

Intro: You are listening to supporting supporters, a free mental health and wellbeing podcast. This podcast is offered by Allina Health. My name is Tonya Freeman, I'm a licensed psychologist and regional lead psychologist with Allina Health. These podcasts are aimed at the goal of providing quick tangible resources from Allina Health mental health providers. Ranging from topics of day-to-day life of the listener. We invite you to join us in any way you please, whether you sit back and kick your feet up, or as you engage in movement, your daily commute, or as you prepare for your day. However, you choose to join us, we welcome you and honor your time.

Episode: Thanks very much Dr. Miller. Hello. My name is David Nathan and I'm a licensed psychologist who works for Allina Health. Thanks very much for pulling up this podcast. I am very appreciative of the work you do; both of my parents and my twin sister are teachers. What you do makes the world a better place and shapes the next generations. There are few jobs more important to our society than teaching and guiding our Young people. Thank you for doing it. I hope this is helpful for you.

One of the most requested topics we have been asked to cover is "what can we control and what can't we control.

What a good topic.

Today I am going to discuss how to have more control, healthy and unhealthy types of control, and realistic expectations about what we can and cannot control.

First, let's jump into the initial question: what can we and can't we control?

I'm going to assume we want a healthy answer to that question. First I'll talk about ways to have more healthy control and later I'll discuss ways to recognize and avoid unhealthy control.

In terms of healthy control the simplest answer to the question of what can we and can't we control is, 'it's complicated.'

Looking at the internet, there are zillions of websites and articles that have well meaning, but incomplete, answers to this question. As I was researching this podcast, I commonly saw statements such as "we can control our emotions", "We can control our behavior", "We can control our calendar" "We can control our meals", "We can control our mindset" Et cetera.

I think these articles are useful, but they are missing factors that psychologists and organizational behavioralist and business strategies have identified as impacting what is and is not under our control.

Specifically, there are six factors that have been identified that impact what is and is not under our control, and these factors can change. These factors, are Time frame, personal skills and abilities, resources available to us, our physical health, our mental health, and our mindset. Adjusting our expectations as these dimensions change can help us spend more time under control.

Awareness of these factors can help us be more successful and comfortable.

Let's talk about what factors represent.

The first factor is time. If we want to do something, do we need to do it now or do we have a week to do it? Can it be done in the next week? Or month?

If I need to run to the store to get milk, I can probably do that nearly any time. If I need to organize a school fundraiser for hundreds of guests, I can't do that in an afternoon. In previous podcasts, I have discussed our time budget; what we can do is limited by how much time we have. We need to recognize how much time is available to us and not try to cram more activities into our day than we have hours to do things. Otherwise, we are going to burn out.

Being thoughtful about how much time we have and how much time it will take to do something helps us have more control of our lives.

The next factor is what are our personal skills or abilities. If someone is a good cook, or good piano player, or if they speak Spanish or French, there are things they are going to be able to do in the present that other people who don't have those skills won't be able to do. We need to respect that we and everyone else has different skills and abilities and something that is easy for hard for someone else may not be easy or hard for us. And everyone has things they are good at, medium at and not so good at. That's how it goes. We need to be honest about what our skill sets are when we think about what we can do.

The third factor is Resources available to us. This has to do with what is available in the environment and people around us. Can we borrow a cup of sugar from our neighbor? Is there someone who could watch our kids if we needed to run an errand or take a break? Do we live in a safe neighborhood? Do we have friends and family that we trust and have our best interests at heart? This factor also related to financial wealth. Do we have the ability to pay for an emergency car or home repair?

People who have access to various resources are going to have more control over things than people who don't.

The fourth dimension is our physical health. If someone has asthma, or disabilities, these things can impact how well we do things. We need to be thoughtful about this. If someone is sick and they push themselves, they are going to be sicker. Physical health can also be impacted by are we hungry? Tired? Are we cold from being outside when it is chilly or raining? How is our physical body doing?

The fifth factor is our mental health. Are we emotionally exhausted? Burned out? Depressed? Anxious? Are we dealing with grief and loss? Feeling overwhelmingly angry? Are we feeling confident and capable? Excited? We are going to be able to do a lot more when we are feeling mentally healthy than when we aren't. If you have listened to my other podcasts, you have heard me discuss the cell phone battery metaphor for mental health.

I apologize if you have heard it already. One way to look at the mind is like a battery. When we are fully charged, we feel great. When we are at 90% or 80%, even if something big comes up, we have plenty of energy to deal with it and other things as they arise. When we do activities that take energy from us; such as chores, boring activities, when we deal with difficult people, when we have to sustain

our attention on things we don't enjoy, we use up our mental energy. Once we drop down below the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile mark, we are going to start experiencing mental health symptoms. Those symptoms show up in three different categories: internalizing symptoms, such as obsessive thoughts, worries, or feeling down; externalizing symptoms, such as breaking things or getting into fights with others; and Somatic symptoms, that we feel in our body such as having headaches or stomach aches. The more used up we are, the lower the battery is, the more frequent and severe the symptoms are. Healthy diet, exercise, sleep and self-care help recharge our battery and keep us more relaxed and capable.

