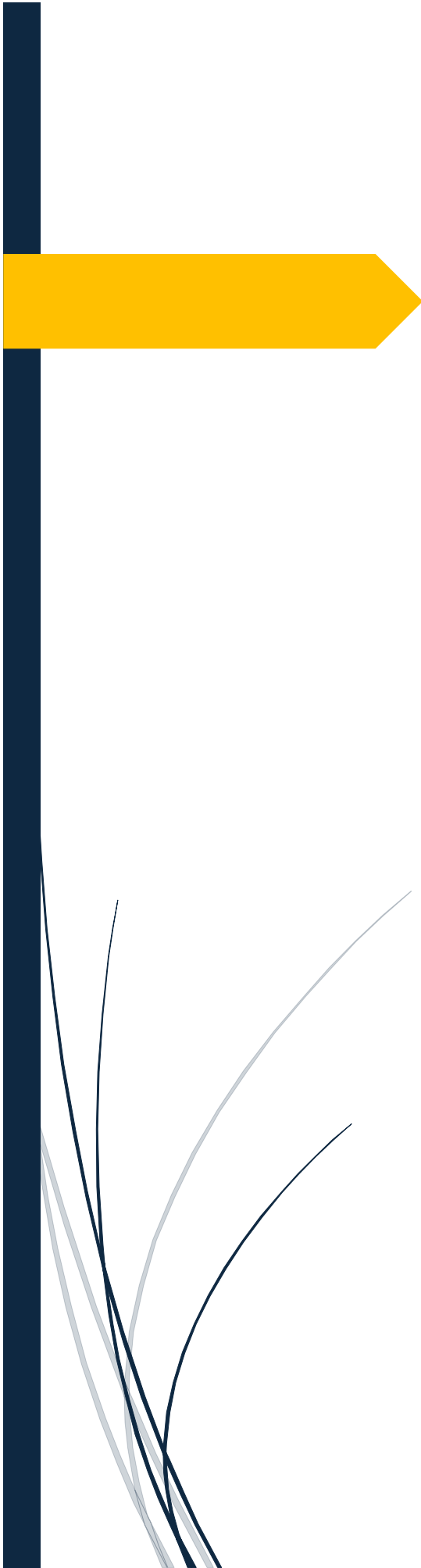




# Agency

Building the Belief That You  
Can Influence What Happens  
Next

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There are many things in life you cannot control. Other people. What already happened. Unexpected events. Whether someone likes you. Whether an opportunity works out. Whether something difficult happens. Agency isn't believing you can control all of those things.

Agency is recognizing that **even when you cannot control what happens, you may still have some influence over what happens next.**

You can make a choice. Try something. Ask for help. Learn something. Change your approach. Practice. Set a boundary. Solve part of the problem. Try again. Or decide that something isn't worth pursuing anymore.

Agency is the developing belief: **There is something I can do.**

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## **When It Feels Like Nothing You Do Matters**

Sometimes people stop trying. Not because they're lazy. Not because they don't care.

But because experience has taught them: **"It probably won't matter anyway."**

If you've repeatedly experienced situations where your efforts didn't seem to change anything, it can become easier to expect the same thing in the future.

- Why try if nothing changes?
- Why speak up if nobody listens?
- Why apply if I'll probably get rejected?
- Why exercise if I've quit every other time?
- Why have the conversation if it will just turn into another argument?
- Why make plans if something always goes wrong?

Over time: **"That didn't work"** can become: **"Nothing I do works."**

This is one way **learned helplessness** can develop.

The experience of having little control begins shaping expectations about situations where you may have some influence. Agency asks us to begin testing that assumption.

**Is there really nothing I can do? Or: Is there something here I can influence?**

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## **Agency Isn't Control**

This distinction matters. Agency doesn't mean: **"If I do everything right, I can make the outcome happen."** You can prepare well and still lose. You can communicate clearly and someone can still misunderstand you. You can apply for the job and not get it.

You can take care of yourself and still become sick. You can show up differently in a relationship and your partner may not.

Agency doesn't guarantee outcomes. It changes your relationship with them.

Instead of: **"How do I make this turn out the way I want?"**

try: **"What part of this is mine to influence?"**

Sometimes that influence is large. Sometimes it's small.

Sometimes your agency is deciding how you will respond to something you never would have chosen.

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## Three Parts of Agency

It can be helpful to think about agency through three related abilities.

### EFFICACY — NOW

**Can I do something?** Self-efficacy is the belief that you can perform an action or behavior necessary to deal with a situation.

