

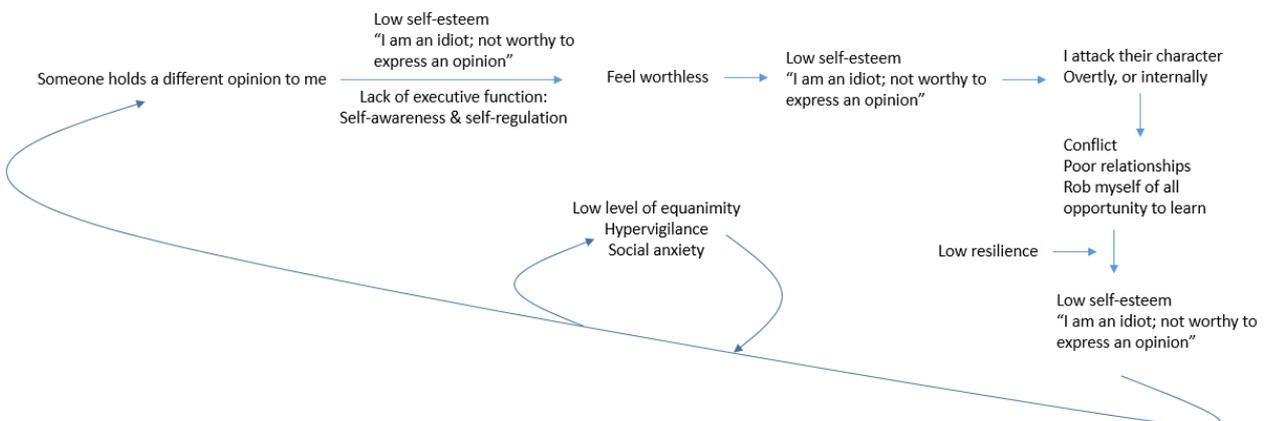


Executive functions

Executive functions are generated in the thinking and attentive part of the brain. They are the key characteristics of wisdom and are the basis for a meaningful life and healthy mutually beneficial relationships.

Executive functions are learned as we grow from infancy to early childhood to adolescence, early adulthood and older adulthood. Each of these stages is associated with developing different healthy executive functions, which ultimately culminates in wisdom. To develop healthy executive function, it is necessary to grow up in a nurturing and supportive environment, to participate and to have rich experiences in life. Unfortunately, many of us do not have healthy executive function and a lot of people grow up into adulthood, but remain a child. This is especially true if we use alcohol and other substances to numb our experience of the world. When we do not face the world whole-heartedly, we cease to learn and grow. We remain suspicious of others, uncomfortable with people, have low self-confidence and low self-esteem, become perfectionists or people pleasers; we are too hard on ourselves and become defensive when challenged. We chase materialism instead of experiences. This leads to a vicious cycle of less than optimal outcomes and unhelpful responses to those. We call this a 'misery cycle'. An example of a common misery cycle is shown below.

Poor executive function: Misery cycle



Nevertheless, the important thing to realise is that executive functions are learned. And it is never too late to start learning. Learning starts with identifying what it is I need to learn. So here is a list of important executive functions and simple exercises that can help in cultivating them.

Executive function	Exercise
Attention	Mindfulness exercises. Pay attention on purpose. See notes on attention.
Self-awareness, self-regulation and emotional regulation	Ask: What am I thinking, what am I feeling? Learning to put a name to emotions helps give you a choice on how to respond to them. Talk to trusted friends; ask them how you come across to them. Make a list of virtues that are important to you. Practice them. Plan ahead. Participate in a wide range of activities. See notes on authenticity.
Motivation and perseverance	Do things despite the way you feel. Sometimes doing comes before motivation. Having people to do things with and being accountable to someone helps remove the stumbling block of not feeling motivated. Identify activities that you want to do.
Planning, organising, prioritising and managing my time	Break down complex tasks into individual steps. Provide visual cues and reminders, such as written notes, charts and to-do lists. Set aside time to plan activities. Arrange your working space so that everything that is needed is visible and easily accessible. Collaborate with others.
Flexible thinking and problem solving	Flexible thinking comes from having had rich experiences and practicing solving problems. That means doing things. The more challenges you face, the more you know you can face and overcome future challenges. Welcome problems and challenges. Seek help where necessary. Find your communities. It is much easier to face challenges when you don't have to face them alone. Practice considering wider issues rather than one specific aspect. Be flexible and consider all options. Discuss options and potential solutions with others. Have a mentor.

You will note that turning attention to your feelings is a double-edged sword. On one hand it is important to learn to identify feelings so that you have a choice on how to respond to them wisely. Acting on feelings impulsively without thought will mean that you will always remain a slave to other people's behaviour and circumstances. On the other hand, if we allow our feelings to dictate what we do, we would probably not do anything. Too much introspection and attention to our feelings can be unhelpful. Sometimes we need to do things despite the way we feel. It is much easier to do that when we have the support of a community. Identify the communities to which you belong; join and participate. That makes all the difference to both yourself and the other members of the community.

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