**Compartmentalization Procedures and Principles**

Our brain constantly tries to predict what is going to happen next and makes judgments about what is the best way to handle challenges. All of this processing depends heavily on exactly what context the person is in. Predictions, judgments, and appropriate behaviors, are drastically different at home, at school, and at work. It gets overwhelming if it is difficult for our brain to clearly differentiate between the contexts. If you have ever taken a call regarding one context, while in a different context, you will likely have experienced how much harder it is to process well.

Ideally, our brain is also able to leave behind the stressors of one context when stepping into a different context. Even if one context in our life is highly stressful and scary, we can usually cope relatively well as long as we can de-stress and not worry about it when in other contexts. For example, if school or work is difficult, we can usually cope relatively well when we get home, provided home is a safe place. When the contexts get confused, however, it gets difficult to leave the stress behind.

*Compartmentalization* is procedures and principles that help our mind be in one context at a time. It makes processing easier, and reduces the negative effects of stress. We instinctively seek compartmentalization, and sometimes we develop compartmentalization procedures without even trying.

Examples of when compartmentalization is often needed: Someone has a stressful job; someone has a job that requires radically different mindset than home-life (e.g., corrections officer vs. mother); working from home; a child goes back and forth between two parental homes where the rules and expectations differ between the homes; a child experiences a lot of stress regarding school; child is in foster-care, but has visits with a biological parent.

Principles to apply:

* Identify the context you want to help compartmentalize
* Minimize cues that cause *breaching. Breaching* are actions and events that interfere with the brain’s ability to compartmentalize. They are words, images, tasks, sensory inputs, etc. that contain references to the other context. Examples of breaching includes work-calls while at home or a foster-child being asked by others about how the visit with the biological parent went. Avoid breaching by removing cues that bring up thoughts about the other context. It is most important to avoid *breaching* that brings thoughts about the stressful context into other contexts, although it may at times be necessary to avoid *breaching* in the other direction.
  + Examples may include putting away the work-bag after getting home from work, not taking any phone-calls from work while at home (and home calls while at work), or implementing rules about foster-care providers not asking about parental visits
* Add sensory cues of what context you are in. It is easier for the brain to keep the contexts separate when sensory information is clearly telling the person what context they are in. A person may wear a suit to work and sweats at home, or a tie when at work or a work function, but never privately. The person may use a different scent in their office and at home. Being deliberate about such cues is especially important when someone has two contexts in the same place (e.g., working from home).
* Create *ritual book-ends*. Rituals are planned and repeated behaviors that make it easier for the brain to know that we are moving from one context to another. It lets the brain know that it can stop trying to predict what will happen in the context we are leaving behind and gives it a little bit of space to adjust to the context it is transitioning into before being challenged by new demands. For example, a wedding helps the couple and guests mark a change in context – the couple will now be thought of as a married couple with the commitments that comes along with this. A funeral marks a change from a context of the diseased being alive, to a new context where the person is not. Most meetings and groups start in a formal way (e.g., approval of minutes or introductions of new people) that helps the mind move from a pre-gathering socialization context where social topics naturally come to mind to a context where the mind more thinks about the business-at-hand. Meetings also typically have a formal end-ritual (e.g., “adjourned” with a hit of the gavel). Rituals can be any specific behaviors that are predictably repeated at the time of a move from one context to another and this behavior is rarely done at any other time. The rituals can be created deliberately, or get established unintentionally. To deliberately aid compartmentalization, deliberate *ritual book-ends,* can be created.
  + Choose a (book-end) behavior to do to mark the beginning of the compartmentalized context. The chosen behavior can be almost any behavior, including singing a specific song, eating at McDonalds (if this is the only time eating at McDonalds), clap hands in a unique way, play a board-game only played at this time, etc.
  + Any discussions with others about the new context should start after the ritual and other contexts are no longer discussed.
  + When this context ends again, any conversations about the ended context should happen before moving into a ritual (book-end) to end the context.
  + The ending ritual can be the same ritual as the beginning book-end behavior, or a different one. Once the ritual has taken place, the person is expected to be able to proceed without much reminders of the other context.

Example: Suzy is in foster-care and does well in the foster-home and well on visits with the biological father. She used to struggle at the beginning of visits and for the first day after each time she returned to the foster-home. Her difficulty was because she temporarily was mentally dealing with two contexts simultaneously following transitions. *Ritual book-ends* were put in place to help. On the way to visits, she and a foster-parent always stopped at an ice-cream place and got a shake (*ritual book-end) –* a treat Suzy likes, but does not have at other times. While having the shake, and afterwards, the visit was pre-viewed if the child had any questions, but things about the foster-home or plans happening in that context were no longer discussed. After each visit, the foster-parent picked Suzy up and asked her if there is anything she wanted to talk about from the visit. If there was, they talked about it. Afterwards, they drove to the foster-home while practicing spoonerisms – a verbal game they otherwise don’t play.

* If it is a child and the child brings up things from the compartmentalized context while in a different context, it is important that people listen and are responsive, without discouraging the child. The child may actually try to “take out the trash” – getting it off their chest so they can better focus on the present context. At the same time, the person should not prompt the child or do anything to risk pushing the child to continue to focus on it any further than the child naturally brings it up. If a child has a big need to talk about the other context, or if there are reasons where the child has to (e.g., is going to talk about it in therapy or will be in Court about it), then doing a small version of the *ritual book ends* can be useful before and after this conversation.
* An adult who finds that breaching the compartmentalization becomes necessary may want to do something to limit the breach. Someone might, for example, drive to the office on their day off to take a work phone-call instead of introducing the work context into their home life context. Alternatively, they may have an own compartmentalized space in their house that is reserved for work-calls, or at least quick put on the suit jacket they wear to work.