first people I thought of. I then started thinking not only about how many times I work with this concept with other clients, but also how I have had to work with it myself.

The Parable of the Farmer and the Horse

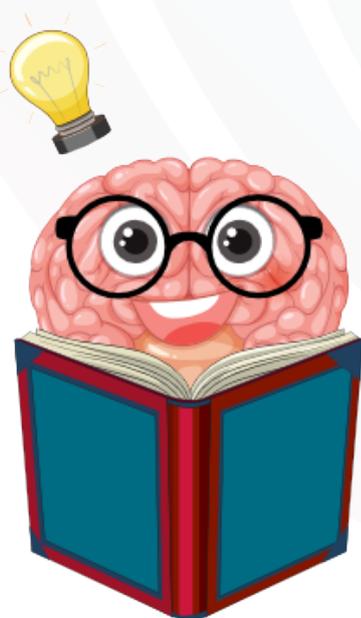
The parable goes something like this. A farmer’s horse runs away. His neighbours come to offer their sympathy, certain it is terrible luck. The farmer’s father simply says, “Who knows?”

The horse returns and brings several wild horses with it. Now everyone is saying how fortunate he is. Again, the father says, “Who knows?”

The farmer’s son breaks his leg trying to ride one of the new horses. Bad luck again, everyone agrees. “Who knows?” says the father. Then soldiers arrive to conscript young men for a war. The son, injured, is left behind. He survives.

The point is not that everything works out in the end. It is that at each moment, the people around him were absolutely certain they knew what it meant, and they were wrong every time. The father was the only one who stayed open minded in his thinking, and notably, the only one who was never wrong.

Why Our Minds Jump to Conclusions



Jumping to conclusions is a very normal human mental behaviour. Every one of us does it and will continue to do it. According to neuroscientist David Rock (2020), the brain is a ‘prediction machine’ that makes predictions every moment of our day. Why does it do this? There are many reasons, but in his SCARF model (2008), he describes certainty as a core neurological need. When certainty is low, the mind does not like the gap and wants to quickly close it so that we feel more comfortable. When there is incomplete information, the human mind tends to fill in the blanks to reduce uncertainty. In essence, for survival, the mind needs to make sense of things quickly. It wants certainty. It wants to know what is coming so it can keep us safe. So within seconds of something happening, it labels our experiences or events with definitive statements: good, bad, ruined, lucky, dangerous, fine.

You might ask, if this tendency can cause problems for us in our mental health and daily life, why have we developed it? It is simply the result of evolution. Our brains have been shaped over centuries to assess situations quickly

because, historically, our ancestors' ability to identify and respond to threats fast was what kept them alive. Our brains have retained, and further developed, that tendency to detect danger, quickly make sense of it, and respond before it was too late.

Sometimes that speed is genuinely useful. Quick thinking can keep us safe in genuinely dangerous or hazardous situations. For example, if you are cooking alongside your two-year-old and you see them reach toward the stove, you grab their hand without stopping to think. You assume the worst and act fast to protect them. That instinct serves us well.

However, at other times, the mind takes one difficult moment and turns it into a sweeping conclusion about our entire future. If you think back over your life, how many times have you heard yourself, or someone close to you, say something like:

- "All relationships are doomed to fail."
- "Everything is ruined."
- "I'm a failure and always will be."
- "There's only one way this can go."
- "Nothing good will come from this."

The habit of making meaning quickly is not the problem. The problem is when we treat that first interpretation as a statement of fact and then start reacting to the story rather than to what is actually in front of us. When we treat these thoughts as facts rather than possibilities, we stop looking for alternatives and our behaviour narrows in response. We withdraw, avoid, or overreact based on a story the mind wrote in seconds, often long before we have enough information to know what is actually true. Our distress grows, and we become stuck responding to a version of events that may have little basis in reality.

The mind's story is fast but reality is much slower, and we need to give ourselves time to see how things unfold.

I've Lived This Myself

I want to be clear that I am not writing this from a position of having figured this out. I very much have lived this pattern myself, over and over, and even today I still have to catch myself doing it.

I started my career in forensics. All through high school, I had only ever wanted to work in a legal or forensic field. So I trained in forensic psychology and planned to complete my master's after a few years in the field. I did not enjoy that work and after three years, decided it was time to move to another field. I had had some exposure to clinical work in my forensic role so thought it would



make a logical transition. When I was moving out of forensic psychology into this field, I applied for a role I was convinced was the perfect role for me. It was a hybrid of forensic and clinical, which I thought would soften the landing into this new and daunting field. I did not get that job. At the time, I concluded that my colleagues in that field had far more experience than me because it was their speciality, that I was too far behind and would struggle to compete, that I would never get ahead, and that I would have to stay in forensics. That mindset felt so overwhelming. Months later, I was offered a role within a team I genuinely enjoyed working with, and who offered professional support while I developed my clinical skills. The conclusion my mind had reached turned out to be wrong and incomplete, and the next role was actually the start of something better. Well, maybe not better initially, but better in the end as I developed and grew more confident in my capability.

