



THE POWER OF “NON-ZERO” THINKING:
ACCEPTING ANXIETY ON THE WAY TO SUCCESS

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WHO AM I?



Dr. Matt Zakreski – you can call me "Dr. Matt"



I'm a clinical psychologist, professional speaker, and neurodivergence advocate



I'm known as someone who can bridge neuroscience and clinical practice to make skills accessible for you and your loved ones



MY FIRST KEYNOTE



Dr. Matt Zakreski

Psychologist, professor, international speaker & neurodiversity ally

GOALS FOR TODAY

01

Learn about the role that anxiety plays in our lives

02

Understand the thinking styles that maintain anxiety

03

Develop new thinking strategies that accept anxiety and move forward anyway

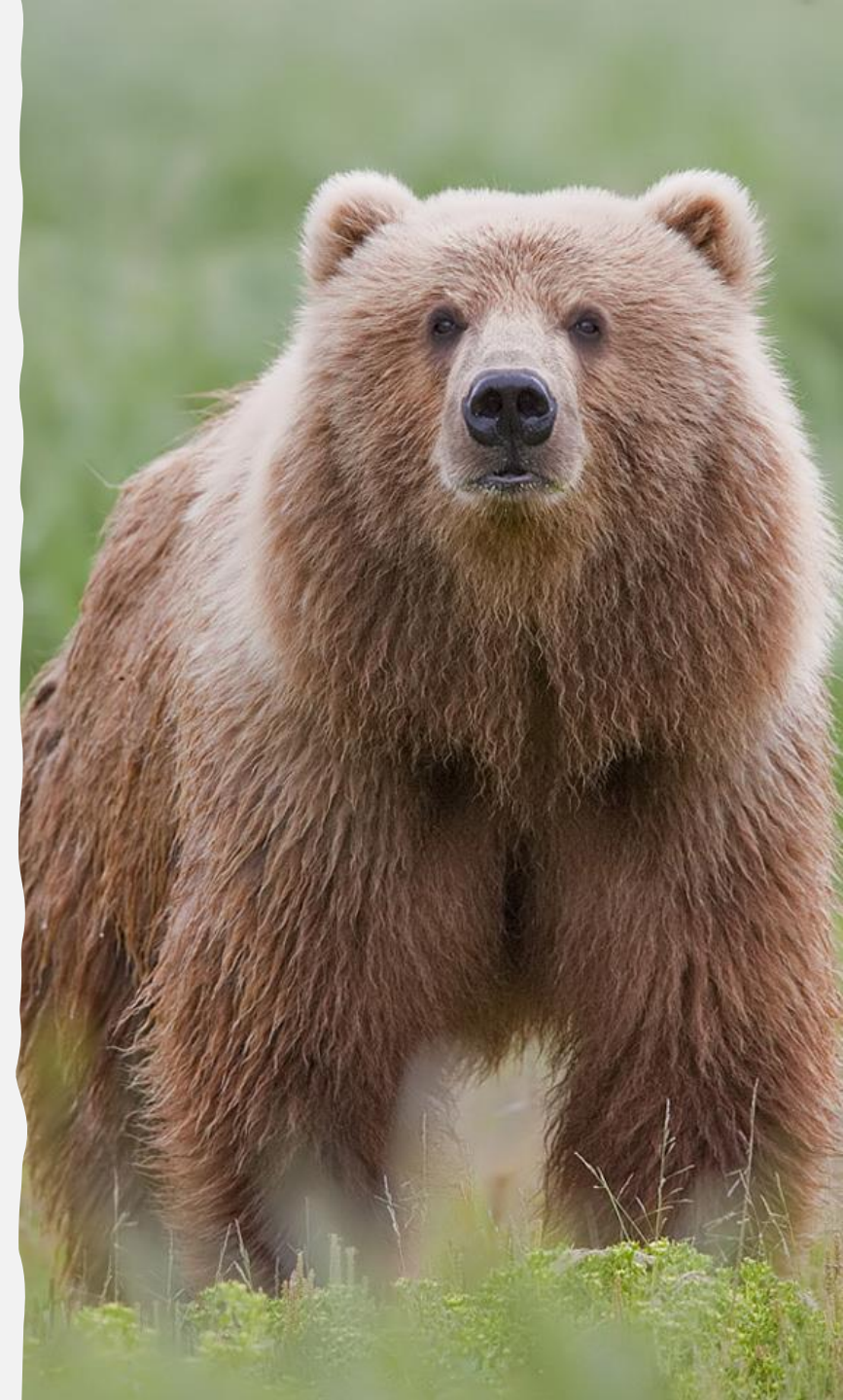
WHAT IS ANXIETY?

