



Learn, unlearn and relearn at Learnlife

Overview

It's not uncommon for people to say that you can't unlearn something. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" and "A leopard can't change its spots" are two common expressions in English, and there are many more in other languages too.

Once you know how to do something, or have learned a certain way of doing things or looking at the world, it's stuck in your brain forever, right? It is also perhaps a little strange to hear the words [unlearn and relearn in a learning environment](#). Perhaps it sounds like these words focus on moving back, rather than forward?

The thing is, we do these things all the time without perhaps even realising. The human brain is far more flexible than we once thought, and it really is possible to unlearn certain things. This process is known as "neuroscience-based adaptive unlearning."

This process also applies to learned behaviour and values. Yes, both can indeed be unlearned and relearned in a different way, though it's not as easy as ctrl+alt+del.

In essence, neuroscience-based adaptive unlearning is a way of rewiring the brain to unlearn previously learned information or habits that are no longer useful. This could apply to anything from a bad habit like nail biting to outdated knowledge like the fact that the earth is flat. By consciously making an effort to unlearn something, we can actually change the structure of our brains and create new, more helpful neural pathways as we relearn them anew.



In this Article

- What are unlearning and relearning?
- Why are unlearning and relearning so important?
- How to unlearn and relearn something
- How does the learning approach at Learnlife take these processes into account?

What are unlearning and relearning?

As we learn new information, our brain creates mental models, or schemas, to help us organize and remember what we know. These schemas are important because they allow us to quickly recall information and make judgments based on our prior experience.

When we are motivated to learn something, the best way is when we can “hang” new knowledge or skills on this pre-existing framework. Before you do a backside flip on a skateboard, you have to learn to ollie (jump), then to backside ollie, then to flip, and then you put it all together.

If the new information is too far outside what we already know, it doesn't really click. If it's something we already know, it's boring and we fall asleep. The perfect



spot is when the new information is just within reach and we can stretch out a bit to get it. This is called the “zone of proximal development”.

Things are not always so clear and linear, especially when we are learning about wider systems with connections to more fluid concepts, but there is always a building process of some kind. This is why we talk about “constructing” understanding of something.

However, these constructs can also lead us to ignore conflicting evidence or persist in outdated beliefs. In other words, our brain can be resistant to change. The older bits of our brains don’t much like change, and prefer predictability so we can stay safe.

This phenomenon is known as the “confirmation bias.” To overcome the confirmation bias and embrace new ideas, we need to be willing to “[unlearn](#)” existing schemas that no longer serve us well. This process requires effort and mindfulness, but it is essential for continued growth and learning.

This process does not just apply to knowledge but also values and behaviours which we develop and can equally unlearn and relearn differently.

Why are unlearning and relearning important?

With an open mind, we can keep our brain flexible and adaptable, ready to learn new things and confront the world's ever-changing challenges.

When we say “open”, that doesn’t mean empty. There’s all kinds of stuff in our brains already, but it’s there because of the experiences we have had. It’s not always true or helpful, and sometimes the stuff in there holds us back.

Take our Learning Guides at Learnlife, for example. Some of them developed their professions in mainstream education and traditional schools. They learned to control the direction of everyone’s learning, to require everyone to be on the same task at the same time, and a million other things that we already know are not helpful to learning.

When these teachers became Learning Guides, they had to unlearn some of these commonly held beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. That is not an easy thing to do, when you have been taught for years that it’s the “right” way to do things, even if you can feel deep down that there is a better way.

Our Learning Guides unlearned what they knew of education and asked new questions, found better ways, soaked up new information and relearned how to guide and support the learning of young people rather than dictate it.

This is a critical process to develop. If we do important things based on the best available evidence, then we have to be prepared to adapt as that evidence



develops. If we act a certain way because of particular experiences and influences, then we need to be able to grow as new experiences and influences emerge in our lives.

The world is too complex for us to be static of mind. Staying set in one way of thinking is dangerous, because when the world moves on, we will be left behind. Can we be the best versions of ourselves if we cannot always upgrade and regenerate through a growth mindset and an openness to new ways of doing things?

