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Tim Evans for HBR

Learning how to plan — especially if you're new to organizing your time — can be a frustrating experience. And for some individuals, the reason could be their brains.

As a time management coach, I've seen some incredibly intelligent people struggle to plan. For example, very creative people who think in pictures can initially have a difficult time translating their conceptual ideas into practical actions that then find a space on their calendars. They need someone to guide them step-by-step on how to go through this process. Or some individuals who do an

amazing job on identifying and executing on their top priority can falter when it comes to tracking and completing other tasks concurrently, including managing others.

In reading the book *Thriving in Mind: The Natural Key to Sustainable Neurofitness* by Dr. Katherine Benziger, I came to understand the scientific basis for what I had observed in my clients — that some people’s brains are naturally wired for maintaining order, while others’ aren’t.

It all comes down to brain science. Those with natural brain dominance in the back-left part of the brain are most comfortable making linear plans and following them. These individuals typically don’t have a need for my coaching help and often don’t understand why others struggle. But those with brain dominance in a different quadrant of their brain will find planning much harder. That’s because the neurochemistry of their brain causes them to use 100 times the energy to think in “planning” mode as someone whose natural dominance is back left.

Just as we tend to recognize that skills like creativity, analysis, or writing can come much easier to some than to others, ease with planning is something that we’re either born with or we’re not. But it doesn’t mean that we can’t develop those skills by actively building neuro-connections in our brain through [persistent practice](#).

As a time management coach, I’ve intuitively picked up on the importance of this truth. I’ve seen clients who have never been able to plan effectively in their entire lives develop this skill simply by looking for help, keeping at it, and pushing through the struggle — essentially, building resilience.

Here are some key steps in using knowledge of your natural brain strength to build resilience with planning:

Recognize your natural strengths and weaknesses. If you find planning extremely difficult, you likely don’t have natural brain dominance in the back-left part of your brain. To find out what part of your brain dominates, do the self-assessment in the book *Thriving in Mind* or participate in the more formal [Benziger Thinking Styles Assessment](#). Learning this can help you better understand what works for you and then use that to adjust your habits. By taking the *Thriving in Mind* self-assessment, for example, I gained clarity on why certain types of work came so naturally to me and why I found myself avoiding other types of tasks.

Accept the difficulty. If we think something should be easy when it’s hard, we tend to get upset and are more likely to give up. But if we set expectations that a task will be difficult, we may still flounder, but we’re more willing to work through any issues, since we understand that challenge is part of the process. When my coaching clients first start planning, they describe it as frustrating, disorienting, tiring, or even anger-inducing because they don’t want to accept the limits of reality in terms of how many activities can fit in a day. The clients who accept and work through those feelings are the ones who make the most progress. They find that on the other side, they have more peace, more confidence, and more clarity on how to structure their time well.

Let go of all-or-nothing thinking. One interesting phenomenon I've observed with people whose natural brain strength is not in planning is that they tend to fall into all-or-nothing thinking. They think that they must follow their plan perfectly, or their efforts have been wasted. Or if they can't plan every day, they shouldn't plan at all. Instead, view learning as a process where improvement counts and every day matters. This will build your resilience because you won't beat yourself up as much when you deviate from your plan, and in turn, you will find it easier to get back on track.

Find systems that work. Instead of forcing yourself into an established scheduling process, find a system that works for you. For example, if you tend to have a strong tendency toward visuals (a common front-right brain dominance quality), find a way to organize that takes that preference into account. Put to-do items on sticky notes, draw on whiteboards, or use [mind maps](#). If you love spreadsheets (often found when you have a strong front-left brain dominance), put your to-do lists and plans in Excel, or consider using apps that will allow you to track your progress in a numeric fashion. If you like to see time as a flow and rhythm (a favorite of back-right dominance), use tools like paper lists that will allow you to adapt and adjust the cadence of your day as needed, instead of feeling boxed into rigid time frames. There is no wrong way to plan. Experiment until you find the right fit.

Borrow other people's brains. If you know people who excel in planning or have organization skills, ask for their advice and insight. They may be able to easily offer potential solutions to problems that overwhelm you. Getting suggestions from others on organization systems that you can then test, instead of trying to develop your own, can save you lots of time. A few caveats: Avoid critical people who may discourage you in your learning process. Change is tough enough without being torn down. Second, ask them for *simple* solutions. Don't aim for expertise in an area when you're just learning; a basic level of knowledge is a good start.

Keep trying. One of the definitions of resilience is "the ability to spring back into shape." When you find yourself getting frustrated in the process of planning, have self-compassion when you make mistakes, refocus when you get distracted, and adjust your plan when new issues crop up. For example, you may decide to move a project you thought you would get done today to the next day. Or you may reach out to a colleague for help on getting a certain deliverable done.

Understanding what's going on in your brain as you acquire time management skills makes a dramatic difference in your ability to encourage yourself and work through frustration and roadblocks. When you convince yourself that you can change and accept that you'll need to work harder than most, you have a much higher chance of being resilient in the process of improving your planning.

Elizabeth Grace Saunders is a time coach and the founder of [Real Life E Time Coaching & Training](#). She is author of *How to Invest Your Time Like Money* and *Divine Time Management* (forthcoming, November 2017). Find out more at www.ScheduleMakeover.com.