- A feeling of dread or uneasiness
- It might cause you to sweat, feel restless and tense, and have a rapid heartbeat.
- For most people, the feelings are moderate and temporary
 - Frequency
 - Intensity
 - Duration



ANXIETY VS. FEAR

- Fear and anxiety are similar emotions that often co-occur and are easily mistaken for one another.
 - *Fear* is a strong biological response to real, imminent danger.
 - *Anxiety* is marked by apprehension and worry over things that may or may not occur.
- The sensations are immediate and beyond your control. What you *can* control, however, is how you manage symptoms.





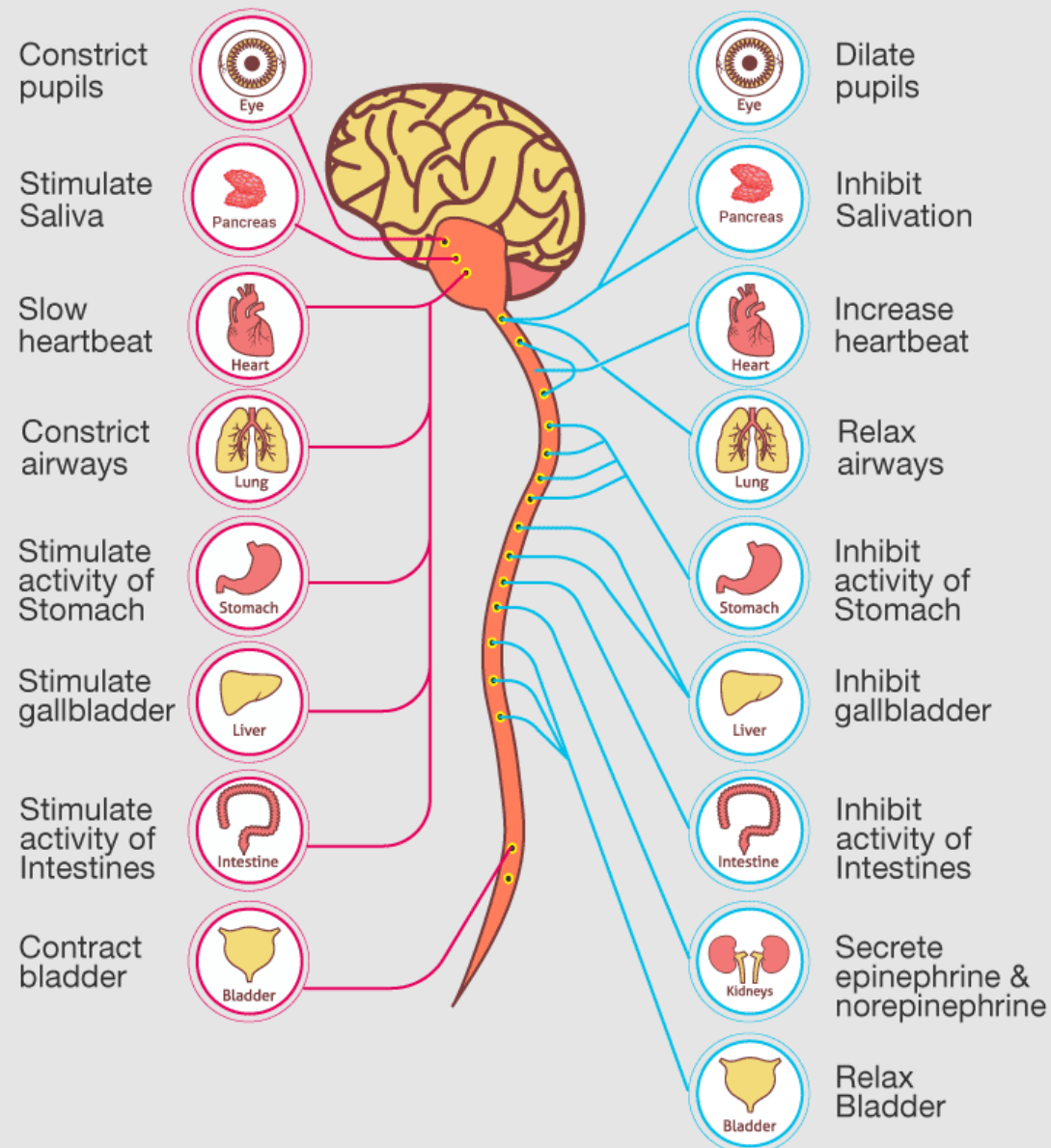
WHAT DOES ANXIETY DO?