Not: **"I know everything will work."**

But: **"I believe I can do something here."**

Efficacy develops through experience.

- You try.
- You struggle.
- You figure something out.
- You adjust.
- You try again.

Eventually you accumulate evidence: **I've done difficult things before.**

### OPTIMISM — NEXT

**Can what I do make a difference going forward?** Optimism doesn't require believing everything will turn out well.

Useful optimism sounds more like:

- **"Things can change."**
- **"I don't know what will happen yet."**
- **"There may be another opportunity."**
- **"I might be able to improve this."**
- **"This moment doesn't necessarily predict the next one."**

Agency needs some possibility of a different future.

If we become convinced that tomorrow must look exactly like today, there isn't much reason to act.

## IMAGINATION — OPTIONS

**Can I see more than one possible move?** Agency becomes limited when we can imagine only one path.

- **It has to work this way.**
- **There are no other options.**
- **If this doesn't work, I'm screwed.**
- **I've tried everything.**

Imagination expands agency by asking:

- **What else could I try?**
- **Who could I ask?**
- **What haven't I considered?**
- **Could I make the problem smaller?**
- **Could I approach it differently?**
- **Could I learn something I don't currently know?**
- **Is there another path toward the same goal?**

You don't need 100 options. Sometimes agency begins when you discover **one more move**.

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## Our Brains Are Good at Finding Problems

Human beings are remarkably good at noticing what could go wrong. That ability makes sense. For much of human history, noticing threats had survival value.

- Something moving in the bushes.
- A change in weather.
- A shortage of food.
- Conflict within the group.
- Potential danger.
- Missing a possible opportunity isn't always dangerous.
- Missing a possible threat might be.

So our brains became very good at asking: **"What could go wrong?"**

That ability is still useful.

The problem occurs when: **"What could go wrong?"** becomes: **"It will go wrong."**

and then: **"It will always go wrong."** and eventually: **"There's nothing I can do about it."**

Agency doesn't require getting rid of your ability to see problems. It means developing the ability to see **possibilities alongside them**.

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## Listen to the Story You Tell About What Happened

Two people can experience the same setback and explain it very differently. Imagine not getting a job.

- One explanation might be: **"I'm just not good enough."**
- Another: **"That position wasn't the right fit."**
- Another: **"I didn't interview very well. That's something I could practice."**
- Another: **"The job market is difficult right now. I'll need to keep looking."**

Same territory, different maps. Different explanation. Different next move.

The explanations we repeatedly give ourselves matter.

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## Watch for the Three P's

When something difficult happens, notice whether your explanation becomes:

### PERSONAL - "It's me."

- *"I'm a failure."*
- *"Something is wrong with me."*

Instead of: **"Something didn't work."**

### PERMANENT - "It will always be this way."

- *"I'll never figure this out."*
- *"Nothing is going to change."*

Instead of: **"This is what is happening right now."**

### PERVASIVE - "This affects everything."

- *"Nothing in my life works."*
- *"I screw everything up."*

Instead of: **"This is one area of my life that isn't going well."**

Notice the difference. **I failed at something.** is different from: **I am a failure.**

**This is difficult right now.** is different from: **This will always be difficult.**

**This part of my life isn't working.** is different from: **Nothing in my life works.**

Agency often begins by making the explanation **more specific, more accurate, and more flexible.**

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## Flexible Doesn't Mean Positive

The goal isn't to replace every negative thought with a positive one.

- Sometimes things really are difficult.
- Sometimes the odds aren't great.
- Sometimes you've made a mistake.
- Sometimes someone doesn't like you.
- Sometimes something doesn't work.

A flexible mindset doesn't say: **"Everything is going to be great."** It says: **"Let's understand what's happening and figure out what I can do from here."**

Instead of: **"I can't do this."**

- Try: **"I don't know how to do this yet."**

Instead of: **"This always happens."**

- Try: **"This happened again. What's contributing to the pattern?"**

Instead of: **"There's nothing I can do."**

- Try: **"What part of this can I influence?"**

Instead of: **"That didn't work."**

- Try: **"What did that attempt teach me?"**

This isn't positive thinking. It's **flexible thinking**.

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## Growth Happens at the Edge of What You Can Do

Agency doesn't grow very much from repeatedly doing things that are easy. It grows when we encounter something that requires effort and discover: **I can respond to difficulty.**

Think about learning almost anything.

