

What is Executive Functioning?

In a nutshell:

= The ability to **control** one's **thoughts, emotions, and actions**

Three core mental processes:

- **Response Inhibition:** The capacity to think before acting, resist urges and impulses, manage reactions to situations, allowing for time to evaluate a situation and how our behavior might impact it.
- **Working Memory:** The ability to hold information in memory while performing complex tasks, draw on past learning or experience to apply to the situation at hand or to project into the future.
- **Cognitive Flexibility:** The ability to shift gears between tasks, thought processes and situations, revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information or mistakes.

Together, they enable:

- **Planning/Prioritization:** The ability to create a roadmap to reach a goal or to complete a task, make decisions about what's important, and to delay gratification.
- **Organization:** The ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials.
- **Time Management:** The capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines.
- **Task Initiation:** The ability to begin projects without procrastinating.
- **Sustained Attention, Focus:** The capacity to maintain attention to a situation or task in spite of distractibility, fatigue, or boredom.
- **Goal-directed persistence:** The capacity to have a goal, follow through to the completion of the goal, and not be put off by or distracted by competing interests.
- **Metacognition, Self-awareness:** The ability to stand back and take a birds-eye view of oneself in a situation, observe our own problem solving, change behavior in response to feedback or observation of others who are more skilled.
- **Emotional Control:** The ability to manage emotions to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior.
 - recover from a disappointment in a short time
 - manage anxiety and still perform
- **Stress Tolerance:** the ability to thrive in stressful situations and to cope with uncertainty, change, and performance demands.

A Helpful Metaphor



1. The Rider (Rational Mind/Executive Control):

Represents planning, logic, and long-term thinking. The rider can see further into the future than the elephant and needs to give clear directions.

Does the rider know exactly where to go? Do they know and connect well with the elephant?

2. The Elephant (Emotional Mind/Instinct/Body):

Represents the actual behavior, but also emotions, habits, instinct, physical demands. The elephant is powerful and seeks immediate gratification.

Is the elephant trained, skilled and motivated?

3. The Path (Environment/Context):

Represents the external, environmental factors. Shaping the path means altering surroundings to make the desired behavior easier and the undesired behavior harder.

Is the path cleared and easy to follow?

We can aim at any of those levels to improve executive functioning – some examples:

Direct the **Rider**:

- Define clear next steps
- Scripts, Implementation Intentions
- Journals, logs, history: analyze what works, find bright spots
- Test assumptions (e.g., time estimation), experiment with over-correction

Motivate the **Elephant**:

- More frequent/immediate rewards
- Visualize consequences
- Build routines (start via **Path** until established)
- “Rally the herd”:
 - Accountability buddy
 - Body doubling, e.g., Focusmate
 - Collaboration
 - Shared documents

Shape and Clear the **Path**:

- Choice architecture (e.g., strong defaults)
- Barrier analysis
- Add/remove obstacles (a.k.a. increase/decrease friction)
- Reduce distractions
- Precommitment
- Make difficult tasks easier (e.g., templates, skills, practice)
- Habit stacking
- Habit loop modification



Some interventions aim at more than one level – examples:

Connect Rider and Elephant:

- Clarify values, meaning
- Mindfulness; acceptance and commitment exercises
- Restate goals as actions
- Cost/benefit analysis
- Motivational interviewing

Target all three at once:

- Externalize memory
- Schedules; calendars
- Physical reminders
- Well-labeled alarms, timers



Selected Sources & Further Reading:

Executive Functioning:

- Barkley, R. A. (1997). Behavioral inhibition, sustained attention, and executive functions: constructing a unifying theory of ADHD. *Psychological Bulletin*, 121(1), 65–94.
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Rider/Elephant Metaphor:

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The Rider/Elephant/Path framing is a popular synthesis, not a peer-reviewed model. The underlying psychological science draws on dual-process theory, e.g.,:

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Interventions:

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- Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2012). *Motivational interviewing* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Oettingen, G. (2014). *Rethinking positive thinking*. Penguin.
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