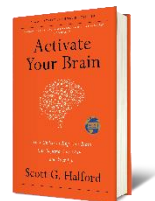


The following excerpt is from *Activate Your Brain: How Understanding Your Brain Can Improve Your Work – and Your Life* by Scott G. Halford, © 2019. Throughout the book, there are Activations; suggestions to activate the lessons in the pages you’ve read in order to make them real in your life, if you choose. They are small ideas to get you started.



Moving from Threat to Thrive

IN NEARLY EVERY SITUATION in life, you’re moving toward something or you’re moving away from something. For instance, do you go to work because you like what you do, or do you go because you don’t want to go broke? These are entirely different reasons to go to work, and each can produce a very different neurochemical reaction.

Kurt Lewin began writing about this phenomenon some seventy-five years ago,¹ describing it as “approach-avoidance” behavior—our tendency to move toward or away from situations. Since then, many psychologists and neuroscientists studied behavior and brain scans (an fMRI, which is a way to look at blood flow in the brain, which correlates with the underlying brain activity of a person who is actively doing or thinking something) to see approach-avoidance at work. A few scientists went so far as to suspect that approach-avoidance “characterizes most, if not all, of a person’s life decisions.”² Whether that’s true or not continues to be debated; some say that arousal and mood have a lot to do with decision making, too. One thing seems clear, however: Approach and avoidance are the ping-pong paddles that bounce us between positive and negative neurochemical states. All the while, our brain is seeking a “safe” place.

Unfortunately, many of us spend a good deal of life in avoidance—the state where we’re moving away from something. Think about all the things you do because you want to avoid the perceived negative consequences if you don’t. If your list is long, you’re not alone. The constant pinging of anxiety can be hard on our body and brain. But if we can shift to an approach state—one where we’re moving toward a reward rather than away from a threat—we will likely feel better and get more done. In order to get ourselves into that approach state more often, it’s essential to understand the states of mind and social interactions that might put us in an avoidance state.

We can’t always choose whether we’re in approach or avoidance. If you suffer an intense scare or get an undue insult from the boss, that external event is going to put you into an avoidance state. In times like these, we have to work very hard to choose a more productive, approach-oriented mindset. The brain operates very differently when we feel safe, when we’re approaching, than it does when we feel threatened and are avoiding. If we understand the factors that researchers have found can lead to the threatened avoidance state, we’re better able to transition to the more productive mindset. I know I like myself best when I’m in a safe state, motivated by moving toward something. Getting there begins with looking at your default approach to the world: Do you lean toward approach or avoidance thinking?

CHANGING OUR PERSPECTIVE, CHANGING OUR NEUROCHEMISTRY

Reframing the reason we do something can change our relationship with the situation and even the neurochemistry that’s triggered in response to it.

From time to time, stop and ask yourself how you’re living your life: Are you doing what you do to avoid losing something, or are you doing it because it feels good and gives you a sense

of well-being? What is the biggest thing you are avoiding right now? How could you reframe it to make it feel like you're approaching, not avoiding? Be careful not to use avoidance language in your reframing; some avoidance behaviors can masquerade as approach behaviors. Consider the work example. If you dread your job and get nothing out of it besides the money, you could tell yourself that you're moving toward your monthly paycheck when, really, you're in an avoidance mindset: You only want that paycheck to avoid hunger and the bill collector. A true approach mindset might see you motivated to go to work because you want to get so good at what you do that you'll have an even more rewarding career than the one you have. It's not always as simple as that, but being aware of how we approach our everyday lives can help us control how we feel and behave.

SEEKING SAFETY IN OUR SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

One of the best ways to evaluate whether you're in approach or avoid mode is to note how you feel and act when you're around other people. In every encounter you have, your brain is categorizing the interaction—several times per second without our knowing—as either a reward or a threat.^{3, 4} We then behave accordingly, moving toward reward and defending against or moving away from threat. All day long, in just about every encounter I have with others, especially when the encounter has a negative aspect, I stop to evaluate whether I'm feeling threatened or whether I'm pursuing something worthwhile in the interaction. Try doing the same in your daily interactions. Check in with how you feel—good or bad, whether intensely or slightly.

Many psychologists and neuroscientists have studied approach-avoidance theory and how it affects social equilibrium. Earlier, I mentioned Kurt Lewin as a progenitor of the approach-avoidance idea, and many have followed in his wake. In his book *Drive*, author Daniel Pink writes about the approach-avoidance idea as it relates to autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Martin Seligman gives his take on living in an approach mindset in his book *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Wellbeing*. In an earlier and acclaimed book, *Learned Optimism*, Seligman shows how avoidance or pessimism can lead to depression, while reframing in a more approach-based style leads to better overall mental health and helps to ward off some depression.

FROM THREAT TO THRIVE: THE 5 CS

As a professional speaker and student of behavioral neuroscience I have had the great good fortune to study and relate the models and musings of some of the best and most brilliant thinkers in this field. In doing so, I have had to take into consideration culture, language comprehension and the practical use of the ideas. I have gladly played conduit and interpreter to people the world over. This led me to capture the essence of each of the models in my own words. Hopefully, they both simplify the models and synthesize the nuances in one easy-to-understand model.

You'll see these attributes of my model throughout the book. Here they are now in one place:

- Certainty (consistency and constancy)
- Choice
- Completion
- Control
- Context

Certainty (consistency and constancy)

This one has a gift on each side of its proverbial coin. We know that the brain thrives when it feels safe. However, the certainty that comes from consistent things in the environment can, paradoxically, lead to complacency and errors. With certainty and consistency, our brain gives us a gift when it no longer has to pay deep attention or spend the expensive energy it takes to execute a task when it is new and its parts are unknown (try brushing your teeth with the opposite hand and you will experience the effort that has to be given in order to keep your toothbrush from smacking your teeth). That same effort and the need to understand the granularity of the task are also responsible for growing new neural pathways to accommodate the new behavior. The gift on the certainty, consistency, constancy side of the coin is to longer spend valuable energy and create sense of safety. On the other side of the coin, the brain is growing from the very change that it dislikes.