- Anxiety is evolutionary
- Monitors the environment for threats
- Rehearses scenarios to “keep us safe”
- Prepares us to “fight or flight (or freeze)”
- It pulls us to the future

PARASYMPATHETIC NERVES

Vs

SYMPATHETIC NERVES



NEGATIVES ABOUT ANXIETY

It feels AWFUL

Pulls us away from the present – makes us less effective

Paralysis by analysis

Self-fulfilling prophecy

Health impacts – ulcers, higher BP, sweating

Panic attacks

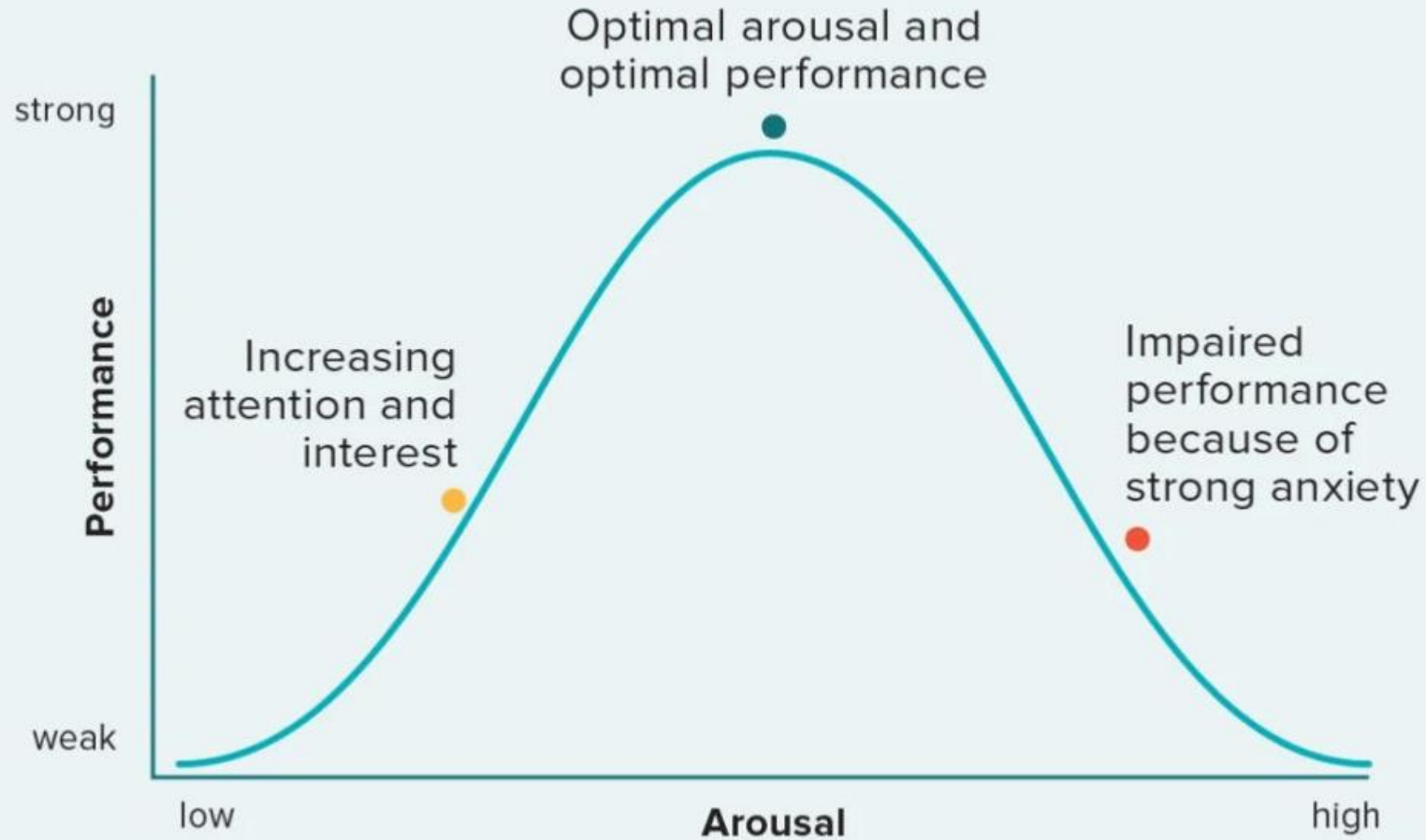
Catastrophizing



POSITIVES ABOUT ANXIETY

- Shows that you care
- Adaptive perfectionism
- Can motivate growth and change
- Gives us information about our external environment
- Gives us information about our internal environment

YERKES-DODSON LAW BELL CURVE



ANXIETY GIRL!

able to jump to the worst conclusion
in a single bound!



