



# GETTING NEURODIVERGENT KIDS “UNSTUCK”

Matthew J. Zakreski, PsyD

# Goals for Today

01

Understanding why  
students get stuck

02

Understanding how  
to engage with  
students who are  
stuck

03

Understanding how  
to organize your  
classroom/workload  
to help keep kids  
from getting unstuck

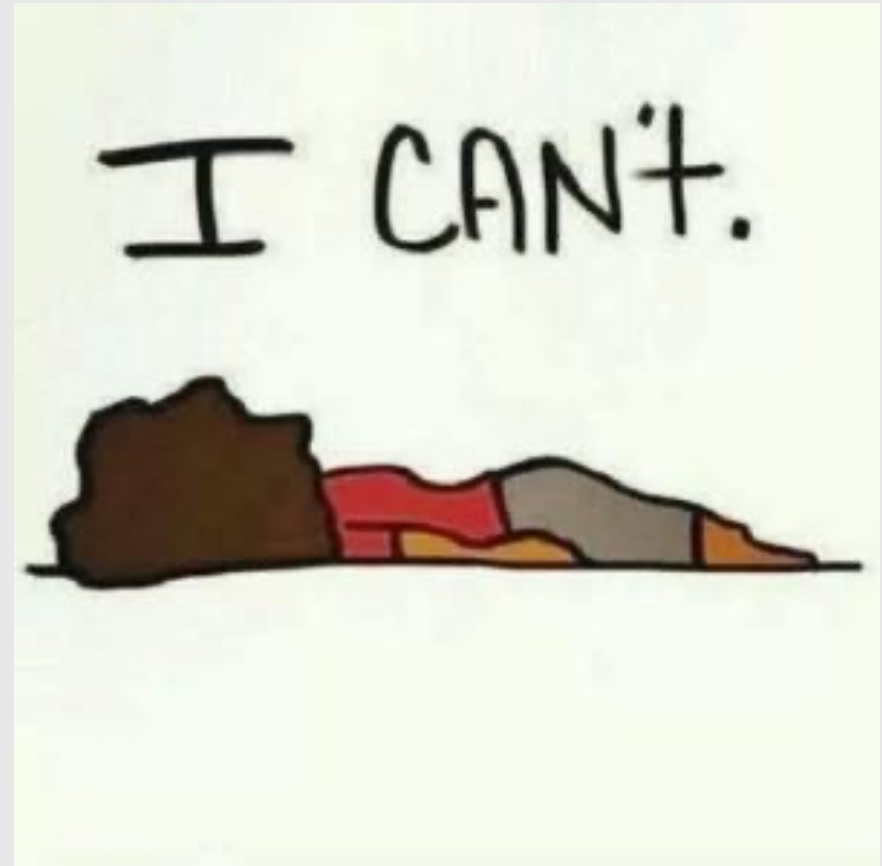


If it was easy, you  
would have done it  
already.

#drmatt

## Kids Get Stuck

- I can't do it!
- I won't do it!
- I don't know how to do it!
- "School sucks!"
- "This is boring!!"
- "Can I just go play Minecraft?"





## What is getting stuck?

- An anxious response to something new or difficult (Fight, Flight, or FREEZE)
- The physiological response is very unpleasant
  - I'm not working
  - I'm upset that I'm not working
  - OMG I'm falling behind
  - Now I'm panicking
  - That anxiety is making it even harder to work
  - Repeat
- Environmental Response
  - Student?
  - Teacher?

# Why gifted kids?

- Emotional intensity
- Heightened emotional response system (limbic system integration)
- Difficulties in seeing context
- Asynchronous development
  - High potential for mismatch
- Big ideas / elaborate plans - “Theory of Relativity Syndrome”

## Case Example: Bryce

10-year-old student

IQ: 132. Diagnoses: ADHD, Sensory Processing Disorder, Dyslexia

Attends a school for gifted/2e kids

Standing in the hallway bouncing back and forth between the walls

When does this happen? What's the common denominator?



# UNSTUCK



WHAT TO DO  
EMOTIONALLY EDUCATIONALLY



# THE C.R.O.W.B.A.R. TECHNIQUE

Best. Acronym.  
Ever.

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C - Context

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R - Rationality

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O - Out of Control

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W - Work Differentiation

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B - Behavior

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A - Alternatives

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R - Relationships

## C - Context

We are very context-dependent people – but we don't think of ourselves that way

- Can improve our behavior
- Can weaken our performance
- Can shift our focus

School presents thousands of different contexts throughout the day (often with variables that we don't see/understand)

Developmentally, adults are better equipped to see the broader, long-term contexts – we need to help our kids see it

WHEN SOMEBODY ELSE IS  
LATE



WHEN YOU ARE LATE



## Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE)

- The fundamental attribution error refers to an individual's tendency to attribute another's actions to their character or personality, while attributing their behavior to external situational factors outside of their control.
  - Who here has ever procrastinated on a big project?
  - Who here has ever had an excuse for that procrastination?
- Context has a huge impact on our behavior!

# R – Rationality

We often expect gifted/neurodiverse kids to be more rational than they actually are

- Asynchronous development

How do kids look when they are stuck?

- Would anyone CHOOSE to feel that way?

We tend to respond initially with rational arguments – is that really the issue?

