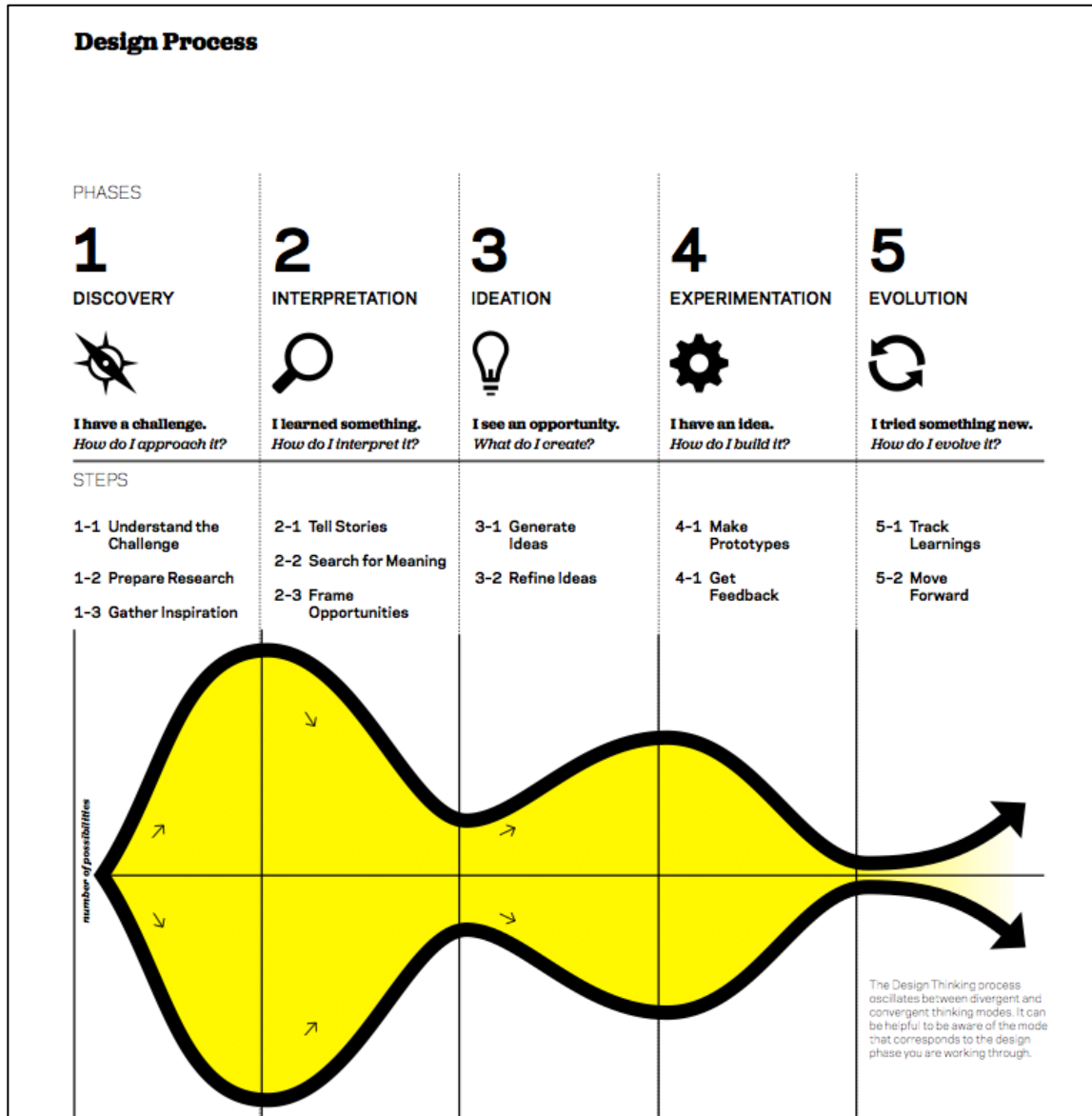


APPLYING DESIGN THINKING TO YOUR NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

Instead of our usual method, what if we used design thinking for our new year's resolutions? Design thinking is flexible, experimental, and insight-driven. It forces us to have clarity of thinking and a bias towards action — no matter how small the step.

The five steps of [Stanford](#) and [IDEO](#)'s approach to design thinking are: **empathy, define, ideate, prototype, test.**



Design Thinking Process (courtesy Creative Commons license by IDEO)

As seen in this visual, design thinking takes us through cycles of flaring and opening up to possibilities as well as defining and honing in on a problem area. Some of us skip exploring the possibilities because we think already know what we want and need. On the flip side, others have

trouble defining a problem or testing a solution for a period of time. Design thinking could offer an interesting framework for us to both explore and define our resolutions.

Empathy

During the empathy phase of design thinking, a designer puts herself in users' shoes to understand their needs and desires. Methods — mostly derived from the social sciences — usually include observations, simulations, apprenticeships, and interviews. In the case of our own personal goal-setting, we need to get a bit creative with our methods. In [one of my last articles](#), I offered three possible techniques to use during this discovery phase. The plus side of “self-empathy” is that we have full access to our internal world. The challenge is that we're so close to the problem, sometimes we can't see it for ourselves.