WHY DO OUR
THOUGHTS
IMPACT US SO
MUCH?

THE ENDOWMENT EFFECT

“By virtue of being ours, our actions, thoughts, possessions, and beliefs acquire a glow they didn’t have before we committed to them.”

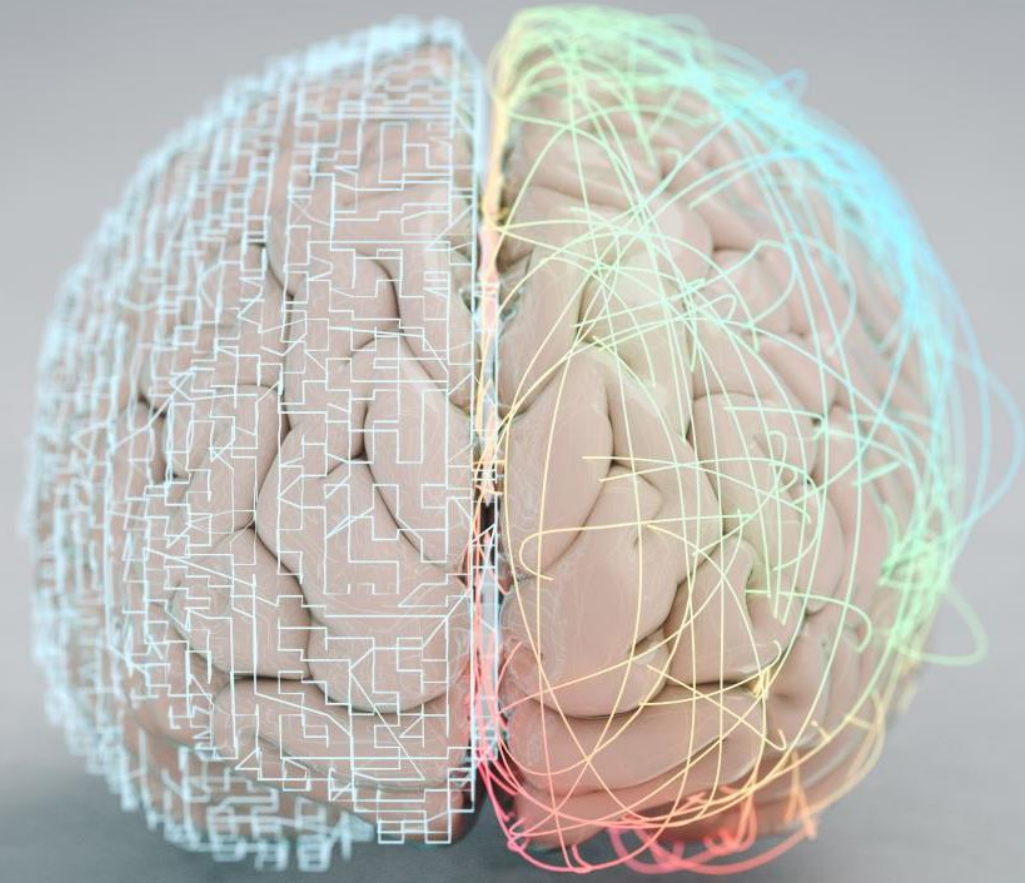
- Maria Konnikova





- We take in terabytes of information every day – if we paid attention to all of it, we'd never get anything done
- Our brains try to protect us by
 - Triaging information (what's most important)
 - Making quick decisions
- Our brains don't like to be wrong – will select information that “proves” us right and ignore contradictory information
- Our brains try to conserve energy by returning to old thought patterns (or comparing new information to previously established patterns)
 - Especially in the absence of other/better information

