



Change Fatigue:

Training our brain to adapt to shifting circumstances

By Ben Moorsom, Dr. Marc Milstein



Change. Many of us don't care much for it. We want routine! We want structure! We want predictability!

While change is almost always placed in a positive light, there are certainly times when change can be associated with negativity – especially in those who are constantly expected to adjust to the changes going on around them. This negative emotion associated with change is referred to as change fatigue, where there is growing resistance and stress responses as more and more changes happen.

In the world we live in right now, change is taking place all around us. With it comes greater stress, greater resistance, and an ever-growing issue of change fatigue.

An ever-changing world

COVID-19 has put the world into a spin. Far more than before, constant change is taking place in every aspect of our lives as we come to terms with this pandemic.

- We no longer have the freedoms we once had
- We have to structure our day in a different way
- We no longer have the social support we once did
- With each passing week we seem to have to change our approach to one or all of the above

The brain responds to these types of changes in an interesting way.

The brain on change

The brain likes stability; it is resistant to change and often reacts negatively to any suggestion of it.

Imagine you get to your desk in your home office one morning and your setup has been changed to the left side of the table when it has always been more on the right. It's not a big deal, as the space is exactly the same, but you'd probably be furious and demand a reasonable explanation, most probably changing it back as quickly as you can. Most probably, all of this happens with a spike in your heart rate and blood pressure to go along with it.

When change is considered threatening to our environment, the resistance and stress response to it is all the more dramatic.

With COVID-19, some changes we are dealing with are moderate, but others are threatening - we're doing things very differently in our everyday lives and we are also aware of the threat to our and our family's well-being.

The reason for the brain's poor response is this:

Of the almost 90 billion brain cells we have, only a very small number are allocated to handle cognitive flexibility; the adjustments we are able to make to our environment².

Within our small number of change adjusting brain cells there are circuits that transmit messages between them. Research published in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Science (PNAS) suggests that while some people seemingly adjust quite quickly to change, others may have weakened cognitive flexibility circuits.

A weakened circuit makes it very difficult for some people to adapt to change. So, while we all have struggled with change in the past year it's important to remember that no brain is identical. To an extent, our ability to handle change comes down to biology. The hopeful news is that through the right practices the brain can learn to adapt to change.

Rewarding or not?

When something changes in our environment, our brain weighs up the cost-benefit ratio of the change. Is it more rewarding than something we are currently doing, or not?

If the change is perceived to be less rewarding, it upsets the brain's stability. This disrupts the 'happy' medium of the brain and leaves us struggling to adjust to the change.

There is a way to improve resilience to change.

During research into the brain's cognitive flexibility circuits, scientists developed a simulation to identify what this reward system would look like in terms of adaptability to change.

The result?

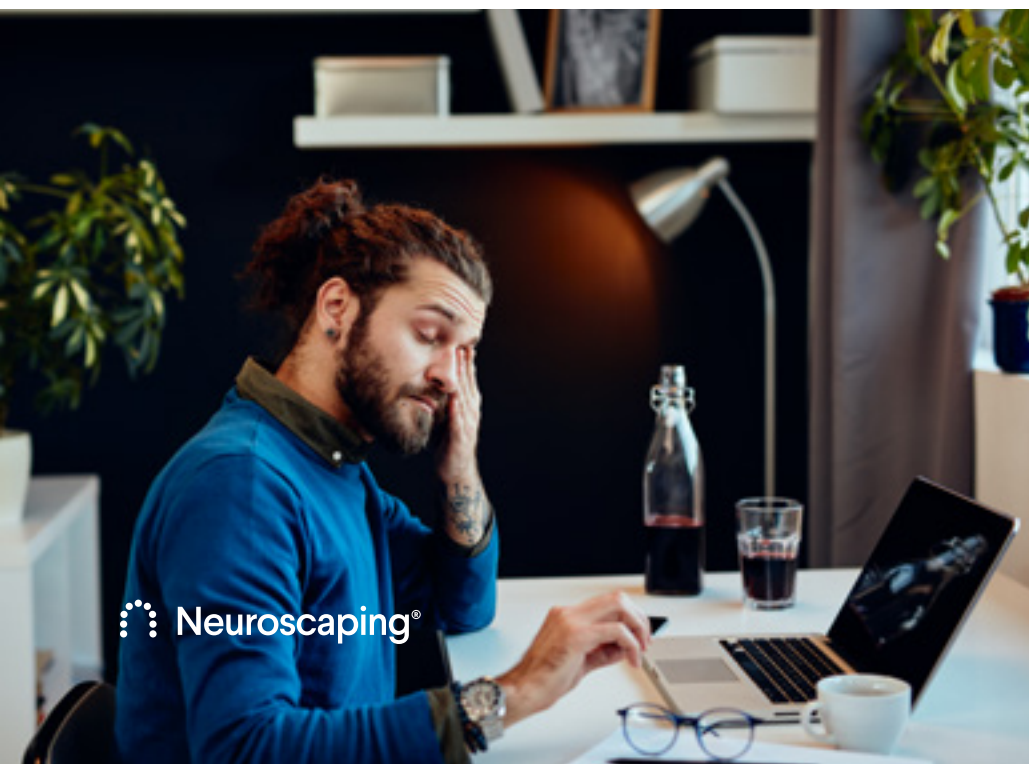
The brain's cognitive flexibility circuit activity was heightened when the change happened, but this diminished over time. In order to increase cognitive flexibility, participants in the study had to experience reward with several changes over time.

