



Acting in roles and dealing with broken routines

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Abstract

In the article, Sietse Jans-Kuperus writes about how to deal with broken routines. Exploring your daily routines helps you become aware of the importance of the various roles you play in life. Roles are related to values, beliefs, and expectations. That is why you behave in a certain way in a specific role, and these are emerging routines. When a routine breaks, the obviousness is gone. Feelings of grief accompany this. Supervisors and coaches should be aware of these mourning feelings to guide supervisees and coachees through the loss of routines related to their professional identity.

Introduction

Are you aware of your roles and routines in daily life? We all rely on routines to structure our activities, relationships, and overall way of living. These routines often feel obvious. That is no coincidence; it is how our brain works.

We also engage in routines because people like predictability. Knowing what to expect provides a sense of confidence and control. However, we live in an age of permanent change. The future is unpredictable and incomprehensible. In uncertain situations, our

routines may be disrupted, leading to feelings of loss. Recognizing that broken routines can evoke grief can help get a grip again.

This article first explores how routines emerge and how you become aware of them. It then examines how you cope with (suddenly) broken routines. Finally, it offers insights into how you, as a supervisor or coach, can support others in dealing with broken routines in professional guidance.

The emergence of routines

We all have routines, though we are mostly unaware of them. Routines are a set of actions or behaviors that you repeat regularly, often in a specific order. It is like your brain's autopilot for daily life, helping you move through tasks without having to rethink every step. Most of the things we do are obvious: how you get out of bed, how you have breakfast, how you go to work, how you start work, etc. That obviousness is related to your expectations, beliefs, and values. Furthermore, that is how acting like routines emerge.

Kahneman (2018) describes how the brain operates through systems: System One and System Two. He explains that in everyday life, we mostly act with our lazy, creative brain (System One), guided by intuition. From our own frame of reference, our personal experience, and our perception of the world, we interpret

situations and imagine what we think we should do. Furthermore, that is a good thing, too: imagine you were aware of everything you are doing during the day. It is not even possible.

Routines are related to the several roles you have in daily life and the tasks you describe for those roles. How you act in a specific role is dependent on your expectations, beliefs, and values.

In my role as a mother, I had a routine of making a cup of tea with my son when he came home from work. I expected that he needed me to tell his story about what he experienced that day. I believed he needed my listening ear. This was related to my value 'the willingness to help'. So whenever he had a morning shift, and I was at home, I was there, at four in the afternoon, waiting for him with a cup of tea

Values also seem to be obvious, but when you explore them, you will discover that everyone interprets a value differently. It concerns your personal experience, character, and life-course development (Jans-Kuperus, 2022). The personal meaning of values includes certain beliefs and expectations.

We are so adept at living our lives that we no longer need to think about many things we take for granted. Furthermore, if we do the same thing over and over again without thinking about it at all, it becomes a routine.

The awareness of routines

Routines are ingrained. Being able to rely on your

intuition is fine. It helps you perform activities that require 'System Two' engagement: a new, unfamiliar situation demands that your brain concentrate and that you pay full attention to your actions (Kahneman, 2018).

Because routines seem so obvious, it can be helpful to explore them to become more aware of them. Take a moment to reflect on how you are doing the basics in life. Think back to the moment you woke up this morning: What did you do, step by step? Furthermore, how did you do it? These actions may seem automatic, but by consciously examining them, you begin to recognize the routines that shape your day, routines that usually go unnoticed.

You can become more aware of your routines by exploring your roles and tasks in daily life. When you reflect on the emotional energy you invest in each role, you begin to understand how you navigate these roles on a personal level. By then focusing on how you want to perform your roles, you become aware of the difference between your current and ideal situation. This reflection may uncover why certain roles demand more of your time and attention than others: it might give you insight into your beliefs and expectations related to that role.

Sometimes, this awareness is just an observation. Nevertheless, it can also confront you with deeper feelings, such as longing, loss, or the context that shapes your actions. In any case, it may evoke feelings of mourning at different phases.