How to unlearn and relearn something

The brain is incredibly complex, and scientists are still uncovering all of its mysteries. However, one thing we do know is the brain forms connections between neurons in order to store memories.

When we learn something new, our brain creates connections between neurons. The more we repeat an action or thought, the stronger those connections become. In other words, the more we practice something, the better we become at it.

The same principle applies to unlearning. In order to unlearn something, we need to break the connections between neurons that have been formed through repetition. So how can this be done?

Well it doesn't happen by accident, or unconsciously, because we already have a word for that: *forgetting*! Unlearning is consciously choosing not to continue using knowledge, values or behaviour. We don't permanently lose access to the previous version, but just strip it back to the roots, clear the space, and grow something new. The old version is still underneath somewhere.

The literature generally indicates that knowledge, values and behaviour can be unlearned in two different ways:

- Wiping
- Deep unlearning

[Wiping](#) is a process of unlearning something that is imposed by something external, and can be pretty sudden, or even incremental and adjective.

An easy example (but not an easy experience!) to illustrate this comes to us from the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators in mainstream education had to suddenly shift to online learning, and realised that their traditional way of *teaching* could not simply be replicated in an online environment, and many approaches, processes and procedures had to be unlearned and relearned. You can read more about how Learnlife adapted [here](#).



Deep unlearning is generated by experiences that change the way we see things, the beliefs we hold or the way we act and react in certain situations. Frames of reference or belief structures and this change can be quite unsettling as it really alters things at the core of who we are.

Imagine a scientist who gets a result that throws everything she believes into doubt. Imagine a person who is prejudiced against a certain group, meeting an individual from that group and falling in love. Imagine a conversation where a perspective is put forward that hits you with a jolt, and causes you deep reflection on your own framing.

In each of these scenarios we have to be open. We have to be ready to change and not just shut it down because of fear and confusion. We also could use some help guidance in what new knowledge, behaviours or values go in place of those unlearned, and how to relearn anew. This really is where effective support comes into critical focus.

How does the learning approach at Learnlife take these processes into account?

Being aware of the learn-unlearn-relearn process really is one of the most important things. At Learnlife, we are used to this process because we are constantly evolving the way we approach learning, and constantly building our learning experiences around the passion and purpose of our learners.

When change is a constant, and there is fluidity built into your structures, you can both support learners to embrace a growth mindset of change and evolution, and also provide space for the mindfulness, reflection and exploration that supports it.

This may seem like we are oversimplifying things, but it's really not centered on what *we* do, but on making space and support available for what our *learners* do. Growth is a human condition, and we do not only evolve over millennia in incremental Darwinian micro-adjustments, but also within the lifespan of an individual, as societies and communities.

To deny this is to deny what is best about us. To resist change and hang on to knowledge, values and behaviours because of fear and denial, is a rejection of how our world might yet be regenerated.

In Summary...

Unlearning is a conscious process requiring us to be open to pruning back obsolete values, knowledge or behaviours. This can be pushed upon us from an external event or stimulus, or can come from within as we change our perspective and framing. It can happen quickly or incrementally, but we need space and support to understand it, and to make sure that what we construct in its place is healthy and



useful to us. We can learn, unlearn and relearn at any time in our lives, although it does get a bit trickier after about age 25. That said, change is literally in our DNA, and we can embrace a growth mindset and keep ourselves open to change.

Our blogs on learning, relearning and unlearning

- [Learn, Unlearn, Relearn](#)
- [The neuroscience of unlearning](#)
- [Developing a Growth Mindset](#)
- [Time to 'unlearn being adults' and embrace the new normal in education](#)

Our Programmes

- [Primary Programmes](#)
- [Secondary Programmes](#)
- [Home Hub](#)
- [Community Programmes](#)

Elements of the Learning Paradigm

- [Shaping a Strong Learning Culture](#)
- [Developing a Growth Mindset](#)
- [Personal Learning & Lifelong Learning](#)

Sources

- [\(PDF\) The process of individual unlearning: A neglected topic in an under-researched field](#)
- [Background - Exploring types of individual unlearning by local health-care managers: an original empirical approach - NCBI Bookshelf](#)
- [Unlearning at the Individual Level: An Exploratory Case Study in a High Power Distance Country](#)