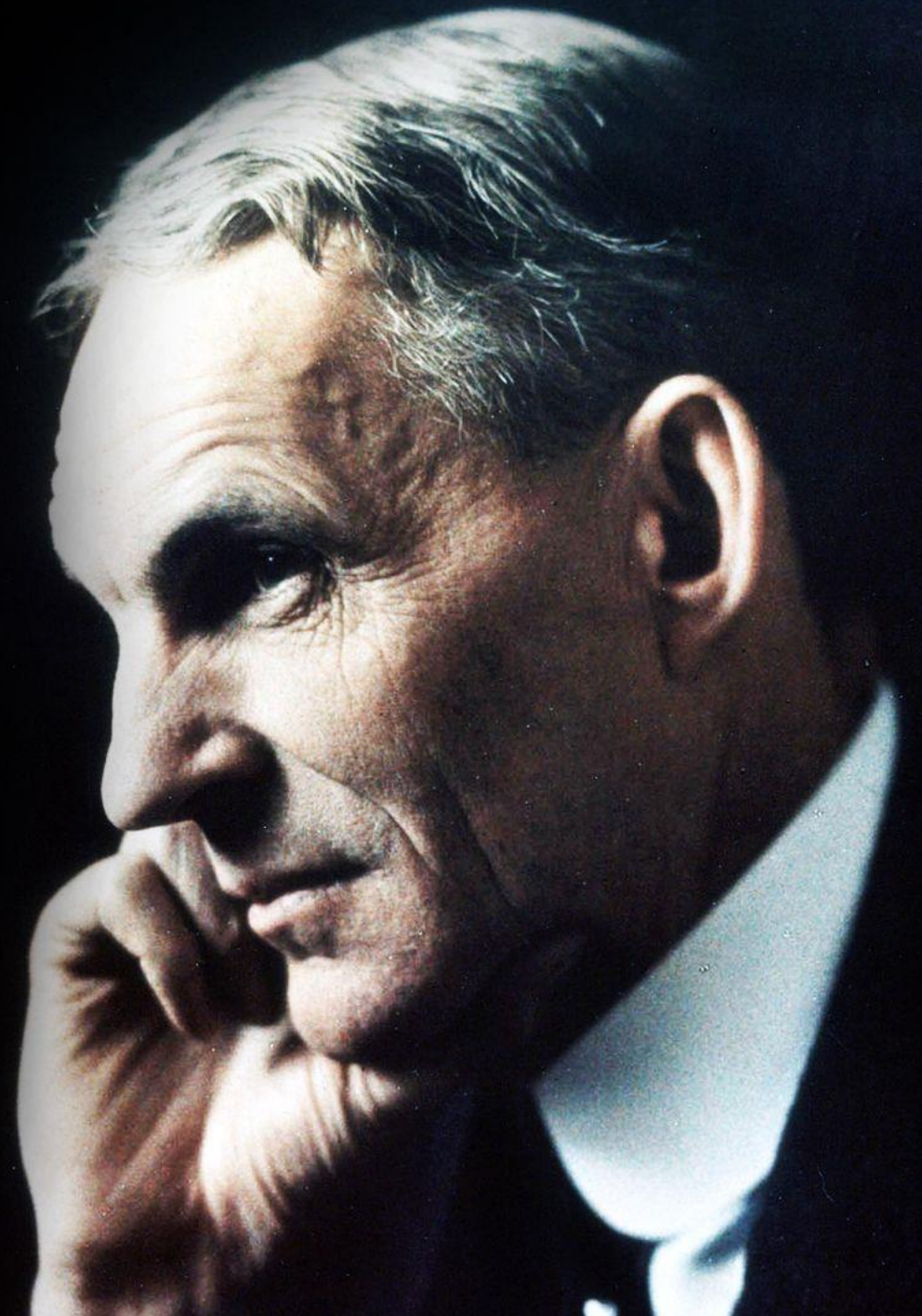
Our brains trade ACCURACY for EFFICIENCY



WHAT IS THE BRAIN
DOING? (AND WHY?)

“Whether you
think you can
or think you can’t
you’re right”

Henry Ford



WHAT IS COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY?

The mental ability to switch between thinking about two or more different concepts