How to deal with (suddenly) broken routines

When something unexpected happens, our brain switches from the obvious and routine, 'System One',

to 'System Two': the situation is unfamiliar, does not match our expectations, and requires us to think about what to do (Jans-Kuperus, 2023).

When a routine is suddenly broken, it is no longer obvious. This can trigger feelings of unsafety and, in the first place, a fight, flight, or freeze reaction. Depending on the urgency of the broken routine, you have to adapt to a new situation in the second place. Feelings of grief accompany this. Losses often occur unexpectedly and can range from minor setbacks to major disruptions. Their impact may be abrupt or reflect a transition that is appropriate to a specific stage of life or social role.

Mourning feelings surface when situations differ from what was expected. Figure 1 illustrates my personal experience: I was sad (grief) and felt like I was no longer important (some depressed feelings). However, after a little while, I said to myself: look what a wonderful girlfriend he has, it is time to let things go in upbringing (acceptance). I found out that I have more me time now, for example, reading a book or magazine (New Discourse). Maybe this is not an extreme example of broken routines, but it shows how expectations, beliefs, and values are related to feelings of grief and the meaning I give to my role as a mother.

My son got a girlfriend. Moreover, from that moment, he was more often going to her place after work, sharing his stories with her. A routine broke: my expectation (that he would have a cup of tea with me after work) and my belief (that he needs me to tell his story) were suddenly interrupted. I had mixed feelings: 'He does not need me anymore, what can I do now to make

sense...' Of course, I was also glad for him, he met this lovely girl – I really love her – but it also caused feelings of grief a little bit: from that moment, he did not share everything with me anymore, but shared his stories with his girlfriend. Meanwhile, I have other routines, reading a book or magazine while I have my cup of tea at the kitchen table at four in the afternoon. Moreover, when he is there with his girlfriend, I enjoy those moments.

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Another example (from a societal context) from the recent past that we can all still recall is the disruption of routines during the COVID-19 pandemic. In our private, but also professional role – as a nurse, social worker, teacher, supervisor, or coach – we all had to do something differently than in our 'normal' daily working time. A sudden change caused culture shock, related to questions about professional identity. Culture shock always involves the (unwitting) search for grip, a new sense of trust and safety (Kramer, 2020).

