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# WHY CHANGE IS SO HARD

(and how to make it easier)

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Mindset, Discomfort and New Realities

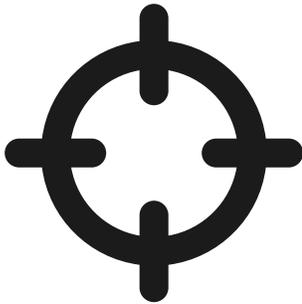
# Overview

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## OPTIMIZATION

Humans get to have an incredible experience in the span of one lifetime... we get to imagine a reality for ourselves that does not yet exist - and then create new neural firing patterns and behaviors to achieve that future reality.

This is the notion of an optimization process, which is the idea that we can get better and better at fine-tuning our preferences so that we get closer and closer to experiencing life the way we want to.

The key to optimization is to understand that there are certain features and activities that will come in to play... but it's the FEELING that matters the most and what you're really seeking whenever you do anything.

If you list a bunch of features you want in a job, for example - like a certain salary, location, etc. Or the features of a romantic partner - a certain look, height, income, hobbies, etc... you are creating 'markers' that narrow what you explore or engage with.

The challenge with this is that you may get everything on the 'feature' list... but... if you are miserable because you don't vibe or share the same values, or there's a personality clash, or other reasons you didn't include in the list, you may not experience the *feelings* that you desire. Yes, you may want a new career, partner, etc... but underneath all of that, what you really want is to be happy and fulfilled.



The field of affiliative neuroscience relates a lot to the feelings and fulfillment we seek, which can guide us as we think about how to optimize our life.

According to affiliative neuroscience (as proposed by Dr. Ruth Feldman), there are 3 key aspects to our evolution as humans:

- plasticity
  - sociality
  - meaning
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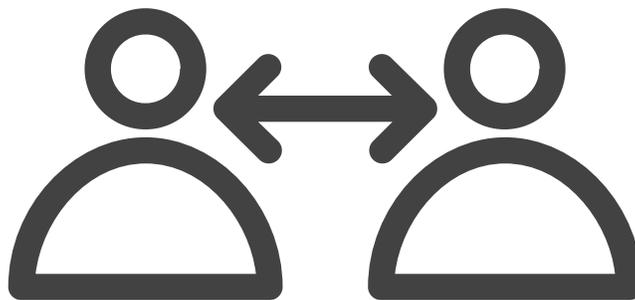
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## PLASTICITY, SOCIALITY, MEANING

### PLASTICITY

Many of you are pretty familiar at this point with the concept of plasticity. We'll look at it a bit more in depth in the next section. Briefly, it's the idea that we can add, change and update how we think, move and communicate. And we have the power to do this from the moment we are born (actually in the womb) until the moment we take our last breath (and then... who knows... I'm talking about the physical dimension for now as we know it :-)

To activate new ways of thinking, moving and communicating, there is a period we must go through of NOT KNOWING how to think, move or communicate in a new way. That period of learning can be uncomfortable. It is the 'Dip' - which we'll go into in the next section. The Dip reflects the process of plasticity and change.



### SOCIALITY

Plasticity is not something that occurs in isolation, however. The key to it lies within our 'sociality'. Human sociality is tied to a bonding hormone called oxytocin. In fact, the oxytocinergic system - which has evolved from much more primitive organisms for basic life functioning - underlies the plasticity of our brain.

This is important to keep in mind because as we think about new realities we want to experience, two aspects of sociality are critical for our health and optimized brain functioning:

- WHO we surround ourselves with, and
- THAT we find people we trust and bond with

Isolation and lone-wolfness can only take us so far. And that is because of this oxytocinergic-plasticity feature of our mammalian brain-body system.

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## PLASTICITY, SOCIALITY, MEANING

### MEANING

The other amazing feature of humans is the meaning we can create and associate with absolutely everything we come in contact with and think about.

The meaning we make of things dramatically influences our feelings, motivations, aversions and overall brain-body activations in response to stimuli.

One example is the meaning we make about pain and discomfort - whether physical or emotional. Studies on the effects of 'appraisal and coping' show us that the meaning we make about stress can have strong influences on our neuroendocrine response, which then influences how we deal with challenge and change.



So the meaning we make about change, discomfort, rejection, and mistakes will affect our physiological response to them. If we see the discomfort and uncertainty that arises from change and doing new and challenging things as a **THREAT**, this will lead to a more dramatic aversive response. If we see this discomfort and uncertainty instead as an indicator that we are doing something **NEW** and must go through in order to change, this can help our brain-body system re-associate challenge, nervousness, effort and discomfort with **OPPORTUNITY**.

Opportunity is something that initiates movement towards, and exploratory mechanisms needed for learning.

Threat activates self-protective mechanisms that narrow focus and shut down exploratory, curious and open-approach systems needed for learning.