Thus, improving our perception of change is key. Viewing change in our lives with a positive outlook can help us build our capacity to adapt over time.

Home office? No more long commutes!

Schools closed? Spending more time with your family!

And so on.



Working with change

In the workplace, leaders and managers who can communicate the rewards reaped from any change can motivate and help employees to adapt. Many people become really unsettled by changes that are implemented in the work environment³.

Research published by the University of Illinois showed that there are two key factors involved in improved employee change adaptability:

1. Work autonomy
2. Trust in their leaders

When an employee has work autonomy, and is able to make their own decisions about the structure of their workday, research shows



trust by feeling supported in having work autonomy. Second, trust grows when employees witness leadership abilities in response to new initiatives implemented.

Where there is trust in leadership, there is usually less of a negative response to changes in work structure. Good leadership also reduces the perception that additional work is being created when changes arise. These key factors lead to a diminished response of 'change fatigue' from employees.

our past is closely tied to our social groups, our relationships and how we perceive our social standing with others.

Despite many of us thinking that we tend to be more isolated in the work environment, or that the support at work is superficial, the need for strong social support in the work environment is, in fact, no different to that which we desire in our personal lives⁵.

During times of change, getting reassurance from others in the same environment - peers and leaders - is critical for us to be able to adapt to change and uncertainty.

How do you build trust?

1. A strong support system

Humans are innately social, and we thrive on social connection. Throughout history, we have evidence that shows there is a higher survival rate in those who have a stronger social standing, both as an individual and in a community setting.

Research also supports the notion that what we think about, how we plan our future and even consider

2. Being heard

Empathy builds trust. A manager or leader who shows true empathy and compassion for their employees is far more likely to hold the trust of their employees.

Listening sessions or providing a platform through which employees may contact their managers may be valuable, allowing employees to voice their concerns and worries as well as feeling heard and listened to. Informative newsletters and surveys may also build trust⁶.



that the work output improves. Work autonomy simply helps employees to be more motivated to work.

Trust is another essential factor in adaptability to change⁴.

There are key areas where trust is crucial. First, the employee builds

Listening can also reduce anger. Anger is a complex emotion but at its root anger often stems from not being heard or understood. We don't need to necessarily solve every problem, but it is critically important to have employees feel heard.

Additionally, employers should make it easy for employees to contact the designated resources as set up by the organization. For example, the human resource department as well as extended health care resources like psychologists or counsellors.

Employees should familiarize themselves with these resources and make use of them on an ongoing basis when they feel stressed or overwhelmed.

3 . Encouraging Wellness

Decision-making can be tough, and the decision-making process goes hand-in-hand with those of change. The energy required to make decisions in times of change can sap our energy. It may have a devastating effect on our sense of wellbeing and drain our body's resources.

Staying in touch with simple acts of wellbeing can help to maintain or restore resilience to change.

- Take part in wellness programs offered by the organization
- Incorporate movement into your day - go for a short walk or do some stretching, exercise or yoga
- Get into nature
- Take a short rest and manage your sleep
- Follow a healthy eating plan



Organizations can create an environment where wellness is encouraged, rewarded and prioritized.

Offering wellness programs builds trust, empathy and support.

4 . Staying informed

Research confirms that we crave information; good or bad. In other words, even if the news is bad, we prefer to hear it rather than receiving no news.

In an interesting study⁷, researchers told participants that they would receive an electric shock. Half of the participants were told that they would receive an intensive shock while the other half received no indication. Those in the first group exhibited far less fear and anxiety about the shock, knowing that it would be intense, than those who didn't know what to expect. The uncertainty of the experience created far greater negative psychological responses in the participants brain areas responsible for emotion and memory.

Employers can take advantage of this need for clarity by ensuring that employees remain informed, even if it is bad news.

Becoming change resilient

The brain is built to be more resistant to change, but we can adapt.

How?

- Cultivate a culture of a sense of reward for new innovations
- Focus on sleep, dealing with stress, managing health conditions, eating health foods and taking part in exercise to maintain the adaptability of the brain
- Implement change in a sustainable way, building up to the reward associated with that change, allowing the 'new normal' to become habit rather than a stress factor

Change doesn't always need to be a stressful occurrence. The mind is a powerful tool, and one that is able to change in itself to become more resilient - we just need to give it that chance to do so.

