

Adapting - The Plasticity of the Brain

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Brains are tricky and adaptable organs.

—Douglas Rushkoff



The human brain is able to adapt. Fortunately! If that plasticity did not exist you'd be hard pressed to keep up with the changing environments in which you work, live, and move. In fact, the word adapting indicates an ability to adjust oneself to different or changing conditions, environments, and needs; to be able to modify what you are doing fittingly. That's one thing. The tricky part is that adapting excessively, especially to tasks and activities that are more energy-intensive for your brain to accomplish, can have negative consequences and outcomes over the long haul.

Is it important to identify and resolve too much adapting? The short answer is yes. The cost of over-adapting is high. It involves expending life energy that is, consequently, unavailable for other endeavors. Over time, it can deplete your energy banks too quickly.

The long answer is more involved. Excessive over-adapting creates a form of stress. If you spend years living an inauthentic life, the consequences of the stress can eventually show itself in any number of ways. In *Doctor Zhivago* Boris Pasternak wrote:

The great majority of us are required to live a life of constant, systematic duplicity. Your health is bound to be affected if, day after day, you say the opposite of what you feel, if you grovel before what you dislike and rejoice at what brings you nothing but misfortune. Our nervous system isn't just a fiction, it's part of our physical body, and our soul exists in space and is inside us, like teeth in our mouth. It can't be forever violated with impunity.

You can develop skills in areas of your brain *bent* as well as outside of that. When the skills you develop match your brain *bent*, you're usually able to achieve higher levels of skill and performance. (The word on the street is that if you put in 10,000 hours of practice on a chosen skill, you may become world class in that skill.)

Following are eight symptoms, some or all of which may be seen in varying degrees in individuals who have been adapting excessively; too much for too long, identified by Taylor through interviews with hundreds of individuals who admitted to years of excessive or prolonged adapting. The following eight symptoms categories comprise what Taylor has labeled Prolonged Adaptive Stress Syndrome or PASS.

1. **Fatigue:** This makes sense, especially when the brain must work significantly harder when adapting. The risk here is self-medicating with anything that will alter brain chemistry and make the person feel better and less exhausted—however temporary (e.g., food, beverages, drugs, addictive behaviors).
2. **Hypervigilance:** This can become a safety mechanism for the brain. It tends to go on “protective alertness” in response to the mismatch between who it is innately and the energy-exhausting activities it is trying to complete.
3. **System Suppression:** Over time, suppression of immune system function can show itself in slowed rates of healing and/or an increased susceptibility to illness (e.g., cold or flu, autoimmune diseases, cancer). The brain and immune system are in constant communication. According to Parris M. Kidd, PhD, a biomedical nutritionist, if people took proper care of their immune system, the average life span could reach well over 100 years—at potentially high levels of mental and physical functioning.
4. **Interference with Thinking:** The stress of over-adapting, which can alter neurochemicals throughout the brain, may be especially deleterious when it occurs in the frontal and pre-frontal lobes (the “executive” portions of the 3rd brain layer). This may be reflected in a decrease in artistic and creative endeavors—a block—or a reduced ability to brainstorm options. It could show up as interference with an ability to make logical/rational decisions, and in slowed speed of thinking. When you say, “I just can’t think,” you are probably right on the money. Something isn’t working optimally in your brain.

Note: An alteration in brain chemistry may also impact one’s management of willpower, the development and use of conscience, and one’s behavioral choices. Some have even suggested that humans may be unable to access free will or be truly intimate with another (intellectually, emotionally, physically, sexually, or spiritually) unless they are being authentically “real.”

5. **History of Severe Stressors:** Individuals often reported a history of severe or chronic stress. Some related to caring for a child with major handicaps or caretaking for aging parents; others spending years working at a job that didn’t match their brain *bent* but appeared their only option or that seemed the only way to make money. The perceived unendingness of these stressors, often without options for respite, can create havoc with everything from hormones to relationships.
6. **Memory Problems:** Cortisol, a body substance that is released under stress, can interfere with the function of memory in a variety of ways, including actually killing brain cells. For more information on the topic of stressors and cortisol, refer to Dr. Robert Sapolsky’s book, *Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers*.

7. **Discouragement/Depression:** Some estimates indicate that 20 million people in the United States are depressed at any given time, with 15% of those likely being suicidal. Excessive/prolonged adaption may contribute to such statistics because of the profound energy drain it can cause over time.
8. **Self-Esteem Problems:** This isn't hard to imagine. You don't feel successful in life, you have many of the other listed symptoms, and you feel "trapped." No wonder you question your self-worth. A diary by Christopher Isherwood called *Good-bye to Berlin* opens this way: "I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking." What a monotonous, unrewarding, and weary way to move through life.

Excessive adapting is a form of stress, especially when it requires the frequent and prolonged use of skills that are more energy-intensive for your brain. Neurons are specialized cells that have a unique ability to transfer information from one to another. Neurons can be negatively impacted by everything from lack of sleep to inadequate diet or chronic stress. Keith J. Karren PhD, et al, in *Mind/Body Health* reported that brain cells can be destroyed by severe or chronic stress, especially cells in the hippocampus (involved with learning and memory). Chronic stress from failure years of excessive adapting and/or living inauthentically may shorten your potential longevity by a decade or more. Avoiding and/or resolving over-adapting can help you go lightly into old age. This means that in and of itself, aging (in the absence of excessive or prolonged adapting) does not need to have a huge negative impact on brain function.



The PASS Questionnaire is designed to help you assess the presence or absence of these eight symptoms that have been linked with the stress of excessive or prolonged adapting. The more sections marked, the more likely it is that you may be experiencing symptoms of PASS. If you identify symptoms, you may want to discuss them with your healthcare professional.

Unfortunately, no one can go back into the past and do it over again. Fortunately, it is possible to learn a new way and craft a healthier future.