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## EASE AND AUTOMATION

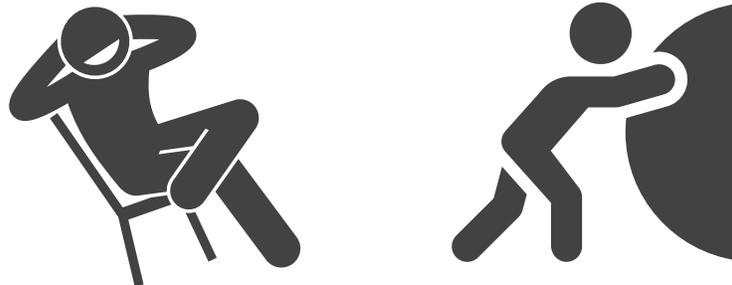
Now that we've covered the idea of plasticity, sociality and meaning, let's look at the actual change process (which remember - ALWAYS involves learning).

When we project an image of our future, it does not yet exist yet, which means that our brain-body system does not currently have the neural and behavioral resources to experience that future version.

It must create them. This is the beginning of the learning journey.

As we move towards that future version, we move out of our familiar, repetitive patterns and neural circuitry. This puts the brain-body system into a mode of needing 'expensive material' to start accommodating these new behaviors.

The brain-body is conservative with its resources until it is clear that the environment and behaviors are going to use them over and over again to be worth the effort that change requires.



When we are trying to learn new things or ways of being, this requires a huge amount of focus - which is governed by the prefrontal cortex.

Think of how much focus you needed when you first learned to ride a bike or drive a car. Once you have done those things enough times, the prefrontal cortex quiets down as many different networks become associated and more easily activated. This is the embodied automation process that leads to mastery.

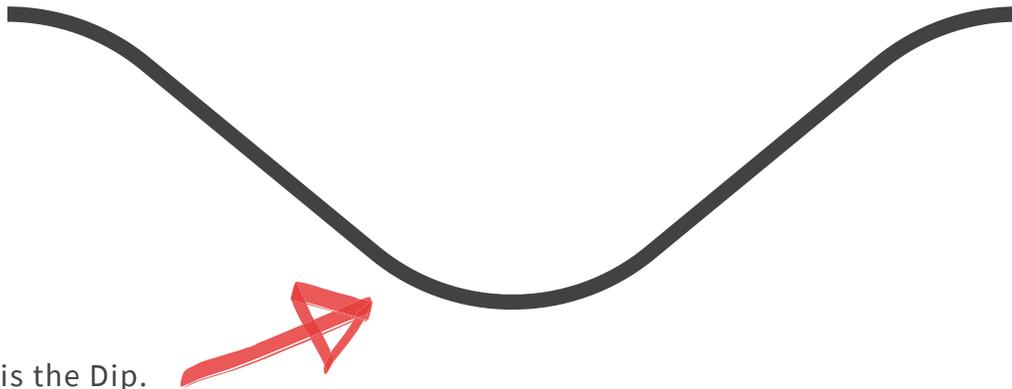
But that feeling of ease and mastery can only happen after time and repetition. This means that even when we feel like we are not doing well, that we are not actually changing - we must keep our sights on the goal.

When it comes to re-wiring the brain-body system, there will be moments where the brain resorts back to the energy-conserving old circuits.

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## DISCOMFORT & THE DIP



This is the Dip.

This is the part of the process of change where we are in new and unfamiliar 'neural territory'. It will not feel natural.

It may feel exhausting. It may make you feel like you can't keep doing the 'new thing' - it's just too hard. You will have strong urges to not bother.

That is the uncomfortable, not-there-yet phase that the brain-body must go through as it allocates resources to develop new circuits.

If we hold steady and continue to challenge ourselves with new, desired behaviors that align with that future vision, the brain will continue to furnish those new circuits with the needed materials.

One example of this might be becoming a more regulated person in the face of stress. Some of this stress might be about uncertainty about the future, or challenges in your interpersonal or professional relationships. If you have been reacting to these challenges in ways that 'throw you off course' - that lead to outcomes you do not want, then you have not yet *optimized* your responses.

To become more emotionally steady in the face of challenge (which means not staying in a fight/flight/freeze/fawn/fold mode) you will need to learn and train your brain-body circuits to activate differently. At first, this will feel impossible. This is simply because it is not something your brain-body has devoted its automation resources to yet.

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If a goal is important to you, do not give up during the dip! You must persevere. As the new networks fire more and more, they increase the statistical probability that they will fire again. A new behavior then starts to feel more natural. As the new pattern feels more natural and activates more, the old networks lower in activity. That is when we begin to leave the Dip.

If we stop during the Dip because we are uncomfortable with the unfamiliar movements, thoughts and feelings that come with doing something new, the brain-body will conserve resources and resort back to old behavior.

