

NWEEG Special Interest Session,

Sep-18

*Mastering Difficult  
Conversations*

*with Sue Evans*



**FAST  
Pathways**  
*Unlocking  
Stress Success*

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## Two Parts of the Thinking

Our minds are amazingly complex, and many models have been proposed to simplify our understanding of how we think. My favourite is Jonathan Haidt's elephant and rider: The rider is equivalent to the conscious mind, your awareness, the thinking which you do on purpose.



It's the rider who evaluates and makes decisions, who likes structure and reason. This conscious thinking, though incredibly powerful, has quite limited capacity. You're able to hold around seven items of information consciously active at any given time. Start adding more, and you quickly lose awareness of the first ones.

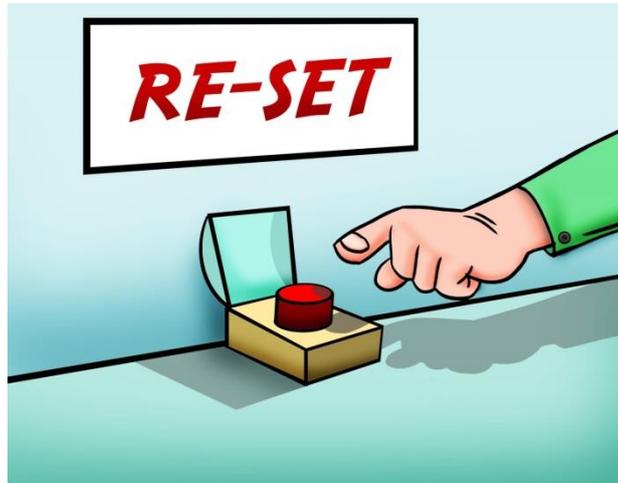
The elephant is equivalent to all the rest of the thinking – everything that goes on outside the deliberate awareness. Your emotions, intuition, inspiration and creativity; and all of the automatic routines which keep you functioning.

So why an elephant? It's far bigger and more powerful than the rider, and if it decides you're going in a particular direction, you usually will, even if it doesn't make sense to the rider.

The skills we'll be exploring will help you to teach your elephant some new habits...

## Skills to Maintain your State

### Quick Re-Set



Here are just a few examples of where it's most useful

- You've just had a difficult conversation. Rather than stewing over it, you want to switch off replaying it in your thoughts, and get on with your day
- You're getting ready for a presentation or interview, and you want to remain relaxed and calm while you prepare – so that instead of thinking what it's leading towards, you're fully focused on getting ready
- You're about to give a speech or presentation, and you want to stand up feeling relaxed and comfortable
- Something's going on in your life which upsets or frustrates you, or makes you angry. You want to be able to respond calmly without getting hijacked by the raw emotion
- You're having an important conversation, and you want to focus fully on what the other person's saying, rather than on what's going on inside your head

### One Point



In Eastern philosophies, it's believed that your body's energy is centred at a point about an inch below your naval, and half way through from back to front. It's got lots of different names, but we'll call it One Point.

Being able to focus your attention at One Point is a great way to feel powerfully centred, and ready to withstand whatever gets thrown at you (though I don't suggest you practise by getting big guys to push you around)...

## Beware the Temptation to Mind Read

No one else can get into your mind to assess your feelings or memories. But any intrusion you try to make into someone else's mind is also a work of pure fiction. You don't know their motivations, you can't be certain of the meaning they're attaching to the words they've chosen. Here's an example, and how you could word it slightly differently.

"You're just trying to make it even harder"

You can't know for sure what they're trying to do (unless they've directly said so). Instead, to keep it factual, you can tell them what you're experiencing.

"It feels like you're trying to make it even harder"

Or if you're uncomfortable about expressing it as a feeling, try "It seems like you're trying to make it even harder". You're sharing your perception, rather than presenting it as a fact, which you can't know to be true.

