



FLEXIBILITY

Being willing to entertain different ideas and try new things

INTRODUCTION

Being flexible refers to the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and new ideas. Flexible people view challenges as opportunities to learn and adapt. Being flexible means that we can apply our skills to new situations and be able to respond successfully. It is grounded in the notion that fair doesn't always have to mean equal. Different people have different needs and skills sets. Each of us can benefit from environments that may not all look the same but are flexible to support us to do our best work.

We can support each other in learning to adapt even when the outcome is unknown.

We can find new ways to solve problems together.

Flexibility reminds us that there are many different ways to achieve our goals.

Flexible environments are those that provide people multiple pathways to achieve goals. When environments are flexible, greater numbers of people will be successful.

When individuals on the autism spectrum practice applying a flexible approach to a problem, they are better prepared to:

- deal with uncertainty,
- incorporate new information,
- adjust to changes, and
- perceive potential setbacks as opportunities for learning.

Flexible thinking is also a key aspect of self-regulation and handling emotions.

Flexible environments can foster a sense of safety and inclusivity. A flexible environment can include viewing challenges with openness, curiosity, and as opportunities for growth. Rather than only offering flexible adjustments to individuals that request them, consider offering them to all individuals.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES FOR ENCOURAGING FLEXIBILITY

Talk openly about it

Most people benefit from discussions that focus on flexibility and seeing it demonstrated by others.

Consider if your hiring process would benefit from some flexibility

- Make interview questions available in advance
- Allow written submissions
- Consider skill-focused (rather than performance or interview focused) evaluation

Take time to validate emotions

Individuals who feel heard and understood are less likely to dwell on negative emotions associated with disappointment and uncertainty.

Practice using empathy and modeling flexible thinking to help the individual move on to finding a satisfactory solution.

Be patient and encourage the individual to practice flexible thinking to help manage distress and build resilience

Consider if classes or meetings can be flexible

For example:

- Consider offering remote or in-person options
- Ask questions beforehand and allow written submissions instead of expecting that everyone will be comfortable expressing themselves in a group, or in the moment
- Allowing people to use the chat feature in remote classes or meetings rather than speaking in front of others

Flexibility in academic settings

Consider offering choices for graded assignments and activities such as a choice between submitting a photo or video and a traditional paper

Work Together

At work, always include the individual in planning when it comes to their job. In some jobs, a flexible approach might include a floating start time with an expectation of 4 hours of work once started. In other jobs, a flexible approach for an employee might be allowing a fixed schedule every week even if others have a variable schedule

Consider a variety of flexible work arrangements

For example:

- Flexible start/end times
- The number and timing of breaks
- Work from home rather than in an open-concept office
- Working alone with one supervisor, instead of actively participating in a group

Apply flexibility to problem-solving

If an expectation is unmet, especially more than once, be flexible in your problem-solving. Rather than simply re-state the expectation, consider:

- Can you re-phrase to a clear, concrete statement?
- Could the person perform better if they had a visual to do list, a checklist, a electronic reminder system or other supports?
- Does the person need more teaching and skill development to meet the expectation?
- Can you modify the expectation?
- Can you use co-worker or other peer support to model or coach?

Support contingency planning

Be flexible to support the creation of a "Plan B" if the current plan doesn't work

Be willing to try new things

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