Thinking about multiple concepts simultaneously

When conscious – cognitive shifting

When unconscious – task shifting

The ability to identify and appreciate context



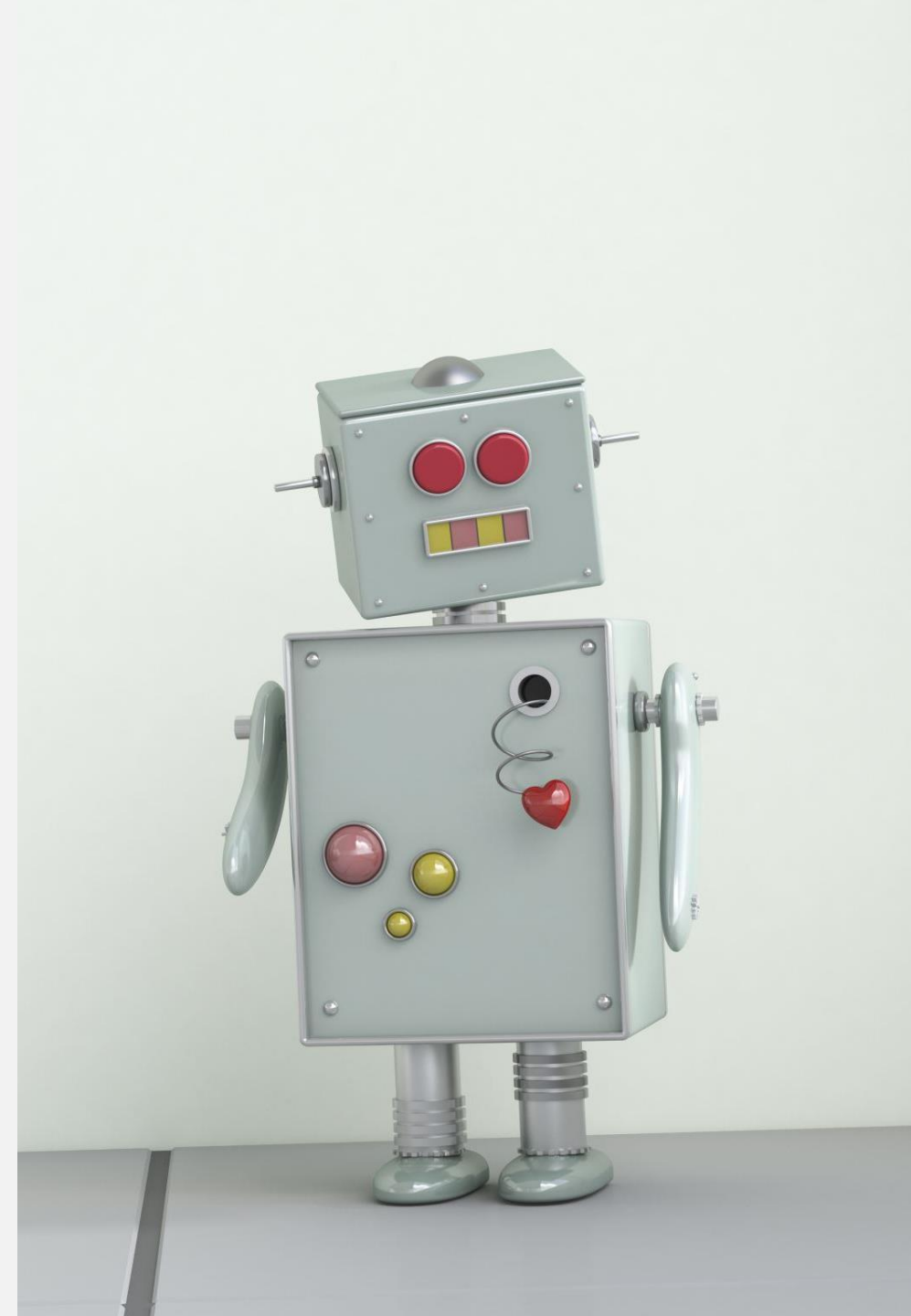
COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY EXERCISE

