Module 2: Updating Your Mental Rules for Managing Stress & Anxiety

Your Mind and Automation of Thoughts

Your mind, specifically all the mental rules stored in your mind, is one of the sources of your stress and anxiety. Remember the bandits that you read about in the first module? These bandits come from your past and will attack you with words and phrases that can slow your progress toward your destination. If your outdated rules say something like “you can’t do this”, “this is too much to handle”, or “you have failed in the past”, you are more likely to lose your motivation than if your mental rules promoted your strengths; e.g., “you have a plan that is likely to succeed”.

Take a few minutes to think about some of your feelings or thoughts that cause you to feel stress or anxiety. Think back over the past week when you were feeling extremely stressed or anxious, such as late at night when your mind was racing, early in the day when you were at work or when you had a panic attack while out in the community. Do you have the situation in your mind? Now think through all the thoughts that were running through your mind as your stress or anxiety levels were increasing. Think about all the worrisome thoughts (e.g., what if this happens, how can I control that, this won’t work, I’m in danger, I don’t have enough money) or critical statements you made about yourself (e.g., I’m stupid, I will look foolish, I can’t do this, no one will like me). Did you notice that nearly all your thoughts are based on predictions about the near or distant future? You worry about what is coming; you worry about the unknown.

It is natural and normal for you to try and predict the future, but why do your predictions lead to an increase in feelings of stress or anxiety? Why do your thoughts about the future increase your sense of anxiety and not your sense of adventure or energy? Many people see the future as promising or exciting. What is the difference between your thoughts and those of people who look forward to the future? How do you know the future when you have not been in the future (people who see the future in a positive way also don’t know what is going to happen, but they think it will be good – why?).

Are you interested in knowing why you tend to become stressed or anxious when you start thinking about the future? If yes, keep reading.

Your brain functions like a high speed computer – processing an enormous amount of information within seconds. Anything you do that is repeated eventually becomes automated, which means that your brain can process the information without you being aware of the thinking process. Consider the process of driving your car. When you were learning how to drive, you thought about everything that was going on in the car; e.g., where to hold your hands, look at all the mirrors, look for the turn signal, check your speed and dozens of other behaviors. Now, you’re not even aware that your brain still processes all the behaviors associated with driving, because it does so with minimal thought from your conscious brain.
You may recall from module 1 that we described your mental rules as bandits attacking your stagecoach as you move toward your goals and values. You make predictions about your immediate future based on your mental rules, which were developed from your past. So, your future is predicted by your experiences in the past. The problem is that many of these mental rules; i.e., bandits were formed from your mistakes or difficult experiences (e.g., being assaulted or abused by a family member). The more mistakes you made or the more pain you experienced, the more bandits were formed in your mind telling you that you will continue to make mistakes or be exposed to danger in the future. Automation of your mental rules – bandits – becomes the primary problem with anxiety and stress. These bandits can undermine your plan without you being aware that you are being attacked by these mental rules.

Would you like to how to stop these bandits in your brain from holding you back from reaching your destination? If yes, keep reading.

Updated mental rules are those that are based on information in front of you – in the present timeframe. Because of automation, your mind may apply a mental rule that is out of date with current information. Your abilities and knowledge continue to evolve, but your mental rules often use old information when influencing your feelings and behaviors. For example, you may no longer be in danger as an adult, but your bandits will say otherwise because they were formed back when you were in danger.

The basic thinking process is displayed in the diagram below.

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**First, something happens.**
- For example, you have been invited to a social gathering where you will meet mostly new people, such as at a party, picnic, or meeting of employees after work

**Second, your mind attaches a rule about this event.**
- The mental rule could be: *I won’t know what to say to all these new people and I will look foolish,* which you learned from past experiences when you tried to socialize, but became too anxious to enjoy the event, so your mind quietly tells you “*don’t waist the effort on an activity that will hurt more than help*”

**OR**
- The mental rule could be: *I could enjoy myself and get out of the house, I usually love a good party once I start talking to people,* which you also learned from past experiences when you recalled how much you enjoyed yourself after you went to the social gathering (and got through the initial anxiety of walking
into a new situation), so your mind quietly tells you “be sure to dress up and be prepared to meet new and interesting people, including a potential person who you could date in the future”