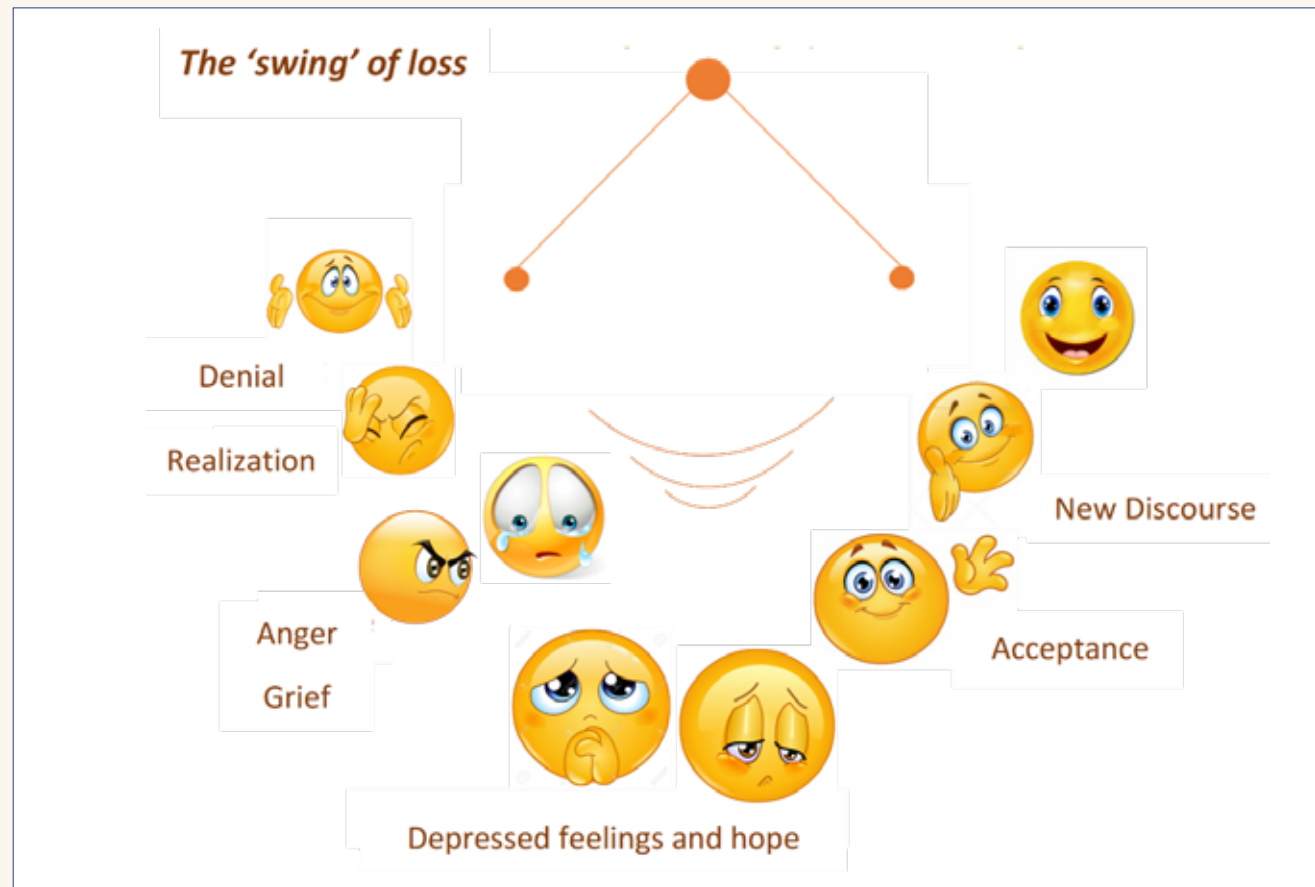


Figure 1. Inspired by the Coping model of Dr. Margaretha van Eeden. (Eeden van, 2012)

People experienced varying feelings of mourning at that time. The grief was about what was no longer or what could not be done, and the action could have been: wanting to do something or creating new possibilities (Jans-Kuperus, 2021). In a complex world, freedom and autonomy are increasingly threatened. There are several situations where you cannot influence a change, which might cause latency. Some

people withdraw, and others take action. In the next little experiment, you can also practice what happens when your routines suddenly break: imagine you go to work by car and start the motor every day around half past eight. You suddenly become aware of this routine when, on a certain morning, the motor will not start. In a flash, several feelings and thoughts are passing by: "No, this cannot be

happening, why now, I will try again". You could feel anger, or maybe shout, or something like that, and then... You could also have a little moment of 'depressed feelings': not knowing what to do and just sitting there, staring at the steering wheel... at last, you get out of your car and act in a solution-oriented way: probably you call a repair service to help, or something similar.

As you can see in Figure 1, a little morning process is underway and passes by quickly. It is a small example, with probably feelings of grief, but you can imagine that such processes pass by every time a routine breaks.

How to deal with broken routines as a supervisor or coach in professional guidance

Developing your professional identity is related to both your individual and collective values. The choices you make in relation to your values show 'what gives you color', what makes you a unique professional (Ruijters, 2015).

As a professional, you also develop routines. Based on your professional values and expertise (your role) and the organization you work for (your context), you know what needs to be done and what is expected of you. Your workplace facilitates material routines—such as your computer and desk in an office (or open-plan workspace). In addition, you have developed personal routines that contribute to your professional identity: the development that gives your practice its unique character (Ruijters, 2015).