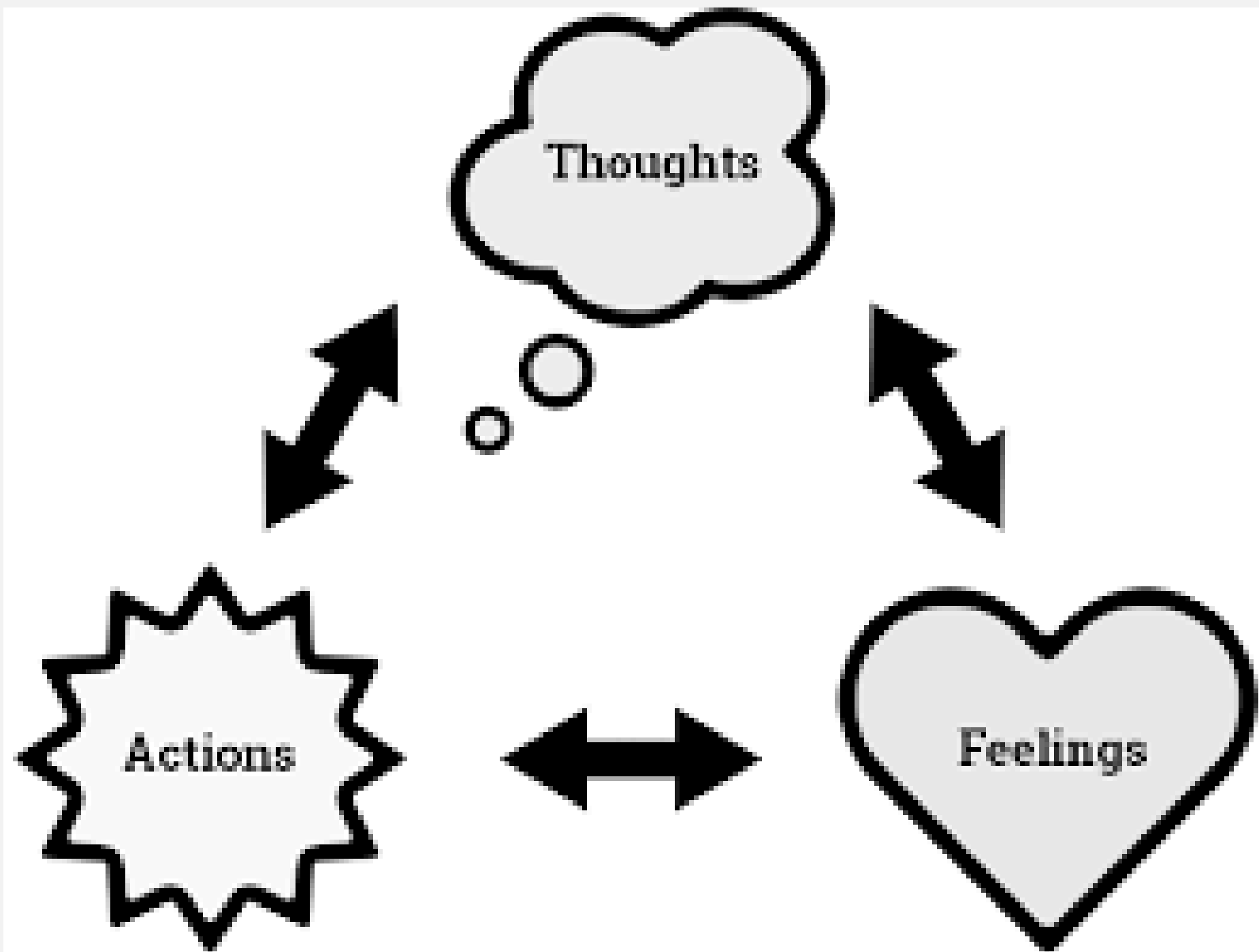
- You're walking down the hallway at work/happy hour/airport, and you see someone you know
- You say hi
- They say nothing back
- What does your brain say is happening?

CLEARLY, THEY'RE A ROBOT

- Our brains tend to go to catastrophic explanations
- Our first thought gets treated as "true" – regardless of whether we have the whole story
- We need to learn to challenge these initial thoughts
- Start silly/ridiculous
- Keep exploring
- What happens if I'm wrong? What happens if I'm right?

The worst-case scenario is that your negative thoughts were right, but then nothing else must change!







**MORE OPTIONS = LESS
REACTIVITY**

- 1) Our brains want to connect thoughts to actions
- 2) Often the first perception we have about something becomes elevated
 - Our brains take shortcuts
 - Our brains like to be right – seek confirmation evidence (ignore the rest)
- 3) Our brains want to keep us safe, so they'll choose a reaction that activates the sympathetic NS
- 4) When we can pause that process, we allow for more potential information to come in – leads to safer choices