On the other hand, when I first got my licence, I asked my father to help me find a reliable car that could handle long distances to university. He had been an aircraft engineer in his early career and was very knowledgeable about anything mechanical. We searched for months but with my budget, the options were limited. We eventually found one that seemed ideal. During the test drive, I heard a clicking sound and asked both the owner and my father about it. Neither of them said they could hear anything. Dad was sitting in the back seat and the noise was coming from the front driver's side, so no wonder he couldn't hear it. I told myself I was probably just being anxious, a naive girl worrying unnecessarily, and I let it go. I should have pushed harder. That car broke down repeatedly and cost me thousands in repairs across the years I owned it.

In my first story, the mind moved to the worst case and was wrong. In the second, it searched for certainty and a conclusion I wanted, and ignored the signal that contradicted it. My mind, like everyone else's, wrote a story and I bought it completely in both moments. This is a pattern most of us repeat across our lives.

Like I encourage clients to do, I have had to work at holding my mind's first assumption lightly. It is not a one-off practice. It is something I have had to return to consistently. Working on it over time has made a real difference to my own psychological flexibility and helped me to move through difficult periods of my life.

What Psychological Flexibility Actually Means

The skill the farmer's father demonstrates has a name in psychology. It is called psychological flexibility. Many clients come to see me wanting to reduce their distress or symptoms, which is a perfectly normal and understandable goal. However, what ACT and the broader research has taught me, both personally and professionally, is that it is not our suffering that is the problem. It is how we appraise it and how we respond to it that matters.

In therapy, we learn to be curious with our inner world, with our thoughts, feelings, urges, sensations, beliefs, and assumptions, so that these are not experiences to avoid or that hold us back, but data to learn from about what might need attention in our lives, or what is important enough to move toward. We learn to sit with discomfort rather than react to it, to be curious with it, to open up and make space for it, and to connect with our values rather than our emotions when making decisions through life.

Psychological flexibility is our ability to stay present and open to our experiences, even the difficult ones. It means holding our conclusions and predictions lightly rather than treating them as facts, and updating our interpretation as circumstances shift and new information comes in. Importantly, it also means making decisions and taking action based on our values rather than our feelings, regardless of how convincing the mind's version of events seems in the moment.

It is worth being clear about what it is not. It is not forced positivity. It is not pretending things are fine when they are not. That kind of toxic optimism only takes us so far and often makes us feel worse for not being able to sustain it.

Psychological flexibility is about staying open. It is the difference between “This is a disaster” and “This is hard, and I don’t yet know what it means.” The father in the parable did not deny that the horse running away was a loss. He simply refused to let that first conclusion become the whole story.

This matters for mental health in a very practical way. When we decide the ending before the story has played out, we either panic and overreact, or give up and disengage entirely. We end up suffering about events that may never come to pass. Staying flexible keeps us anchored in what is actually happening right now, rather than living inside a story we have written in advance.

And it is a learnable skill. Like physical flexibility, we build it through practice, through small and repeated challenges to our perspective that become more natural over time.



The “Who Knows?” Mindset in Practice

To help understand this concept in daily life, here is a simple and relatable example. Like many clients, I have sent emails or messages to someone only to never receive a reply. Within seconds, the mind makes up a story about why they have not responded: “my message was too blunt”, “they’re annoyed”, “I’ve said the wrong thing”, “they’re not interested”. You get the gist. On the other hand, I can sometimes forget to reply to text or email messages myself, and have had friends, family, and clients ask me if I was upset with them. The simple answer is no, I just forgot. But their minds had provided an explanation to fill the gap, just like mine does.

Our minds are great storytellers. Like movies based on true life events that open with something like “this story is based on true events, but storyline, characters and other elements may have been fictionalised for dramatic purposes”, our minds work in a similar way. We start with data that might be fairly factual, and then fill in the rest with a lot of creative storytelling.

The “who knows?” stance is not about dismissing that story. It is about recognising that not everything the mind tells us is truth or fact. It is simply about noticing the story and seeing it as a perspective the mind is offering in the moment, one that could change with more information. In the example above, from there you can instead wait a while to see what comes next, choose a values-aligned action, send a follow-up message, or simply get on with the next task rather than spiralling. As I have learned, more often than not when the reply comes, the story the mind had told me turns out to have been very creative. The worry was real, and it tells me I care about something, being helpful, building connections, but what it was predicting was assumption, not fact.

This is acceptance and willingness in its truest sense. Not giving up, but acknowledging what is true right now. We cannot know the outcome, and we cannot control all the variables. When we stop demanding certainty, something shifts. The urgency drops. We stop burning energy on outcomes that may never come.

Without that shift, we tend to fall into familiar patterns:

- **Rumination:** “I must solve this right now.”
- **Avoidance:** “I can’t handle this feeling.”
- **Catastrophisation:** “Everything is falling apart and it’s always like that.”
- **Over-control:** “I need to eliminate the uncertainty.”
- **Impulsive decisions:** “I just need relief, right now.”