In collaborating with others, you have developed social routines: chatting with a colleague about the weekend, brainstorming with another colleague about a problem. As you gain experience, your pro-

fessional actions become more naturally informed by that experience. Acting intuitively is automatic, making it easy to make mistakes that the brain may not notice. If something unexpected happens, your brain can adapt by focusing and giving its full attention to the task. However, if you were to do this for every action, you would become exhausted. Moreover, it is inefficient (Kahneman, 2018).

Therefore, it is essential for professionals to continuously reflect on their thoughts, emotions, and actions in order to remain aware of the routines they have internalized. By learning to recognize situations in which errors are more likely to occur, and by striving to prevent mistakes when the stakes are high (Kahneman, 2018), professionals can develop alternative forms of behavior—new routines—that enable them to act in alignment with what is ethically and professionally appropriate (Jans-Kuperus, 2023).

Another thing about professional routines is the sudden loss of obviousities: it touches the (professional) identity. It needs a reorientation on who you are as a person, related to your private life, but also on who you are as a professional, related to your colleagues at work. During the COVID pandemic, for example, professionals had to deal with a broken structure and broken routines, even in crucial professions. New roles and routines call for a different discourse, which is shaped by mourning feelings. Questions raised about the quality of the profession, related to personal experiences (Jans-Kuperus, 2021). The disruption of familiar routines and assumptions touches upon one's professional identity: who are you when you no longer have your own workspace, when you are at home due to illness, or

When your trusted team suddenly disappears?

A supervisee was very angry when we started the supervision session. She had argued with a colleague, who told her she had forgotten to give a patient his medication (that was actually correct). She focused on the colleague and disagreed with how she had behaved and with the way she had given her feedback. Then, other supervisees asked her what kind of colleague she was, whether the colleague reminded her of someone in her private life, and what that colleague should have done differently. The supervisee had no idea why she was so angry, because the feedback she gave was correct. The dialogue then shifted to expectations and beliefs. The question, "What do you think you had to do in your role?" made her sad and aware of her disappointment. She shared that she had applied for the job her colleague was hired for. She then realized that her anger stemmed from her expectations for that role. During a period when other colleagues were ill, she had naturally taken over the coordinating tasks. Nevertheless, when her colleague got the job, she had to let go of the responsibilities she had taken on so naturally.

As a professional coach or supervisor, I am 'the Swing' above the mourning process (figure 1). When supervisees, coachees, or clients experience feelings of loss, I listen, ask deeper questions, and connect with those feelings. Guidance for supervisees and coachees gains a deeper dimension when the loss of familiar structures affects their sense of professional

identity. Supervisees and coachees may feel uncertain about the consequences of unexpected external events. When such events break established routines, they can evoke a sense of lost autonomy.

On the other hand, I guide supervisees, coachees, or clients with finding a new discourse when they are in that phrase: I hold up a mirror to the supervisee or coachee, pose critical questions, and challenge them to experiment with different forms of action. I guide them in discovering what they find personally meaningful and help them place it in the context of what is professionally required and what the organization expects of them.

In my role as a professional guide, I consider it essential to acknowledge this loss first. Paying attention to disruptions in routines—especially when circumstances change suddenly—is important, as it allows professionals to feel recognized in their experience of loss. Subsequently, I find it valuable to explore with supervisees and coachees what lies within their sphere of influence and what they wish to change or are able to change in developing new routines (Jans-Kuperus, 2023).

Finally, we live in an age of permanent change. The future is unpredictable and incomprehensible. In other words, the world is in transition: we know we cannot return to the predictable, obvious past, but we do not know what lies in the unpredictable future. Some routines must be left behind because they no longer serve us, while new ways of acting are still unclear. In this liminal phase, it is important to stay connected and make conscious choices (Kramer, 2024).

As a supervisor or coach, your most important new discourse is to help create awareness of feelings of mourning triggered by sudden changes in routines. That needs a dialogue that allows space for expressing emotions, and a non-judgmental environment that encourages creative ideas and new ways of acting. ■

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