Figure 1. Self-fulfilling prophecy loop

UNREGULATED
ANXIETY

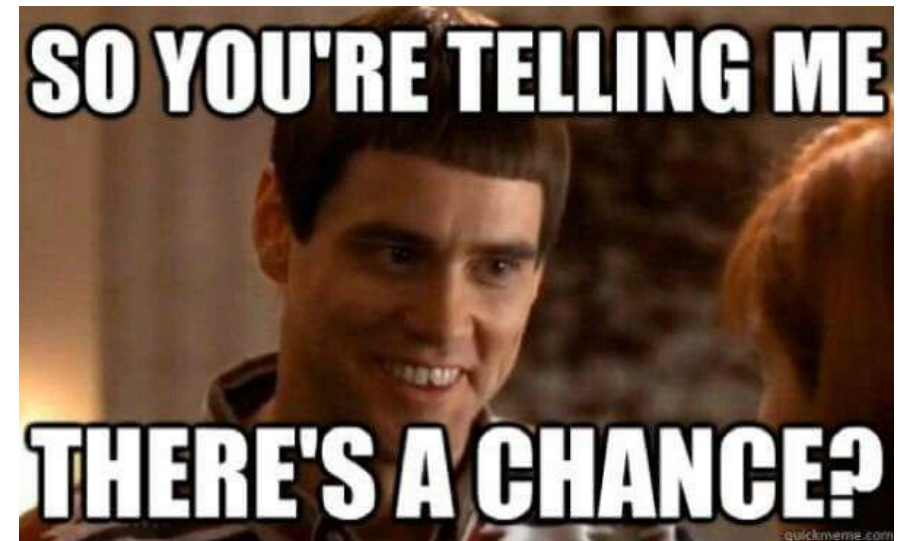
NON-ZERO THINKING

- We waste time and energy arguing with feelings – they can't be wrong!
- When we accept the reality of the feeling, it loses part of its power
- Non-Zero is always accurate – and it doesn't matter what the number IS because calling something non-zero implies that there are other options
- More options promote cognitive flexibility



WHY NON-ZERO THINKING WORKS

- Acknowledges that there is always a chance that something could happen
- Doesn't try to dictate reality
- Accepts that we cannot control (or know) everything
- Decreases emotional reactivity
- Moves us from adversarial to collaborative
- Recognizes that challenges and barriers exist
- Enhances cognitive flexibility



The feeling you want to feel
is waiting on the other side
of the feeling you don't like.

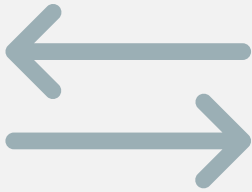


HOW TO CHALLENGE THOUGHTS

- Look for “all or nothing” thinking – answer is usually in between
- Watch for words like “always or never” – usually exceptions
- What else do I need to know?
- Are there other possible explanations
 - Yes. Yes there are.
 - There’s always a non-zero percent chance that it would be another reason

THE
CHALLENGE

THE BENEFITS OF CHANGE ARE THEORETICAL UNTIL THEY BECOME TANGIBLE



We need to move from “what if” to “what is”



Beware the self-fulfilling prophecy



The first 90 seconds of change are the hardest – think about the “two-minute mountain”

i LOVE you
you're
PERFECT
now
CHANGE

CAN WE
CHANGE?



B25



DELTA



DELTA			LOCAL TIME
FLIGHT NUMBER	SCHEDULED	STATUS	11:19 am
DL 791	12:05pm	At Gate	
DESTINATION			
Houston-Bush, TX			
PARTNERS			
WestJet 7045			



DELTA

D. you wanna
go out with me? 

☐ YES ☐ NO

☐ MAYBE

 The right
answer 

"If you do what
you've always
done, you'll get
what you've
always gotten."

~ Anthony Robbins

S



SPECIFIC

M



MEASURABLE

A



ACHIEVABLE

R



RELEVANT

T



TIME-BOUND

SO... WHAT'S YOUR GOAL?



BE CURIOUS

...

NOT FURIOUS



*“Try to reduce your stress level,
and if you somehow succeed please
let me know how in God’s name
you did it.”*

TAKEAWAYS

- We cannot completely avoid anxiety – so stop trying!
- Anxiety can help us
- Our first thought about something tends to be treated as true – it doesn't have to be!
- Challenging your thoughts creates cognitive flexibility
- Cognitive flexibility limits emotional reactivity
- You already don't have what you want – so you might as well try!

THANK YOU FOR HAVING ME!

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QUESTIONS?

Courage is not the
absence of fear, but
rather the judgment
that something else
is more important
than fear.

— Ambrose
Redmoon



RESOURCES

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2022.802606/full>

<https://medicine.yale.edu/news/yale-medicine-magazine/article/a-theory-abandoned-but-still-compelling/>

https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/camh_covid19_infosheet-challenge_worries-pdf.pdf

<https://thetherapycentre.ca/challenging-anxious-thoughts/>

<https://community.thriveglobal.com/what-if-something-goes-right/>

<https://execvision.io/blog/overcome-sales-call-reluctance/>

<https://psychologycompass.com/blog/sales-anxiety/>

<https://www.gottman.com/blog/dating-anxiety-how-to-move-forward/>

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