The “who knows?” mindset brings us back to a more useful question. *Given what is actually here right now, what is the next step I can take?*

Resilience: Staying Engaged While the Story Is Still Unfolding

Once we accept that the mind’s first story is often incomplete, a practical question remains: how do we keep going when life is still uncertain?

Resilience, in my clinical experience, is not separate from psychological flexibility. It grows out of it. I find the metaphor of a reed useful here. A reed bends in the wind and survives. Frozen rigid by ice, the same reed snaps at the first pressure. The reed did not get weaker because conditions got harder. It got weaker because it lost its ability to adapt. That is what rigidity does to us too. It is not the hard moments that break us. It is the insistence that things should be different, that we should already know the outcome, that we cannot tolerate not knowing.

Rigid story:

***'This is bad. I'm stuck.
Nothing will change.'***

Flexible story:

***"This is hard. I don't know
what it will become. I can take
the next step and reassess."***

I would encourage you to think of resilience not as a personality trait some people have and others do not, or a rule or mantra that must be developed, but as a set of behaviours we can build and practise over time. It is what we do when life is unstable and the mind is demanding a definitive answer we cannot give it yet.

Holding the “who knows?” mindset builds resilience because it:

- Reduces the emotional spike or spiral from treating one difficult moment as permanent
- Keeps options and perspectives open when we are under stress
- Allows recovery to begin sooner, because we stop feeding the catastrophic story
- Supports persistence, because discomfort stops feeling like proof of failure
- Creates space to act from values rather than fear or urgency, allowing us to make choices guided by what matters most rather than by the pressure to escape discomfort.

When we remember that life is an ever evolving and changing experience, we suffer less from the added weight of “this will never end” or “my life will always be like this”. Resilience is what happens when we continue to engage with life while uncertainty stays present.

A Practical Framework for Hard Moments

What I find most useful about this approach is that it gives us something to actually do in difficult moments, rather than just a concept to reflect on. Here is how I think about applying it:

1. **Notice the instant judgement.** Identify the story the mind delivers. Your boss sends a short, blunt email and within seconds the mind has a verdict: *they're unhappy with my work.*
2. **Insert “who knows?”** Use it as a pause, not to minimise the discomfort, but to prevent premature certainty. They could be busy, stressed, or simply brief by nature. *Who knows?*
3. **Name what is actually true right now.** Ground yourself in facts, not forecasts. *What I know is: I received a short email. That is all. What it means is not yet established.*
4. **Choose the next workable step.** One small action that either improves the situation or supports your coping. You reply professionally or ask for a quick check-in, rather than spending the afternoon ruminating. *This is something I can actually do.*
5. **Allow the emotional weather.** Stay with the discomfort without letting it drive your behaviour. The anxiety may still be there, and that is okay. *I can feel this without needing to fix or escape it right now.*
6. **Re-evaluate as reality updates.** Come back to the situation with fresh information rather than staying fixed on the first story. Your boss responds warmly. *The story the mind told had no basis in what actually unfolded.*

What the Shift Looks Like in Real Time

The difference is not whether things are hard. It is whether we turn “hard” into “final.”

In the first surge of emotion, the mind might say: “This is a disaster. Everything is ruined. I will never recover from this.”

The “Who Knows?” stance sounds more like: “This is genuinely hard. I don’t know yet what it means. I’m going to focus on what I can actually do today.” It shifts focus from what is hard and out of our control, toward acceptance of what is, and toward what is actually within our control.

That is not positive thinking. That is thinking accurately under uncertainty. That is psychological flexibility.

A Small Experiment for This Week



Understanding this concept is a starting point. What actually builds the skill is practising it in everyday life, across small moments as well as larger ones. This week, when something happens that the mind immediately labels as bad (or even very good), try pausing before locking in the meaning. Notice the story. Ask “who knows?” Not as a way to dismiss what you are feeling, but as a genuine invitation to stay open a little longer.

Then ask: what do I actually know right now? What can I actually do?

Give it a try and see what shifts for you. I would be genuinely interested to hear how it goes.

Closing Thoughts

The concept of psychological flexibility has a longer scientific history than many people realise. Its roots can be traced to the 20th century, where figures like Jean Piaget identified adaptability as central to how individuals assimilate and accommodate new information. The more formal clinical application came in the 1990s through the work of Steven Hayes and the development of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Since then, psychological flexibility has become a core component not only of ACT but of other evidence-based models including Dialectical Behaviour Therapy. What this body of work collectively represents is a meaningful shift in how we approach mental health: away from symptom reduction as the primary goal, and toward learning to hold difficult inner experiences, understand what they are telling us, and continue moving toward what genuinely matters in our lives despite their presence.

This is not a soft concept. It is one of the more robustly supported ideas in contemporary clinical psychology, and importantly, it is learnable.

When we can genuinely hold the idea that good and bad are not fixed outcomes but shifting interpretations, we become less reactive under stress, more able to tolerate uncertainty, and better equipped to keep functioning when life is unstable. The farmer’s father did not have certainty. He had the discipline to stay open when everyone around him was certain.

That discipline is available to all of us. I hope you will give the concepts covered in this article a try and see the difference it makes to your quality of life and mental health.