You've stayed out of their head, and you're not trying to second-guess what's going on in there. And that works both ways – just as it helps to stay out of their head, it also helps to remember they're not inside yours. Expect them to know what you're thinking or feeling (however long they've known you, or however well), may lead to disappointment.

If you really want to stay out of conflict, be prepared to tell them how you feel, what you want, what you're experiencing. They might still not respond to that the way you'd like, but in telling them, you've done what you can be responsible for.

## Your Shield



It's an unfortunate fact of life that we have to deal with unpleasant people – rude, cross, selfish or spiteful people. The bullies and the mood-hoovers. Here's a way to harness your imagination to boost your own protection.

I developed this technique for a little girl who was only six at the time. Someone in school had started to pick on her – only little things like mimicking and telling tales, not the world's most traumatic experience; but a normally sunny, outgoing little girl was becoming increasingly quiet, and was starting to make excuses not to go to school.

This technique uses your imagination; and kids are great at that. As we get older, we tend to curb our imagination, so it can feel a little strange to get into the parts of your thinking outside your awareness – but those are the parts which shape your experience of the world, and where you can make the most lasting change.

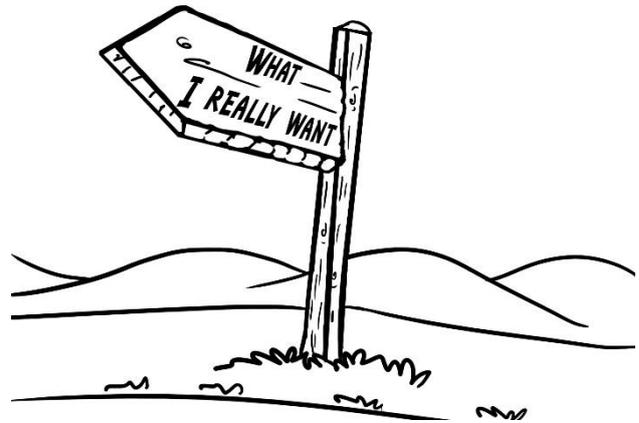
This works best when you apply it to something really specific. It doesn't have to be the most difficult relationship you have to deal with (and it does have to be something that you're comfortable to work

with on your own). So choose a specific person who you want to be more comfortable dealing with. Or a particular conversation which drained your energy, that you can still remember clearly. Bring it to mind as if it's happening right now. Because once you've used that specific example to set the new pattern, your mind can naturally apply it to similar people or situations which you encounter, all by itself.

When preparing for any difficult conversation, get crystal clear on what you really want (even if you don't believe there's a hope of getting it).

If it's a negotiation, also decide on your minimum acceptable position, and what compromises you might be prepared to make if needed.

Because if you're not clear in your own mind, you won't make it clear to anyone else either.



## Behaviour and Identity

Another way in which our minds are fond of generalising, is confusing behaviour with identity. Let me share a couple of examples: If you drive, you've probably experienced someone dangerously cutting in front of you in traffic. However colourful your response, it's more likely to be along the lines of "What an idiot!" rather than "That was stupid thing to do!". All you've seen of that person is one thing they did (albeit a stupid one); but from it you've made a judgement about their whole personality.



You notice the man at a far table in a restaurant, getting animated and raising his voice to the waiter and you might think "Nasty piece of work. There's no need for that!". Even if you've no idea what it's about.

Now does it really matter? For a person who's speeding away from you in the car in front, or some guy in a restaurant you'll never see again, probably not. But what when those same, sweeping conclusions get made about a colleague or a parent? Someone with whom you have more regular contact.... Well, if it was just the one-off event, that opinion may soften over time, and it wouldn't be that big a deal.

But the brain doesn't stop there... Once that initial conclusion's been drawn (we've decided what we think of that person) it sets the mind's filter. So that even if we don't realise it, we continue to look for further behaviours to reinforce our snap opinion of the person. Or we continue to listen to what other

people think of them, taking that on board as fact. And when we see them behaving in a way which contradicts that judgement, we're much more likely to discount it as a one off. An anomaly.