Many people give up during the discomfort of the Dip. That's when it feels the most difficult and can trick people into thinking they don't have what it takes.

# MINDSET

This is where Mindset is critical. If we've learned that things should always feel easy, or we've been under the influence of easy-gratification neurochemicals from instant behavior-reward mechanisms (like social media, substances, and addiction to certain activities), the contrast of what effort feels like will be so great that it may feel 'wrong'. But the feeling of uncertainty and effort is inevitable for creating change.

Because life continues to present us with new challenges and unexpected problems, we continuously get an opportunity to learn new ways to respond, move, think and communicate so we can get closer to achieve our desired reality.

This means that as we continue to strive for a life that feels fulfilling and desirable, we will continue to be faced with Dips. Our key then, is to re-associate the discomfort from engaging in new and unfamiliar challenges with opportunity for growth, rather than something we should avoid.

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## RE-ASSOCIATING SENSATIONS AND STIMULI

If our familiar way of responding to work, family, relationship and life stress is to shut down, become reactive and angry or vindictive, or to become melancholic and sad, etc., any kind of response that's DIFFERENT from those is 'unfamiliar'.

Statistically-speaking, it is always a 'safer bet' for the the brain-body to associate unfamiliar things as threats: if it's correct, you survive. If it's incorrect, you lose an opportunity, but you're still alive. This means that when we are doing things that don't feel familiar, we may encounter fear or aversion.

Aversion is about avoidance. It can take the form of:

- distraction (doing anything that feels easier, like watching TV, scrolling on the phone, any activity that is automated and familiar to you);
- lethargy (not feeling like putting in the work to try to respond differently).
- putting the responsibility or blame on anything but YOU.



These are all patterns of thought and movement our brain-body uses to avoid expending extra resources for new behavior. While some things are important to avoid for our safety and health, when it comes to LEARNING new things, changing how we respond and creating new, desired experiences - the body's fear response will impair our ability to do what's needed.

As you learn something new, you may feel embarrassed, insecure, incompetent. This is the MEANING you are making of the sensations coming from the body as it encounters something unfamiliar that it has not yet navigated and mastered.

If you can re-associate that initial flood of sensations of nervousness or embarrassment with the 'new neural territory' and opportunity, instead of threat, this helps our brain-body relax into a more exploratory and learning state. Re-associating a stimulus to a different MEANING is another super-power of humans that can help us achieve more than we may initially think.

In the long-term the absolute SAFEST we can be lies within our ability to create the ideal physiology and brain activity that helps us adapt on the spot - regardless of what comes our way. So becoming a MASTER at learning and re-associating meaning is actually our 'safest bet'.

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## **SOCIAL REFERENCING**

Luckily, because we are mammals - and a special kind of mammal called a Human, we have a special skill to help us get through these dips and challenges. This skill is called 'social referencing'.

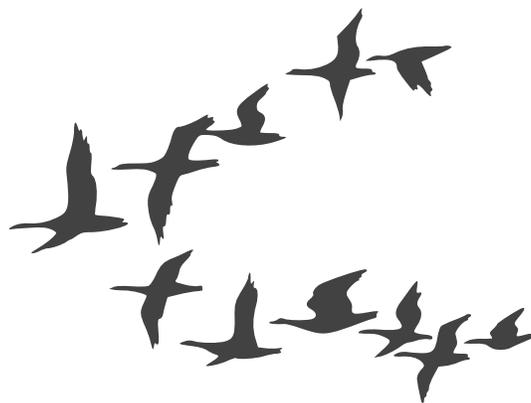
Social referencing is a mechanism we use to not need constant trial and error to figure out if something should be approached or avoided. Instead of experimenting and risking harm with new behaviors, we can use the evaluations and reactions of others to give us information.

We look to the people around us to help us know if something is harmful, helpful or irrelevant. We watch their expressions, pick up on frequencies emitted by their bodies and movements, and listen to the words they use. This is where we can get trapped in groupthink.

If we are around people who are, for example, quick to judge others, or afraid of looking like they don't know the answer or experiencing unfamiliar things, this fear will be transmitted via those signals.

Change and transformation REQUIRE looking like we don't have all the answers, and that we have space to make mistakes and be vulnerable without being judged or rejected. If we are surrounded by self-protective and defensive reactions and behaviors, there's a good chance our brain-body will begin to associate making mistakes and being vulnerable as something to be avoided.

If the groups we are a part of don't value growth, experimentation and exploration of new ways of being, there will be a lack of social cues that link these things with reward hormones. We will therefore not seek these out; they won't have enough value for us within our social matrix.