- |                    |                    |                        |
|--------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| • Driving.         | • Exercise.        | • Learning technology. |
| • Cooking.         | • Having difficult | • Setting boundaries.  |
| • Public speaking. | conversations.     | • Playing a sport.     |
| • Parenting.       | • Managing money.  |                        |

At first, something may feel awkward, uncertain, uncomfortable, or difficult. Then you practice. Your capability expands. What once felt difficult becomes more manageable. Now you can attempt something harder. This is how we accumulate evidence of agency.

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## DOING Builds Evidence

You can think about agency all day. But agency becomes much more believable when you have **evidence**. That evidence comes from experience. **DO → NOTICE → LEARN → ADJUST → DO AGAIN**

You attempted something difficult.

- Maybe it worked.
- Maybe it didn't.
- Either way, you learned something.
- You adjusted.
- You tried again.

Over time, the story changes.

From: **"I don't know if I can."** to: **"I've handled difficult things before."** to: **"I'll figure out what I can do."**

This is one reason **DOING** matters. You aren't simply trying to convince yourself that you're capable.

You're **collecting evidence**.

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## Start Smaller Than You Think

Agency doesn't require dramatic challenges. Small experiences count.

- Make the phone call you've been avoiding.
- Ask the question.
- Try cooking something new.
- Go somewhere unfamiliar.
- Fix something.
- Ask for what you need.
- Complete the task you've been putting off.
- Learn how something works.
- Have a difficult conversation.
- Exercise when you don't particularly feel like it.
- Solve one piece of the problem.

The objective isn't: **Do something impressive.**

It's: **Practice encountering difficulty and responding to it.** Then build from there.

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## Agency Includes Asking for Help

Agency doesn't mean doing everything yourself. Sometimes the most agentic move available is: **"I don't know how to do this. Who does?"**

- Ask someone.
- Find information.
- Hire someone.
- Collaborate.
- Get treatment.
- Take a class.
- Use a tool.
- Request support.
- Delegate.

Agency isn't independence. It's the ability to recognize and use the resources available to you.

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## Know What Isn't Yours

Agency also includes recognizing when something **isn't yours to control**.

You cannot make someone:

- Love you.
- Forgive you.
- Change.
- Agree with you.
- Choose you.
- Understand you.
- Stop drinking.
- Go to therapy.

Become the partner, parent, friend, or coworker you want them to be. Sometimes agency means stopping the exhausting effort to control something outside of you and asking: **"Given that I cannot control this, what choices are still available to me?"**

That might mean accepting.

- Adjusting.
- Setting a boundary.
- Changing expectations.
- Leaving.
- Grieving.

Or deciding how you want to participate going forward.

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## BUILD AGENCY

When you feel stuck, try moving through three questions.

- **EFFICACY** - What can I do right now?
- **OPTIMISM** - What might become possible if I keep working with this?
- **IMAGINATION** - What else could I try?

If you don't know the answer to one of them, that's okay. That becomes the next thing to explore.

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## DO MORE / DO LESS

### DO MORE

- Separate what you can influence from what you cannot.
- Practice things that stretch your current abilities.
- Notice evidence of things you've figured out.
- Treat mistakes as information.
- Look for another move when the first one doesn't work.
- Ask for help when you don't know how.
- Challenge "always," "never," and "nothing" thinking.
- Make explanations specific rather than global.
- Add **yet** when something is still learnable.
- Build difficulty gradually.
- Review what happened after you try.
- Build reps.

### DO LESS

- Waiting until you feel completely confident.
- Assuming discomfort means you can't do something.
- Treating one outcome as evidence about your entire ability.
- Predicting the future from one difficult experience.
- Confusing lack of control with lack of influence.
- Trying to control other people's choices.
- Calling yourself a failure when an attempt fails.
- Assuming your first idea is your only option.
- Avoiding every situation where you might struggle.
- Thinking your way toward confidence without giving yourself experiences that create it.

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## The Bottom Line

Agency isn't: **"I can control what happens."** It's: **"I can participate in what happens next."**

You won't always know what to do. Your first attempt won't always work. Some situations won't change. Some outcomes will remain outside your control. But agency grows when you repeatedly discover:

- |                        |                                |                            |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| • <b>I can try.</b>    | • <b>I can ask for help.</b>   | • <b>I can handle more</b> |
| • <b>I can learn.</b>  | • <b>I can imagine another</b> | <b>than I once could.</b>  |
| • <b>I can adjust.</b> | <b>option.</b>                 |                            |

You don't have to convince yourself that you're capable. **Go build some evidence.**