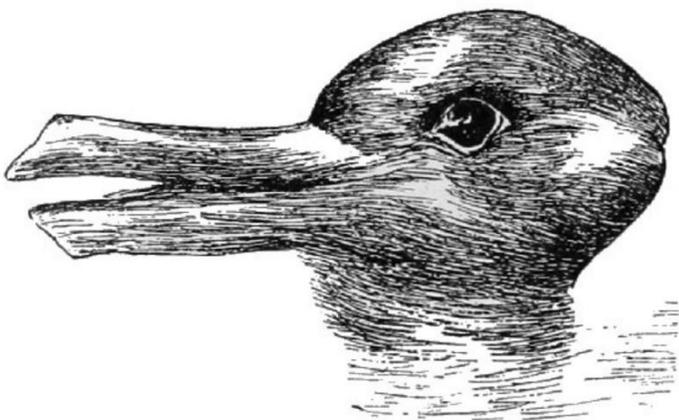




Controlling Our Thoughts during the challenging season of COVID-19

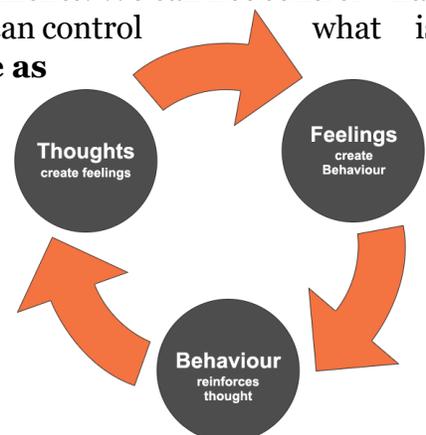


Do you see a duck or a rabbit?



The Power of Thoughts

Whether one is back on the flight deck and faced with remaining focused or struggling to remain positive and focused at home or trying to prepare for the simulator, controlling our thoughts are crucial at this time. As illustrated by the pictures above, we may have exactly the same physical evidence, the same information but we make different sense of it, not only from others but from ourselves at different moments. We can not control what is happening around us and in aviation at present but we can control what is happening within – our thoughts. **I can make a choice as to how I interpret my experience and what I choose to focus on. This choice I make will make all the difference.** Your thoughts are a catalyst for self-perpetuating cycles. What you think directly influences how you feel and how you behave. What we think, we become. Someone once said life is 10% of what happens to you and 90% of how you react to it.



Tools to Control Thoughts

The brain provides us with very powerful tools to control and change our thoughts.

Neuroplasticity refers to the brain's ability to modify, change, and adapt both structure and function throughout life and in response to experience. Self-directed neuroplasticity means that we are in charge of this change. We must however be clear about what we want to create and do it with intention.

Myelination is the process of “insulating” a new neural pathway to strengthen it, and to forge new default thoughts and behaviors. Heavily myelinated neural pathways are up to 300 times faster. They've been optimized for speed and efficiency. Myelinated pathways help us create new desired default thoughts and behaviors, as the brain will choose the most highly myelinated pathways. Neurons are myelinated when we practice and repeat the desired thought or activity.

How to Control your thoughts

1. **Become aware** of the thoughts that you are having. If you are not aware of your thoughts they control you instead of you controlling them. Our brain operates on auto-pilot if we are not aware. When our mind wanders it goes into 'default' mode and then tends to go into negative mental loops. A single intentional deep breath can be enough to bring the brain back from 'default mode' to activating other thought regions like the executive functioning region which is responsible for attention, logical reasoning and decision making.
2. **Choose each thought** and where it leads. A practical way of doing this is to focus for 17 seconds on a positive thought. One thought leads to another. Four thoughts later or 68 seconds later, it is very possible to have changed your current mood.
3. **Repetition.** New neural pathways are created through repetition. Persist through the discomfort of choosing a different way of thinking. Re-set, re-adjust, re-start, re-focus as many times as you need to.
4. **Weaken the neural pathways of negative thoughts.** Myelin is living tissue. If you stop firing a pathway for 30 days, the myelin will start to break down.
5. **Interrupt negative thoughts.** As illustrated by the duck and rabbit picture above, the mind can only really think of one thing at a time. You could either see the rabbit or the duck at any given moment but not both simultaneously. When you concentrate your attention on a positive thought/possibility/activity, you inevitably engage the parallel act of purposefully ignoring other things.
6. **Focus on what you can control.** Today, identify one thing that you can control and focus on that.

References: Bergland, C. (2017). How do neuroplasticity and neurogenesis rewire your brain? *Psychology Today*.

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