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sustainable human flourishing

AEPHORIA
WHITE PAPER

BEWITCHED, AMPUTATED OR DEAD?

An introductory white paper on individual stuckness

INTRODUCTION

This is a summary description of Aephoria's approach to individual and leadership stuckness. It is based primarily on Julia's doctoral research on leadership stuckness (Kukard, 2021), as well as Aephoria's experience over the past decade.

The focus for this paper is on individual stuckness, although stuckness can occur with couples, communities, organisations, and nations. More information and full references are available on request.

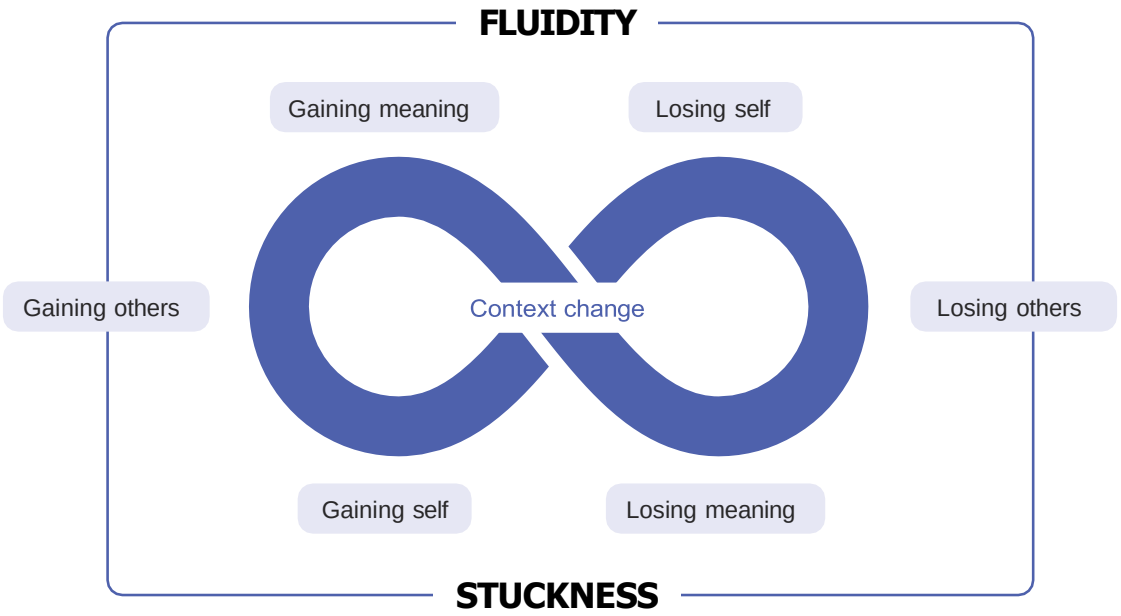
What is stuckness?

Stuckness is generally a non-pathological, unavoidable, and recurring state in which we have a disconnected and irrelevant relationship with others and/or our context. This means that our actions become repetitive and have limited traction. People can be stuck for years, because we don't tend to notice that we are stuck until the pain of isolation, disempowerment and meaninglessness becomes undeniable (Kukard, 2021).

The opposite of stuckness is fluidity, emerging adaptively in response to our inner worlds, as well as to other people and our context. When we are fluid, we are evolving, building our inner worlds, and becoming more human. In this state, we can see the world as it is rather than as we are in it. This enables our actions to have more traction and our outcomes to be more consistent with what is valuable to us, to others, and to the world (Kukard, 2021).

The process of stuckness

Stuckness is caused by three 'losses', and fluidity reinstated through regaining these. These losses and gains relate to one's self, to others and to meaning. Both stuckness and fluidity are normal and useful to us, and we go in and out of both states many times over the course of our lives. The lemniscate diagram below shows the process of stuckness, with the changing context in the middle because it affects all stages (Kukard, 2021).



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Losing our selves

'Self' here refers to the inner world of humans including thoughts, feelings, sensations, and insights. For Existential philosophers, the mark of a human is the capacity for an inner world to emerge and change in response to our context. It is this capacity that differentiates us from objects who stay the same no matter where they are (Heidegger 1927/2008, Sartre, 1943, Biko, 1978/2004, Heil, 2011).

We can lose our self by becoming bewitched, amputated, or dead. By bewitched, we mean controlled by an external magical external puppeteer, for example climbing the corporate ladder, success, money, or a marriage. When we become amputated, we lose essential parts of our self because we believe they have no value and/or are denigrated by the world, for example playfulness or blackness (Biko). When we are dead, we have a severely reduced inner world. This happens when we are objectified by others and then in turn objectify and oppress ourselves (Heidegger 1927/2008, Sartre, 1943, De Beauvoir, 1946/2015, Manganyi, 1973, Biko, 1978/2004, Fanon, 1986, Nussbaum, 1995, Mbembe and Dubois, 2017, Heil, 2011). When we do this, we turn ourselves into an object or tool of utility, that is, we narrow down our whole complex identity to just one part of ourselves, and see ourselves for example as just a CEO, a beggar, or a mother.

Bewitchment, amputation, or death have multiple causes ranging from childhood attachment patterns and socialisation to trauma, oppression, poverty, refugee/outsider status, objectification, addiction, grief, illess, premature psychological ageing and more. A noticeable cause of stuckness is trauma, especially bullying and the use of humans as tools in workplaces (Heidegger, 1927/2008, Heil, 2011, Wilson, 2017).

