

Stances. What does it take to do difficult things.

Believing you can do a difficult thing is called self-efficacy. This article breaks down the idea of self-efficacy into 3 components (stances) and describes how they work, and how to train them.

Self-efficacy is the stance towards one's own capacity to face difficulty.

In simpler words: self-efficacy means believing that you can do the difficult thing, whatever it is. This article discusses how the difficult things are done, and what kind of approach is necessary to do them.

Please be aware that it uses some extreme cases to illustrate the point. This is done on purpose, as it is easier to see exactly what is needed in edge cases, rather than the everyday ones.

The principle

You might have heard about this experiment:

Albert Bandura recruited people who were terrified of snakes, to the point where they couldn't even enter a room where there was a snake. He worked with them over a few hours with small steps. The point was to figure out what exactly makes someone believe they can handle the snake.

The researchers noted four distinct elements that influence self-efficacy:

Previous experiences: having done the thing already, and whether someone failed or succeeded.

Observing others: watching people around who either fail or succeed.

Being told by others that you can (or can't) do something.

Physical reactions, mood, and emotions (stress, anxiety, calm, energy).

To simplify, those who believed they could do it did; those who believed they couldn't, didn't.

The conclusion is that if you already know how to do something, are encouraged, see others do it, are in a good mood and a safe situation — it is easier to do the difficult and scary thing. But what about the people who did something no one had ever done? What about those specifically told by others they couldn't? What about difficult situations where good mood and positive emotions are impossible?

Self-efficacy with no support

There is one assumption one can make when reading Bandura's experiment: that believing you can do something is a prediction of your chances for success. If handling a snake is easy for some people, and only difficult for those particular people, the chances were good to begin with. Each source of self-efficacy supports the prediction that the thing is actually doable: you have done it, others do it, someone tells you that you can. Even a calm state of mind suggests that the thing is not impossible to begin with. So the message seems to be: this is possible and you can be one of the people who do it.

But what if there is no past success to rely on? What if there is no one to follow as an example? What if there is discouragement instead of encouragement? What if the situation does not easily grant a calm state of mind? Let's look at some examples.

George Dennehy: A musician, born without arms in Romania (a doctor hung a death certificate on his crib), adopted at 18 months by an American family. Performed with Goo Goo Dolls before 7,000 people.

Roger Bannister: The sub-four-minute mile was held to be physiologically impossible — the authorities, the doctors, said the human body simply could not do it. He did it in 1954, and once the “no” was broken, others broke it within the year. The impossibility was in the head, not the legs.

Dick Hoyt: Pushed his quadriplegic son Rick Hoyt (who has cerebral palsy) in over 1,100 races, including 32 Boston Marathons. Finished the last marathon at the age of 73.

If “can they do it?” were a question about chances for success, the answer would be obvious. Bannister was told by experts that what he wanted to do was physically impossible. Dennehy had no obvious reason to think he could be a musician in the first place — his story almost sounds like a joke. With Hoyt, it's not that it can't be done. It's that nobody does it, because it's already hard for one person, let alone one person carrying another. The impossibility here is really just that this isn't something people do.

So what is the I CAN statement really about if not about the objective chances?

How do people do impossible things?

Imagine a person who had been kidnapped and held captive for years. There are unfortunately far more cases of this than there should be. Data shows that most captives do not escape, nor even try. This is called “learned helplessness,” which is often linked to what science calls “coercive control.” In short, the hostage often feels powerless and without agency to act.

Jaycee Dugard was abducted at 11 and held for 18 years. She later said that even when doors were unlocked, she didn’t try to run. This is exactly what coercive control means.

Yet some people do escape, even when chances of success are extremely thin. **Natascha Kampusch** was abducted in Austria at age 10 and held for more than eight years. She escaped at 18 when her captor briefly moved away while she was cleaning his car.

What happened in that moment? Her captor being away was not, by itself, an escape. At some point, she had to recognize that moment as a possibility: **he is gone; I can leave.**

What kind of thought would make someone escape in a situation like that?

I CAN — pre-decision.

And here we see it: I CAN has nothing to do with predicting success. It does not mean, “I can escape successfully.” It is a stance that says, “I have it in me.” I am giving myself permission, gathering courage, and opening a door.

I WILL — a decision.

If the first one is opening a door, this one is choosing to walk through it. Not “I will try and see if it is possible,” but rather “I am doing this. Now.”

AND NOTHING WILL STOP ME — determination.

This is the moment when someone looks at the risks and the odds and decides to do it anyway. It is deciding in advance where the real endpoint of trying is. And in this case, the endpoint is as far as it can get: “I know this can cost me my life, and I am doing this regardless.”

I CAN, I WILL and NOTHING WILL STOP ME as stances

All of the above are stances — positions one takes inside their own mind towards a situation or a difficulty.