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About Ben Moorsom

Ben is the creator of Neuroscaping®. A behavioral communications practice. Since founding the Debut Group in 1997, Ben has made it his mission to challenge and disrupt ineffective conventions of business communications, pioneering new approaches that strengthen brands internally, engage people more effectively and deeply capture their attention. By applying advances from psychology and neuroscience, Ben and his team turn audiences into active participants. They use Neuroscaping methodology to cut through the noise and competition at the gateway to the human mind, placing business messages near the front of the line. Ben is a frequent keynote speaker and co-conspirator at global conferences on communication thought leadership.

About Dr. Marc Milstein

Dr. Marc Milstein specializes in taking the leading science research on health and happiness and presents it in a way that entertains, educates and empowers his audience to live better. His presentations provide science based solutions to keep the brain healthy, lower risk of dementia, boost productivity and maximize longevity. He earned both his Ph.D. in Biological Chemistry and his Bachelor of Science in Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology from UCLA. Dr. Milstein has conducted research on topics including cancer biology and neuroscience and his work has been published in multiple scientific journals.

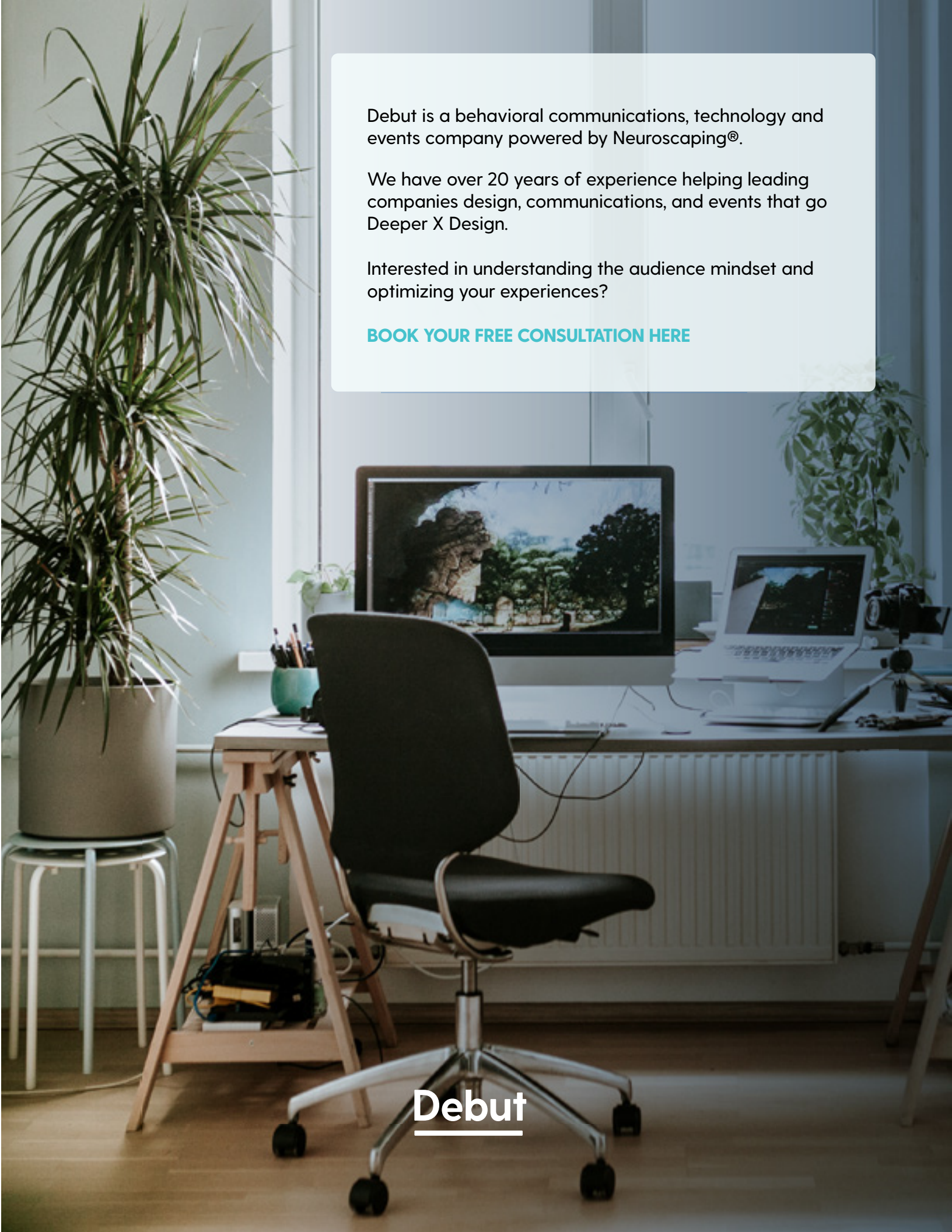
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