When we have lost our selves, we have less agility in the world and diminished capacity for adaptation, and so we trot out the same identity with its matching behavioural routines in every context. The context keeps changing but we don't, we remain locked in legacy assumptions, beliefs, needs and behaviours. This way of being can make us irrelevant and unlikely to have traction. Typically, we do keep trying but nothing seems to work, and things become painful from here on.

We lose ourselves in response to a particular life challenge or workplace culture and initially we survive and/or do well because we have adapted to the current context. However, if we fail to keep adapting then the stuckness will set in. Critically, at early stages of stuckness, we don't notice that we have lost our selves because our capacity to know our self and to self-reflect is severely reduced by losing ourselves. This is why pain is necessary and useful to get us moving out of stuckness, and why the next two stages of stuckness tend to be frustrating and confusing (Kukard, 2021).

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Losing others

The second stage of stuckness occurs through losing others. We become human through others (Ubuntu, Buber, 2010), we create our identity through others (Spinelli, 2005, Van Deurzen and Iacovou, 2013), and we grow and learn through engaged relationships. When our actions and words become irrelevant through the process of both losing our selves and our capacity to emerge, people may initially try to help us. However, if we persist in our historical patterns of behaviour, people are likely to leave us, and with them our capacity to be human, to build a sense of self through others, and to be present in the world. When we lose others, it can result in a painful time of isolation, a downturn in performance, disorientation, and frustration. Most people only notice they are stuck when others start to disappear from their lives, and pain and dissatisfaction become daily lived experiences (Kukard, 2021).

Losing meaning

The last stage in the process of stuckness is the loss of meaning. Meaning is a complex activity that requires a self and others because the best type of meaning includes one's self and transcends one's self (Frankl, 2006, Vos, 2020). The loss of meaning can be devastating because we lose direction in life, activities become empty and pointless, and we may even struggle to find a reason to live.

We are now properly stuck, which is painful, confusing, frustrating and self-esteem sapping. Sometimes we can respond to this by punishing an individual, an organisation, or a country that we think is causing our pain. This can take the form of slander, argumentation, infidelity, fraud, nepotism and more. We can also become more susceptible to narcotising temptations such as gossip, alchohol, sex, drugs, pornography, and shopping (Kukard, 2021).

The role of a changing context in stuckness

It is important to note that stuckness is a relationship where the individual stops adapting in relation to their context, and the context keeps changing. The chaotic and traumatic context that we currently live in means that we have even more opportunities for stuckness if we don't learn how to emerge and grow in relation to our inner and outside worlds.

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Becoming fluid again

Getting out of stuckness requires the reversal of the three losses; we must find self, find others, and find meaning. It requires us recontextualising ourselves in our self, others, and the world.

There is much literature available on finding one's self. Some of the ways we have found to be useful include getting a facilitator to help you (coach, therapist, friend), exploring who you are in the process of being stuck, using a typology that can give you the language to describe yourself (for example, the Enneagram) and experimenting with new ways of being yourself. Try out new foods, clothes, friends, pastimes, and experiences, and notice how your identity grows as you integrate these capabilities and knowledge into your self. The bigger your inner world and the greater the variety of identities living in there, the more capacity you will have to be agile and relevant in your engagement with the world (Biko, 1978/2004, Van Deurzen, 2009, Van Deurzen and Iocovou, 2013, Kukard, 2021).

Finding others also helps us create and locate ourselves. To do this, we need to figure out how we are in relationships and what needs to change for those relationships to be engaged and to positively impact on our inner worlds. This means being authentic, vulnerable, and open, which are skills that can be learned (Buber, 2010, Mbembe and Dubois, 2017). While engaging with others, we need to continue building our own inner worlds and engaging with our selves, or we might risk losing our selves again. This is a delicate tightrope that we must walk between being-for-ourselves and being-for-others (Heidegger 1978/2008).

The last stage is to build a sense of meaning that is, well, meaningful! Not all meaning is meaningful, and we can become confused by self-orientated or materialistic versions of meaning. The most powerful forms of meaning come from learning and from transcending oneself through a useful project, by growing others, or being with nature (Blomme, 2012, Camus, 2014, Sartre, 1943, Frankl, 2006, Vos, 2020). Meaning is most often not bestowed on us, we must make it (Sartre, 1943, Camus, 2014), and this requires some work. This includes finding out what we are passionate about, what we are naturally good at and drawn to, and having some discipline around building our gifts.

Sadly, we don't live happily ever after when we have moved out of stuckness through regaining our selves, others and meaning. Instead, we re-enter the cycle of stuckness and start the process all over again. (Kukard, 2021).

What is the value of getting stuck?

Most of us only notice the unpleasant part of stuckness; the pain, isolation and the lostness. But stuckness is a most beautiful manifestation of our desire to really live. It is the knee-jerk and unconscious response to us closing down our lives and making them small and irrelevant. Stuckness is a highly sophisticated mechanism for enabling our emergence, adaptation, and survival. When we get stuck, we should get excited because we know that we have a chance to be more. We should not try to prevent stuckness but instead practice getting stuck well, often, and quickly (Kukard, 2021).

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CONCLUSION

Stuckness is a normal signal that we need to rethink and kickstart our lives. We will get stuck over and over in life because constant adaptation is impossible, and humans are generally reluctant to change. However, we can lessen the pain of this by building our inner worlds, by having engaged relationships and working to create meaning in our lives. When we do this, we get stuck, and yet can reboot quickly and less painfully.

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