



## Rigid vs Flexibility: The Key to Mental Health



Over recent decades the use of rigid language in our thought patterns has become a prominent focus in the understanding of problematic human behavior and emotional functioning. The origins of this theory can be traced back to roots in both Western philosophy, going back to the Greek philosophers discussion of realism, and to Eastern philosophy, relating to the issue of attachment. More recent philosophers, such as Hume (Hume's guillotine) have also focused on this. In the last century the concept has been brought into psychology and discussed by prominent psychologists including Horney ("the tyranny of should"), Ellis ("demandingness"), Beck (conditional assumptions), and Hayes ("rule governance").

Such rigid language includes the use of concepts such as shoulds, expectations, musts, have to's, needs, and oughts.

From a neurocognitive perspective, such rigid language relates to our brains innate tendency to develop simplistic heuristics for the sake of efficiency, however, this can become problematic. This is part of what gives rise to the problems with rigid language. This language results in the development of rules about how things are supposed to work and place unnecessary conditions on how people and things function. They are however subjective and informed by limited information (being our own experience). They are therefore inherently based on a logical fallacy.

Despite this, they often become a basis for predicting the future with absolutistic connotations. They also result in moral connotations and judgements that block acceptance for what is, whether related to the self, others or life more generally. This is what results in over identification with behaviors, events and situations, and in over generalized conclusions. Hence, they give rise to problematic evaluations that contribute to emotional distress.

This has been supported by a number of research studies. In recent decades Steven Hayes and his colleagues have shown the negative consequences of "rule governance" in their study of language. Such associations have also been shown in literature by Daniel David and his colleagues. They have shown a pattern of research demonstrating the relationship between rigid forms of language and dysfunction (emotional distress and behavioral problems). They have also conducted their own studies to confirm the implicit relationship between rigid forms of language and negative evaluations, even when people are unconscious of these connections.

How problematic this rigid language is for any given situation is dependent on a number of different factors. These include how strongly the person believes such thoughts and the proximity to a situation that challenges it. Less strongly held beliefs (or, alternatively stated, those with no emotional attachment) may be "let go of" quickly. For instance, if someone thinks "it should be a nice day to day", but then it rains, if they have little emotional attachment to the thought then they may move on quickly with no distress. In contrast someone who strongly believes the thought (having a high level of attachment) will likely

experience a high level of distress and become stuck on the thought, possibly perceiving their day to be ruined.

In terms of proximity, when more distal to a situation that challenges a belief, such as "I should succeed at the things I do", a person may be able to state this calmly and even be able to show acceptance for specific situations where they did not live up to the expectation to succeed. This is because the flexible "want" is also present and may be stronger at that time. However, when confronted with a specific situation where they fail, the rigid belief that they "should have succeeded" may be stronger and trigger emotional distress (e.g. [depression](#)). Thus the rigid and the flexible versions of the same idea can co-exist within a person, but one may be activated more strongly in a given situation depending upon contextual factors.

With regard to addressing the use of rigid language, it is important to incorporate the above issues into the challenging and reframing of thoughts. In particular, you can't should on a should to reduce the experience of distress for the individual. That would instead compound their use of rigid language.

The alternative is to promote the use of flexible/preferential language. Examples of such language include statements such as, "it would be better if...", "I would like it...", "it is likely to ...". This allows more readily for the understanding and acceptance of factors that influence what happens (what is). So if we take the statement, "people should respect others", this is a closed statement that does not allow for the acceptance of the variety of factors that may influence a person's behavior and leads to judgement when people do not adhere to the rule. Based on the rule, there are no if, buts or maybes about it, it's just the way people must behave (or else they're less worthwhile). If this is reframed as "it would be better if people respected each other", this allows more readily for the acceptance that people may have personal or cultural influences upon them that inhibit their ability to show respect in certain situations. This results in more specific and more nuanced attributions that the problem with respecting others is something within the person, but that it is not that the person is the problem (ie they are still worthwhile despite having a problematic habit).

The use of such preferential language also helps people to be less attached to specific ideas. This reduces the impact of cognitive biases and allows people to be more objective in their assessment of information.

There are now a number of different techniques that have been shown to help reduce people's use of such rigid language. These include behavioral interventions (e.g. behavioral experiments, exposure interventions), cognitive restructuring, cognitive distancing techniques, and mindfulness strategies. All of these interventions, either directly or indirectly, are thought to target the use of such rigid thought patterns to help increase functionality and mental flexibility. Thus, while there is no one way to help people to develop a more flexible mind set, it is important to understand the underlying mechanisms at play.

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