Third, you experience one or more emotions
- Based on your mind’s rules about the event, you will likely feel a certain way, based on past experiences (not necessarily based on current information). Using the examples above, how do you think you may feel with each rule?
  - “I won’t know what to say”: hopeless, worried, humiliation, frustration
  - “I could enjoy myself and get out of the house”: hopeful, energized, excited, social

Can you spot your bandits in your mind? Think back over the past week when you planned an activity, such as paying bills, going to a job interview, working on a project at your job, attending a doctor’s appointment, helping your kids with school work, or getting out of the house to pick up groceries. Instead of starting the activity, you began to worry about the activity and what could go wrong or what won’t work. Instead of starting or completing the activity, you did the opposite, such as stayed in the house, you avoided your kids, you called out sick from work, or you distracted your mind so you did not think about the bills. The activity or plan was shot down within seconds of the thought.

When your plan or ideas are stopped quickly, it is likely the result of your bandits, attacking your stagecoach as you started moving toward a goal.

Bandits are effective in part because they hide and jump you without you seeing them. So the first strategy is to find your bandits in your mind and expose them to the light (in this case, the light is information in the present). Your goal is to identify your thoughts and emotions just before one of your ideas or activities are stopped.

Now think back over the past week when you did achieve an activity that you planned, such as attending a doctor’s appointment, spending some time with your kids, going to work and taking on some of your work related tasks, or getting out of the house to pick up needed supplies for the home. What mental rules did you use to get moving? These mental rules were likely based on updated information; e.g., I need to attend my doctor’s appointment and it won’t be bad, I’ve done it before. Moreover, you may have made the task easier, such as going to the supermarket when it was less crowded, watched a movie with your kids because it was easier than finding the energy to play outside or you completed simple tasks at work that required less mental energy. When you are anxious or stressed frequently, you don’t notice that you are probably achieving many of your activities.

Read on if you would like some guidelines for updating your mental rules
Tailor your mental rules to fit your needs and your objectives. Below are some helpful tips for keeping your mental rules updated:

- **Repeat behaviors that help you approach stressful situations** – the best rule to remember is that you have skills to manage your stress and anxiety and to increase these skills over time.

- **State the odds** – your outdated mental rules tend to predict that the odds of an event happening at either 100% (bad things will happen) or 0% (something good will happen). Based on present information, the real odds are between 0% and 100% for all your outcomes; so state the odds of something occurring based on present information.

- **Break down the tasks into smaller steps** – if the odds of something good happening is low, increase the odds by breaking down the task into two or more steps.

- **Avoid activities that don’t lead to your values** – One way of increasing your anxiety is to approach activities that you don’t find meaningful or important, even if you weren’t anxious. Doing something that you really don’t like can cause anxiety – so focus more on activities that feed your values.

**Assignment:**

Now it’s your turn to identify your mental rules; i.e., bandits that stop you from reaching your value-driven goals. It’s hard to imagine the true impact of your mental rules until you begin to examine the chain of events. You can learn how your thoughts can increase your feeling of stress or anxiety. The good news is that your thoughts can also create positive emotions, which can lead to increased energy as well as an expansion of your ideas. The first step is to look out for situations where your motivation to implement one of your value-driven ideas was undermined fairly quickly. Once you notice the situation, you can use the form *Modifying Mental Rules Worksheet*. The worksheet includes a rating of your emotions connected to your outdated rule (the one that may have triggered your feeling of stress or anxiety). Once you identified the situation, you can look back to your thoughts that stopped you from moving forward. Once you identify the outdated mental rule, see if you can update the rule with information in the present (or more accurate information). Once you update the rule, re-rate your feelings of stress, anxiety or worry associated with the new rule. The goal is not to eliminate your feeling of stress or anxiety, but rather to learn how your original mental rule created a powerful emotion that lead to you being unproductive. You may not feel stress free with the updated rule, but your emotions may improve enough to allow you to approach the stressful situation. You and your mobile wellness coach can review the worksheets next week.