I CAN — the opening stance

I CAN is like opening a field of possibility. It is granting yourself full permission to claim that success is possible for you, even if the odds are one in a million. It is believing in yourself, and in your capacity to do what is needed, even if you have no proof of it and no experience. It is the moment you stop the “but can I really?” debate.

In the captive example it is: “I can escape.” Not “I can escape if the situation gets better,” and not “I can try,” just “I can.” If anyone can ever escape from something like this, then I can too. This belongs in my field of possibility now. This is an example of an extreme I CAN: reclaiming one’s own agency.

There are softer and less dramatic versions of I CAN that can be used in everyday life, and also as a training exercise. They work better if you say them with conviction. “Of course I can make a good presentation.” “Oh, I definitely can learn how to play guitar.” “If anyone else can start driving a car, then I can too.”

There are situations where I CAN is necessary. This means all the moments where difficult things are thrown our way without us choosing them. “I can beat cancer.” “I can have this difficult talk.” “I can get out of the addiction.”

I WILL — the decision stance

If I CAN is opening the door, then I WILL is the decision to walk through it, at the same time closing the door behind you. I WILL is like signing a contract.

In the captive example: once I CAN opens the field, I WILL is “I am escaping. This is what I am doing.” There is no debate, no “what if,” no “maybe not now.” The decision is closed and sealed, and sure to be acted on.

In real life, the I WILL is rarely a one-time thing. The classic heroic I WILL is the long list of New Year’s resolutions that break mid-January. The wrong assumption here is that a decision like that needs to be taken only once, with heroic effort, and then can be dropped.

The real I WILL isn't heroic and isn't made once. An unbreakable decision of this kind has to take into account how difficult things actually go. It won't be pretty: I'm going to slip, I'm going to be scared, I'm going to get tired, I'm going to want to quit — and I WILL anyway.

And keep willing again and again.

AND NOTHING WILL STOP ME — the determination stance

AND NOTHING WILL STOP ME is the determination to keep willing over and over.

In the captive woman example: after I CAN opens the field and I WILL locks the decision, this one says “I am escaping and nothing will stop me. If they kill me, they kill me.” The determination here includes accepting the worst possible outcome.

But there are other types of determination:

Defiant determination is the case of everyone ever told they cannot do something, who did it anyway. That's a teenager who told someone they wanted to be an astronaut, heard “You? You will never be an astronaut,” and who responded with an internal “watch me.”

A quiet, brave determination is the determination of those facing something they are scared of. This is the “I'm deadly scared, and I'm doing it anyway.” of everyone facing a phobia, breaking up with someone they do not want to hurt or leaving their well-paid job for their own project.

In everyday reality, NOTHING WILL STOP ME takes the form of “**I will keep trying, again and again.**” This type of determination is necessary to get out of addictions, to lose weight, to find a job or build a business. It is yet another decision to keep willing and keep trying, renewed at every slip.

From this perspective, no failure is actually possible. Failure is an endpoint, and to keep trying is an open project without an endpoint built in.

Heroic I CAN — I WILL — NOTHING WILL STOP ME might look like a one-off action with only two possible results: either success or failure. In reality, they are stances that need to be taken over and over again.

Stances and the functional human mind model

A stance can influence multiple layers at once, and this is why a stance cannot really be considered a thought.

A stance is the freedom to choose a lens through which you look at a situation (or at life in general), which then determines the thoughts, feelings, and actions related to that situation.

The easiest way to understand the concept of a stance is to look at optimism and pessimism as stances. “Everything will be fine,” said by the optimist, and “everything will go wrong,” said by the pessimist, are both stances chosen towards things that can’t be predicted. And both have very little to do with an actual prediction.

How optimism and pessimism influence the layers:

Nervous system — Optimist: the situation is seen as something that will work out, so the body stays relaxed. Pessimist: the situation is seen as something that will end up badly, so the body sees it as a threat.

Emotions — Optimist: ease, anticipation. Pessimist: anxiety, unwillingness, flatness.

Thoughts — Optimist: “It’s going to be fine, it will work out.” Pessimist: “This will end badly, this is obviously going to be a catastrophe.”

Beliefs — Optimist: “I am lucky and things fall into place for me.” Pessimist: “People only disappoint me.”

What makes stances have this much power is that the influences reinforce each other. The nervous system makes emotional response stronger, emotions make thoughts appear, and thoughts provoke emotions back. Repeatedly thinking the same thoughts hardens them into beliefs, and beliefs fire nervous system responses in an instant.

If “I CAN” helps so much, why do we all keep saying “I can’t”?