So when the 'grumpy git' greets you with a sunny 'Good morning', it gets brushed aside as out of character. It doesn't fit your beliefs about his personality. It can just as easily work the other way too – you're more likely to be cheated or let down by someone whose first contact with you set a favourable opinion.

These mind filters can powerfully affect how we respond to individuals and situations – luring us away from the facts, and into the realms of mind reading and supposition. So they can be a powerful fuel to conflict. I've seen these kind of one-off experiences fuel silo-thinking and destroy collaboration within organisations, sometimes for years.

It's not an easy one to overcome – those mind filters stop us from overloading, by simplifying the world. But they can get in the way too. If you're involved in a disagreement (directly, or as an observer), what mind filters and assumptions are at play? Where did the parties' opinions of each other come from, and could you open up new collaborations with increased awareness of how those filters got set, or the effects they're having?

## Mind Your Language!

So we've looked at changing your mind patterns, to change the way you feel about (and respond to) challenging situations. While we're exploring difficult relationships, let's look at a few ways to avoid fuelling the conflict, and hopefully help to diffuse it with the words you choose. This can be useful when you're one of the conflicting parties, or when you're trying to mediate in an escalating situation.

Sometimes, being carried along by the flow of emotion and having a monumental row, can clear the air and make the relationship stronger. But it can also have the opposite effect – so here are a few ways to avoid inadvertently worsening a conflict.

No matter what you say (or don't), you're not responsible for the other person's responses and reactions. These suggestions can be quite subtle, so they'll have little effect if the other person isn't willing to talk things through constructively. But if they're open to keeping it collaborative, these little tweaks can really help. The first tips are for keeping it factual, to help stop emotions from escalating.

## Stick to the Facts - Avoid Over-Generalising

One thing our minds do really well, is generalise – taking a set of circumstances or cause-and-effect, and generalising it to everything similar. It's one of our most effective ways of simplifying the world, so that we don't have to figure out every situation from scratch. Often it's valid – when you see a large queue at the checkout, it's reasonable to assume that you're going to have to wait to pay for your item.

But sometimes (especially if things are starting to get emotionally heated) we make generalisations which aren't quite so universal, or aren't valid for the situation which we're facing. It throws down the gauntlet to the opposition to find just one example where it isn't so, thus collapsing your argument.

Amongst the most common conflict-fuelling generalisations are ‘Always’ and ‘Never’. Imagine you’re on the receiving end of a statement like

“You always say no” or “You never listen to me”

How does it make you feel? Chances are, it puts you on the defensive. It’s a sweeping statement that you want to challenge, and the conflict goes up a notch.

So to avoid that emotional escalation, here are three ways to keep that statement more factual:

- Give a specific example of another time when the other person said ‘No’ – preferably one they’ll remember, and clearly link it to the current issue
- Say something like “It feels like you always say no”: The other person might think that you oughtn’t to feel that way, but it’s less easy for them to argue with – because only you know how you feel.
- Or “I’m struggling to remember a time when you’ve said Yes”. So you’re recognising that maybe there have been times, but you can’t recall one. Again, because that person’s not inside your head accessing your memories, it’s less easy for them to argue with (though they may still try).

Here’s another examples of a generalisation, and how to make it more factual (and less tempting to argue with)...

“This isn’t working” could be expanded to

“This isn’t working very well” – recognising that there might be little bits working. Or

“This isn’t working yet” – recognising that perhaps it might, given time; but do we really have that time?

## Frame your Opinions

It’s incredibly tempting in an argument to put forward your opinions or beliefs as absolute fact. They can feel that way - but other people’s realities may differ from yours. So another way to keep what you’re saying more factual and objective, is by framing your opinions as your own.

For example “This isn’t helping”, could be changed to

“I don’t think this is helping”, or

“I can’t see how this is helping”

It’s a slightly softer way to make your point.