It all starts with a few simple questions to ask yourself: *What do I want for 2015? How will I be different in 2015?* Here are a few strategies for self-empathy:

- reflect through journaling and free associative writing
- use a self-interviewing method. Type “What do I want in 2015?” and then answer it without thinking too hard. Ask a follow-up question to that question and answer it, as if you were typing a dialogue between two people. The part of you asking questions is digging deeper.
- if you're not sure what to ask, keep asking yourself “why?” until you feel you've reached the bottom. Example: Why do you want to lose weight? Because I want to look good. Why do you want to look good? Because I feel confident when I look good. Why do you want to feel confident? Because when I'm confident, I connect more easily with people. Why do you want to connect more easily with people? Because that's when I feel life is worth living.
- have a friend you trust interview you about what you want to happen or change in 2015
- take a retreat in a quiet remote place, remove yourself from your usual daily context
- close your eyes and visualize what you imagine yourself feeling, doing, saying in 2015

Define

During the define phase of design thinking, a designer begins to converge on a user's problem. In our case, after taking some time to reflect with ourselves, we might obtain an insight about our lives. We might realize we definitely want more or less of X, Y, or Z. Or we might surface some underlying causes or patterns in our life to focus on. We are beginning to define our problem or what designers call a “point-of-view” (POV).

In design thinking, a POV statement is something like this:

[user] needs or wants [what user needs/wants] because [insight, reason, core motivation]

Here's a personal example I'm going to work with for the rest of this post:

[I] **want** [to feel more connected to my body throughout the day] **because** [otherwise I feel over-analytical, frustrated, and stagnant].

Note I focused on how I wanted to feel. At this level, I find that focusing on an experience or feeling is more insightful than specifying a goal or object. In later steps, we'll specify what behaviors and actions are associated with me "feeling connected to my body."

My core motivation to avoid an unpleasant feeling — avoid pain. It's essentially the problem I'm hoping to solve for myself. A great resource on core motivators is BJ Fogg's [behavior model](#).

Our POV is what most people call "a resolution" or "intention." But we can't stop there. **We absolutely need to break it down into smaller components and behaviors, otherwise, it will only exist as a high-level concept** and we'll be confused about how to translate it into our day-to-day (which we'll do in the "Prototype" phase below).

Ideate

After we've defined a problem, we are going to flare out again. In this step, we get to brainstorm around our POV statement. In brainstorming, we don't want to limit ourselves. There is no such thing as a bad idea. Think big, strange, wild, unique. If stale non-unique ideas come out, that's okay too. The point is just to get ideas out.

In my case, I asked the question: How might I feel more connected to my body throughout the day? Here's a list I made in five minutes of fast writing. I did not censor myself.

- gardening
- some kind of physical work, lifting boxes
- chores such as cleaning
- mindful eating
- sensory tea ritual
- wear a sensory onsie that massages my body
- tai — chi video or podcast
- qi — qong virtual teacher chat
- ecstatic dancing
- dance breaks

- dance as I work
- take walks outside
- yoga trance dance
- clocking my computer time
- standing desk
- a giant “body-feel” booth I can stand inside

Prototype

During the prototype phase, designers test whether an idea can hold water by making a cheap prototype to test. All these activities make me feel more connected to my body, which is what I want. Now, I’m going to choose one of them and prototype it for a short amount of time.

How do we choose? I asked myself: **which of these behaviors is easiest to do and will give me the highest impact** (i.e., make me feel most connected to my body)?

I’m going to choose dance breaks. I know that dancing is fairly easy; I don’t need anything but my phone and a little bit of space. I also know that dancing is one of the best ways for me to feel instantly aware of my whole body. The energetic release of dancing has a high impact on my mood.

Now I need to make a prototype. I need to get very clear about what I’m going to actually do, because “dance breaks” is more specific than embodiment but still not specific enough. I’m going to **specify, shrink, and span it**. Read about how to do that [here](#).

After I have gone through that process, my idea becomes this:

For the first week of January, after I step out of the bathroom in the mid-morning, I will play a Beyonce song and dance for two minutes.

Is this statement the prototype? No. **My prototype will be the actual experience.** There is me. There is the space I’m will be in. There are the tools I will use, such as my phone and the song by Beyonce. There is the “trigger” of stepping out of the bathroom, which will cue me for my dance break. If you want to explore more about triggers, I suggest checking out [BJ Fogg](#)’s behavior model. Therefore, the prototype includes the actor, the actions leading up/during/after, and the environmental context. I will be continuously refining these components as I test out my prototype.

Test

The reason we test it first is because issues will definitely come up. What if my phone dies? What if I forget to do it? What if there is a meeting in the room I was planning on dancing in? What if I feel suddenly shy, and decide I can't dance in my co-working space? The behavior might look easy on paper, but reality might be a whole different story.

Testing allows me to adjust my choices based on my level of motivation and environmental considerations. Testing gives me the ability to:

- course correct, tweak, revise one of my specifics before I decide “it’s just not for me” and giving up
- increase or decrease the challenge of my habit
- decide whether or not I want to renew my contract with this habit and for how long

In other words, testing is the only way I can know how to shape my behavior. I can't expect to get it right the first time. The default is to course correct and tweak. Most of us operate on a “get it right the first time” default — and it's just not how it works.

Conclusion

Design thinking is iterative by nature. It is also creative. It takes advantage of divergent and convergent forms of thinking. It affords us the opportunity to modify our resolution if it doesn't work out, instead of giving up altogether.

About Maria Molfino *Maria is a Stanford-trained behavior designer and personal growth coach whose work empowers women to design their lives around energy, flow, and love — leading to greater meaning and fulfillment.*