ACTIVATION

- Possibly, corporations should stop organizing change management efforts and begin with GROWTH management efforts. The semantics matter because the activity and human energy change with the words we use.

Choice

Right from the beginning of the book we discuss choice and how when we have it and execute on it the brain perceives it as a reward.

ACTIVATION

- If you are a leader, offer career paths to your employees instead of prescribing the job you think an individual should take. If you make a proposal to a customer, offer a few options from which to choose. They all should be choices that suit the client even if you have a strong opinion about one of them. You may recommend that choice but be prepared to have the client choose one of the others.

Completion

I cover this thriving attribute in chapter 7. The brain pays attention to many things, but the two that stand out as the most egregious to brain are threat and incomplete tasks. Just remind yourself of the times when your eyes have flown wide open in the middle of the night when your brain inconveniently stumbles upon a reminder during its nightly filing of information that you forgot to send that very important email that you owe to a customer. Yikes! Incomplete tasks gnaw at the back of our brain, and if you have many of them scattered through- out your life, the messiness can cause you to feel overwhelmed and might not get any of your tasks done.

ACTIVATION

- WRITE THINGS DOWN! Keeping lists is not for old people and those with bad memories. It is for all of us of all ages to keep our brain safe and calm.
- Start the day with the biggest task looming. Practice the “arrow” technique of completing tasks. Theorists calculate that on average employees are able to effectively accomplish 9 substantive work items per day.
 - 1 BIG task
 - 3 Medium-sized items
 - 5 small items

Control

In chapter 5, this very broad-topic brain soother is covered in depth. Everything from feeling like things are fair, to the knowledge we “control” some fiefdom of the world in expertise, to the ever-important attribute of confidence.

Feeling in control often manages our behavior to a more positive state, while feeling out of control has the opposite effect on our behavior. In the business world, we often see ourselves and colleagues feel helpless because “we weren’t consulted” before a big decision is made. Empowerment is what they’re talking about. Empowerment is what gives employees the feeling of control by being consulted on different aspects of a major decision.

ACTIVATION

- Write down the number 97.
- Answer this by writing it down: What do you do better than 97% of the people who do what you do? If you’re an attorney it might be that you look at a complex case and can in an instant predict where the case will end because you have a lightning-fast ability to synthesize laws and tactics into a likely conclusion and you’re usually right in this instance. You might not be as expert in other aspects of your job. But this is the area where you excel, where you would raise your hand at a risk to your career to say, “Pick me. That’s the one area I have hands down.” It’s not bragging. It’s the confidence that comes with the control you feel about the specific domain of expertise.

Context

Knowing how you fit into a group, your family, the community, even the universe at large is a central theme and “craving” of the brain. Entire religions are devoted to this very topic. Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl developed an entire psychological theory around it called logotherapy based on what he saw with survivors. Those who thrived were those who always had a purpose, a meaning, a context in a world that was miserable and dark for them at the time. Meaning, according to Frankl, was the driver of psychological well-being. Context is critical for everyone.⁷ And it’s a tool that leaders and parents can employ to promote well-being and a sense of belonging with their charges. It’s the driver of effective performance. As Simon Sinek so aptly puts, “Start with Why.”

Context is so pertinent to our existence that it affects our everyday lives in nearly everything we do. It's not only reserved for the bigger meanings of life, but also it can be for something as mundane as trying to figure out what a profit and loss statement means. In a workshop, I can put the same P & L in front of 20 people and say, "Tell me what it means." 100% of the time a few people in my workshops will holler out, "What's this for?" It's a basic context question. How does this fit in? Who is using it? What are they trying to accomplish? What part do you want me to play in it? These are all context questions. If you're a parent, one of the most difficult things to reconcile is the difference in nuances that change according to context. Why is it okay to cry there but not here? Context affects every aspect of our lives.

ACTIVATION

- Picture yourself talking about your job to a group of 6th graders. Now, imagine you are talking to your peers about a project. Next, envision being in the boardroom where you are presenting a proposal to the executive team. How do you feel in each of these scenarios?
- How does your behavior and your confidence differ in each? Based on the context of each of these scenarios your role, purpose, and status may change, and therefore your behavior will change.

The 5Cs model is nuanced and has many applications. If you understand the basic needs of humans to feel like they are a part of something meaningful; that they wish to have an area or domain that they control through mastery; that goal achievement and the ways to get there are central to the human experience; that making choices allows for someone to feel like they are in charge; and that safety is key for people to feel open and able to operate at their best in new environments and with other people—if you understand these points, you will have a deep understanding of what it means to be human.

Obviously, this discussion skims the surface of the inner workings of the brain as they pertain to our behavior, but when we come from a place of knowing, we can be more in control of our destiny—living by design, not by default. The neurochemistry of our brain may seem like an arcane set of fluids and electrical transmissions that are difficult to visualize. But we can see them acting out in our social selves every single day, at every moment. Once you're aware of them, you'll see them play out in nearly every aspect of our business and personal lives. I wish it was as easy as going to the paint store and mixing a little of this and a little of that to come up with the exact perfect amount of neurochemistry for the moment. It's not, of course. Our gift is our greatest challenge—our ability to think about things in the past and in the future and assign emotional states to them. Those states, as you've discovered, drive our behavior and can be productive and sometimes destructive.