## What’s Directly Relevant?

When things start to get emotionally heated, it’s tempting to make the issue bigger by linking it to other things. This could be by bringing up similar events from the past (even if they’ve been resolved), by drawing parallels with something else, which might not be directly related; or by throwing in what other people think of / have said about what’s going on. So even an argument which started small, can spiral up to being about Life, the Universe and Everything.

To avoid this kind of escalation, stick to what's directly relevant; and if needed, be prepared to explain to the other person how it's relevant. You can use the techniques we've been exploring (such as the Quick Re-Set and One Point) for managing your own state, and give yourself that extra second to think before you speak, asking yourself 'How is that relevant? What does it add to the discussion?'

If you really want to avoid an escalating conflict, be prepared to avoid the temptation to be self-righteous about it.

## Beware of your 'BUT'

'But' is a very small word, with the amazing power to negate whatever went in front of it. For example

"That was a great piece of work, but next time, can you change the format?"

"It's getting better, but without them making much effort"

Notice how it's different when you read those sentences again, swapping that 'but' for 'and'.

You're much more likely to forget about the first half of the sentence, hearing only the second, when they're separated by 'but'. Now that might be exactly the effect you want

"We'll have to save up for it, but it'll be worth it"

"It might take some working out, but we'll find a way"

Start to notice when you're using it, and make sure your 'but' doesn't get in the way of what you really want to say, and the response you're trying to get.

## Seeing it Through Their Eyes



Have you ever wondered how great negotiators and peace makers manage to tease out agreement, from what appears to be an impossible deadlock?

Many have become incredibly skilled at seeing the situation, not only from their own perspective, but from that of the other parties. It enables much greater flexibility, so that without compromising on your

desires, values or authenticity; you can put across your viewpoint in a way that's more likely to lead to collaborative discussion and agreement.

Your conversations might not have as much riding on them than a peace negotiation, but by applying that same skill, you can help make sure that you do yourself (and your viewpoint) full justice in the way you put it across to the others involved.

I've used this technique in many different contexts, for

- Helping people to prepare for a difficult conversation with their boss or a team member
- Reducing the repeating conflicts between parents and teenage children
- Preparing to ask for something which the other party might not agree to, or where the stakes are high
- Softening the way a business owner spoke with her staff, after she was shocked to learn that they saw her as domineering
- Improving people's effectiveness as third-party peace makers, in situations where there's conflict between others.

It's another effective way to access the deeper parts of your thinking, and your own intuition and creativity. So be prepared to slacken off the rational, critical parts of your thinking for a little while, to get the best from the experience.

## About Sue Evans...



With a background in Engineering and over 20 years Change Leadership experience, I've delivered £multi-million projects and culture change, for international organisations including Danone, Corning, and Lloyds Bank (and had a fair few difficult conversations along the way!).

As a Professional Speaker and experienced facilitator, I understand the challenges of engaging teams and changing behaviours, to deliver sustainable results.

I'm a Master Practitioner and Trainer of NLP (neuro-linguistic programming), and an Approved Havening® Practitioner, trained in each by the original creators. I also have a Diploma in CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy), a combined Diploma in Hypnotherapy, Coaching and NLP; and Institute of Leadership and Management certification as a Mentor and Coach.

Drawing on extensive experience of supporting one-to-one clients and specialist knowledge of resolving stress and anxiety, I created the FAST Pathways® programme based on client demand, to share powerful skills for Process Engineering the thinking.

Because stress is a given in any organisation. Sometimes it gets in the way, but sometimes it can drive even better performance. I truly believe in every individual's right to a challenging and fulfilling working

life, and to every organisation's right to reap the rewards of building and supporting a capable and motivated workforce. That might sound idealistic – but the right know-how can help to shape that reality.

If you have questions which we haven't covered, or any which surface after the session, you're very welcome to get in touch.

And I'd love to hear about differences you notice as your new thinking skills develop

So give me a call (contact details are at the foot of the page)...