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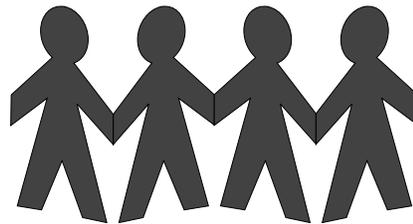
## YOUR TEAM

Therefore, who we surround ourselves with (in person and online) can influence our mindset about change and transformation. If we stay in a supportive environment that challenges us to fire the new circuits, this boosts the brain-body's motivation to seek growth and challenge.

***This is why we MUST have people around us who are OK with us changing and evolving and doing things differently.***

Many people who surround you will not be ok with you changing if they are not in their own process of change. They may associate your change and growth with being left behind, you not needing them, or a new type of dynamic within the relationship that is unfamiliar to them. This can trigger insecurity.

This doesn't necessarily mean we need to cut people out of our lives completely, but we do want to be mindful of how we spend our social energy. We can have compassion for others' insecurities, but for growth to occur, it is helpful if our ratio of supportive peers, partners and environments *outnumber* the less supportive ones.



Growth- and change-supporting people give off micro-signals in their reactions to our process of experimenting and exploring new ways of moving, thinking and communicating. These social referencing signals (that come in the form of facial expressions, words, communication patterns, tone of voice and body movements) help amplify an 'excitatory' state for you to continue to explore, expand and change. Groups and learning environments can also help with this.

In contrast, people who are afraid of change and unfamiliarity (and more specifically, YOU changing) will give off cues (facial expressions, words, tone of voice, etc.) that can dampen your mobilized, exploratory state.

As we continue to be in supportive environments and experiment with new behaviors and mindsets, we can get to a point where that 'future version' of us becomes the one we experience more often than the old one.

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## THERE'S A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A DIP AND CUL-DE-SAC

As much as mastery and moving through the Dip is important, we may also want to consider that there are some things that are truly worth the effort, and some that aren't. To illustrate this, here's an excerpt from *The Dip* by Seth Godin:

### The Dip and the Cul-de-Sac

*“When you first start something, the rapid learning you experience keeps you going. Whatever your new thing is, it's easy to stay engaged in it. And then the Dip happens.*

*The Dip is the long slog between starting and mastery. The Dip is the long stretch between beginner's luck and real accomplishment.*

*The Cul-de-Sac is a situation where you work and you work and you work and nothing much changes. It doesn't get a lot better, it doesn't get a lot worse. It just is.*

*There's not a lot to say about the Cul-de-Sac except to realize that it exists and to embrace the fact that when you find one, you need to get off it. That's because it is keeping you from doing something else. The opportunity cost is just too high.*

*That's it. Stick with the Dips that are likely to pan out, and quit the Cul-de-Sacs to focus your resources. That's it.” - Seth Godin*



One thing that can help us decide if something is worth it is tied to another aspect of MEANING. The meaning we have for the purpose of our life. We can engage in this by taking time to reflect on the legacy we want to leave, and what our highest possible mission is during this lifetime - who we want to help, how we want to be of service. This is related to 'self-transcendent purpose'. When we have a clearer image of that MISSION or that PURPOSE, this can help us determine if the Dip and the ups and downs are worth the effort.

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## REVIEW

As you learn something new, you may feel embarrassed, insecure, incompetent. This is the MEANING you are making of the sensations coming from the body as it encounters something unfamiliar that it has not yet navigated and mastered.

The meaning we make of things dramatically influences our feelings, motivations, aversions and overall brain-body activations in response to stimuli.

If we see discomfort from doing new and challenging things as a THREAT, this will lead to a more dramatic aversive response. If we see it as an indicator that we are doing something new and must go through in order to change, this can help our brain-body system re-associate challenge, nervousness, effort and discomfort with OPPORTUNITY.

Re-associating a stimulus to a different MEANING is another super-power of humans that can help us achieve more than we may initially think.

A catalyst to transformation is finding people who allow you to feel safe and supported during the insecurities and mistakes you encounter as you grow.

In the long-term, the absolute SAFEST we can be lies within our ability to create the ideal physiology and brain activity that helps us adapt on the spot - regardless of what comes our way. So becoming a MASTER at learning and re-associating meaning is actually our 'safest bet'.

## Activity to try

1. Draw a learning dip.
  2. Now draw a figure/symbol that represents you now on the left side of the dip.
  3. Draw a figure/symbol on the other side of the learning dip that represents a future version of you that you would like to experience.
  4. If you can, write a few words or draw how that would feel.
  5. Now look at the lowest part of the Dip.
  6. Where do you think you are in your learning journey? Are you noticing micro-progress that indicates you are on your way out of the dip?
  7. For the next week, pick one new action/behavior to try and do it five times this week to see if it feels any more 'familiar' to you. It could be getting up at a certain time, doing a healthy bedtime ritual like journaling, stretching, gratitude, or practicing a new skill or movement.
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