The I CAN’T stance is sneaky: it hides in the background, and many people are unaware they take it, or that there is a stance to take in the first place. Whether I can do something, or I can’t, seems to be independent of me and to depend on the circumstances instead. That’s why I CAN’T often sounds more like a question than a statement: “I am not sure I can” sounds somewhat similar to “can I?”

The hidden “I can’t” can look like this:

- Stressing and over-preparing before a work presentation (I am not sure I can do it well enough)
- Worrying about money next month (I believe I cannot handle the money situation)
- Thinking: “I’ll end alone” (I don’t think I can ever find anyone)

- Dreading a conversation (I don't think I can do this well)

If believing “I can't” is so problematic, then why don't we just all believe we can?

There are a few things that cause it. There is an evolutionary safety bias: it is better to underestimate one's capability than to make a catastrophic error. There is social conditioning: humility is rewarded, and being overconfident is punished. There is a form of ego protection: “I can't” permits avoiding failure without trying.

All of this points back to the same problem — the prediction of a chance for success. I CAN is treated as something one must be absolutely certain about or capable of proving before being allowed to claim it. In simpler words, you have to be careful about saying “I can,” because you might be badly wrong. You might be far too confident about what you can do, and if you fail, everyone gets to see it.

The I CAN stance, as we already saw, is not a prediction of success. More than that: I CAN does not guarantee in any way that one will succeed. The stories above show examples of people who did, but obviously there are plenty of those who tried and did not get a medal, did not play a huge concert, or did not escape. So why believe you can if you might spectacularly fail?

This is simple logic: I CAN does not guarantee success. But I CAN'T does guarantee failure. Not everyone who takes a stance of I CAN “succeeds” in the sense of achieving the big goal. But anyone who ever achieved something by hard work and not by chance had to take the I CAN stance at some point.

Worrying about how you would look if you fail, to yourself or to others, is not on its own a problem. It just points back to the choice of stance. The choice is either: a) I CAN survive looking stupid because I decided I could and failed, or b) I CAN'T survive that.

Is a stance really a choice?

Earlier, optimism and pessimism were described as stances that are chosen. By are they really choices? A pessimist who has run “everything goes wrong” for forty years is not choosing it on purpose. A stance run long enough stops feeling like a position taken and starts feeling like reality: not “I am reading this as dangerous” but “this is dangerous.” The choice is still there, but has gone automatic and invisible. This is why we keep stances that are of no help.

How to train in helpful stances

The examples used in this article are, again, exceptional. But the fact is that in everyday life, stances are not meant to be trained on life-or-death situations. Training starts the same way as training in

anything else: start low and go slow.

1. Notice the I CAN'T stance — the solution to the automation problem.

Because the I CAN'T stance often hides in plain sight, the first step is to check where it is and what it relates to. Do you think you can't get a better job? Can't quit smoking? Can't learn a new language at your age?

2. Choose one I CAN'T to train on.

Start small, but pick something real: I CAN'T rarely applies to very easy things.

Examples: I can't decide what to do, I can't make a decision on my own, I can't go alone to the restaurant, I can't go there unprepared.

3. Make it easier by building Bandura's supports yourself.

This step helps, but is not really required to change a stance.

Keep score of all successes This can be a mental note, but a real notebook is a better solution. Previous successes make it easier to believe in I CAN, even if they have not much to do with the challenge ahead (Example: "if I could lose weight and stop eating sweets, I can stop smoking too.")

Look for examples of those who did the same thing In everyday life, chances are that other people have already done what you are trying to achieve. Get inspired by their stories.

Encourage yourself It is of course helpful to have people around who believe in you. If you don't, do for yourself what they would do. Repeat to yourself out loud that you can do it.

Be excited about trying One of the supports in Bandura's experiment is a calm state of mind. But calm is not always accessible, and telling yourself to calm down in a high-stress situation is one of the least helpful things you can do. What works better is getting yourself excited. Harvard researcher Alison Wood Brooks found that people who told themselves they were excited, instead of anxious, before a stressful task performed better than those who tried telling themselves "I am calm." One of the reasons this reframe works well is that anxiety and excitement are similar body states, while calm is on the opposite side.

4. Decide you can.

As simple as that. Tell it to yourself out loud, and remind yourself as often as needed.

5. Decide you will.

This means committing to doing something, and not debating whether to do something. Once you decide you will, that means you are going to do the difficult thing.

6. Decide that nothing will stop you, which means taking into account that slips can and will happen.

Life is unpredictable and we do not always get to actually do the things we decided to do. Sometimes something comes up, sometimes fear is too much, sometimes we need more time. NOTHING WILL STOP ME takes all those circumstances into account. If the decision is to quit smoking, the NOTHING WILL STOP ME part means: I will quit even if I can't today; I will keep quitting even if I slip; I will do it even if it makes me anxious or annoyed.

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