The sixth factor, a healthy mindset can also help. Our mindset refers to the general way we view the world. This is a complex topic with many parts. Today I am going to discuss three that are most closely related to control.

Those are compassion to self and others, mental flexibility and setting realistic expectations and boundaries. These are especially important skills for adults who work with children and teenagers. There are plenty of resources on the internet about them, but here is a quick run down.

Compassion for ourselves and others is all about not beating ourselves or others up. Everyone makes mistakes. If we are blaming ourselves or other people when things go badly, we are engaging in a common but unhelpful coping strategy. Life is complicated. There are usually lots of reasons things happen. Thinking It's all my fault or its all their fault paints with a very broad brush and is unlikely to help us understand the reality of a situation or fix it. If something goes wrong, learning from it and moving on is the healthy thing to do. If we give ourselves a hard time, or someone else a hard time we are actually making the situation worse. Being compassionate with ourselves and others is the healthy thing to do. Human beings by nature want to be successful, and we usually try to be as successful as we can. If we had known something we were doing was going to go badly, we would have done something else. Compassion makes hard things better.

Mental flexibility is another aspect of our mindset. Having different solutions to problems is more effective than having one answer for everything. Conditions change and context matters. If a student yells in class, its helpful to know what is going on when we respond.

If the antecedent of the student yelling was because someone slipped and a book bag fell on them, it's a very different situation than if someone yelled because they are trying to get negative attention or to embarrass someone.

Mental flexibility also helps us deal with complex situations; if someone is stung by a bee, we can know intellectually that the bee is more scared of us than we are of the bee, that the bee was trying to defend its hive, and that the bee gave its life to protect its family. We can recognize the emotional/experiential reality that bee stings hurt. These two realities are both true and one does not override out the other. Human beings are very complicated. Being able to keep multiple points of view in mind when we make decisions, helps us make the best choic

The final aspect of mind set I'll talk about today is setting appropriate boundaries.

Healthy Boundaries establish realistic hard limits. Living within these limits and expecting them from others helps keep us safe. Having too many rules can be stifling, but it is critical that clear rules exist.

Working with parents, I often use the example of teaching the big three in their homes; in this home, we are respectful with our words and tone, so we are not hurtful with what we say; we are respectful with bodies and physical objects, so are safe with our bodies and things, and we respect what the parents or other primary care takers say. If someone breaks those rules, they have injured the family community and they lose access to a preferred activity, such as screens or hanging out with friends until a chore is completed. When the job is done, they have repaired their injury to the family and they have earned the privilege back.

Expecting respectful words, behavior and listening to teachers and other staff makes for comfortable classroom environments where learning can take place. Outside of the classroom, if someone is not verbally or physically safe with you or respectful of you, it is important for you to consider what options you have available to you, including reorganizing how much time you spend with this person. Even when we disagree, there is always a way to do this respectfully.

The healthier our mindset is, the less likely we will get in our own way and in the way of others when things are difficult in our lives.

It's important to recognize what things are not part of the big six, or specifically, things that do not impact what we can and cannot do: The first thing that has nothing to do with what we can or cant actually do is what other people tell us. Just because someone says we should be able to do something does not mean we can do it. Just because someone else can do something does not mean that we can do it. We can't ever control what other people do or say. We can't control other people's behavior. When it comes to our students or our children, we can work to create environments that make it easier for them to be in control, but we can't control them directly.

We've discussed the big six, and identified some things that we have no control over.

Now let's talk about healthy and unhealthy control.

There are plenty of unhealthy ways to get things we want, or for people to get things from us: pressuring people to do things we want. People can pressure us to do things they want.

Unhealthy pressure is pressure that is too much; it is pressure that is destructive.

But putting too much pressure on people to do things is destructive.

threatening someone, or physically harming someone in order to get them to act in ways someone else wants can change behavior, but its going to damage the person being pressured. It's also going to damage the relationship between the person being pressured and the person doing the pressing. It breeds resentment and thoughts or even plans for revenge.

Unhealthy pressure also takes a lot of time and energy to sustain.

If someone is applying unhealthy pressure to someone else, establishing healthy boundaries and limited or eliminating time spent with them need to be considered.

Healthy control is more interactive; it often means that someone does not get everything they wants in the moment, but the relationship tend to last longer, be interactions and relationships with health controls tend to be a resource for everyone involved, and unlike relationships with unhealthy control, they tend to free up time and energy for their participants.

That is it for this podcast. Today we have discussed the big six factors that impact how much control we have over things, discussion of factors that have nothing to do with what we can and cannot control, and a description of healthy and unhealthy control. Thanks very much for listening. Take care.

Outro: On behalf of Allina Health and Change to Chill, we thank you for taking the time to listen to our podcast. We do hope you enjoyed this episode and we hope that you join us in other episodes covering even more interesting topics with mental health providers. As always, you can find the show notes and any accompanying research and tools at the change to chill website at [www.changetochill.org](http://www.changetochill.org). In health and wellness, take care and see you next time!