Content vs. Process

# What anxiety looks like in kids

- Anger (especially at little things)
- Difficulty sleeping (at home) or settling (in class)
- Defiance
- Explosions (may “come out of nowhere”)
- Lack of focus
- Overplanning
- Avoidance – finding reasons not to
- Negativity “I can’t so I won’t”
- Focus on the future
- Procrastination

# Procrastination

- Procrastination is a prolonged anxiety response from the sympathetic nervous system
  - Flight, fight, or freeze
- It isn't about avoiding an event/task – it's about avoiding a FEELING
- Trying to push a student through the feeling creates more anxiety, more FREEZE
- To manage
  - Get curious about the fear
  - How can I support you?
  - How can we change the fear?



# O – Out of Control

- Kids are very sensitive to their environments and changes to them
  - May not be able to articulate those feelings
- People control what they can control, when they can control
- Kids have relatively little control in their lives – so where do they express their control?
- Arguing is a way of control – predictable vs. unknown



# ARGUING!

Who wants to argue with me?

**"THE AIM OF  
ARGUMENT, OR  
OF  
DISCUSSION,  
SHOULD NOT BE  
VICTORY, BUT  
PROGRESS."**

**JOSEPH JOUBERT**

# W – Work, Differentiated



Differentiated Instruction (Carol Tomlinson) is the gold standard of how to adapt classrooms to the educational needs of gifted and 2E learners



DI is a student-centered, interest-driven approach to adapting curricula (we teach the students we HAVE, not the students we WANT to have)



In DI, the teacher anticipates the differences in students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles



DI creates different learning paths so that students can learn as much as they can as deeply as they can, without

undue anxiety because the assignments are too taxing  
boredom because they are not challenging enough.

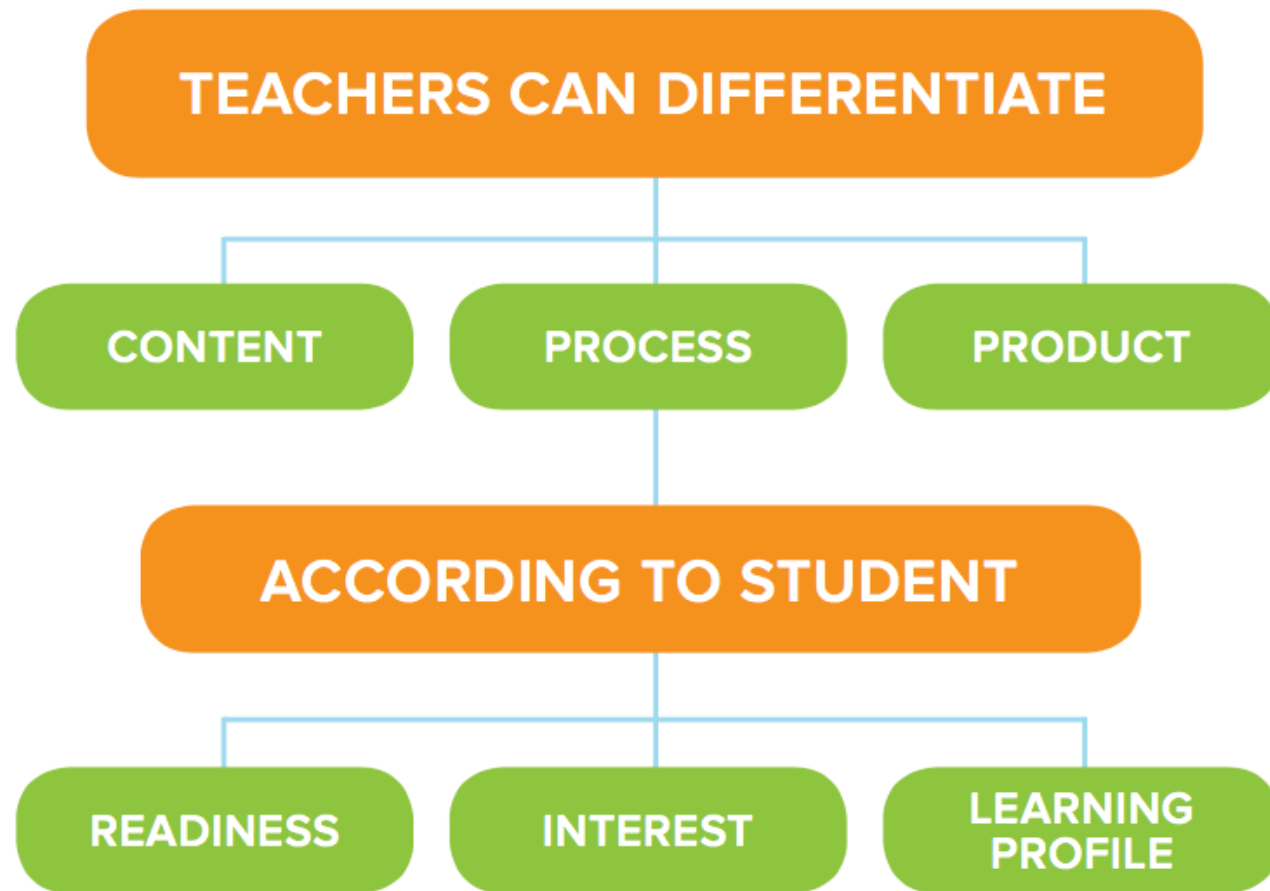


FIGURE 1: DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION GRAPHIC ORGANIZER (TOMLINSON & IMBEAU, 2010)

## Philosophy

- Regarding diversity as normal and valuable
- Seeing every learner's potential for academic success
- Accepting responsibility for maximizing each learner's progress
- Recognizing and removing barriers that deny many learners equal access to excellence

## Principles

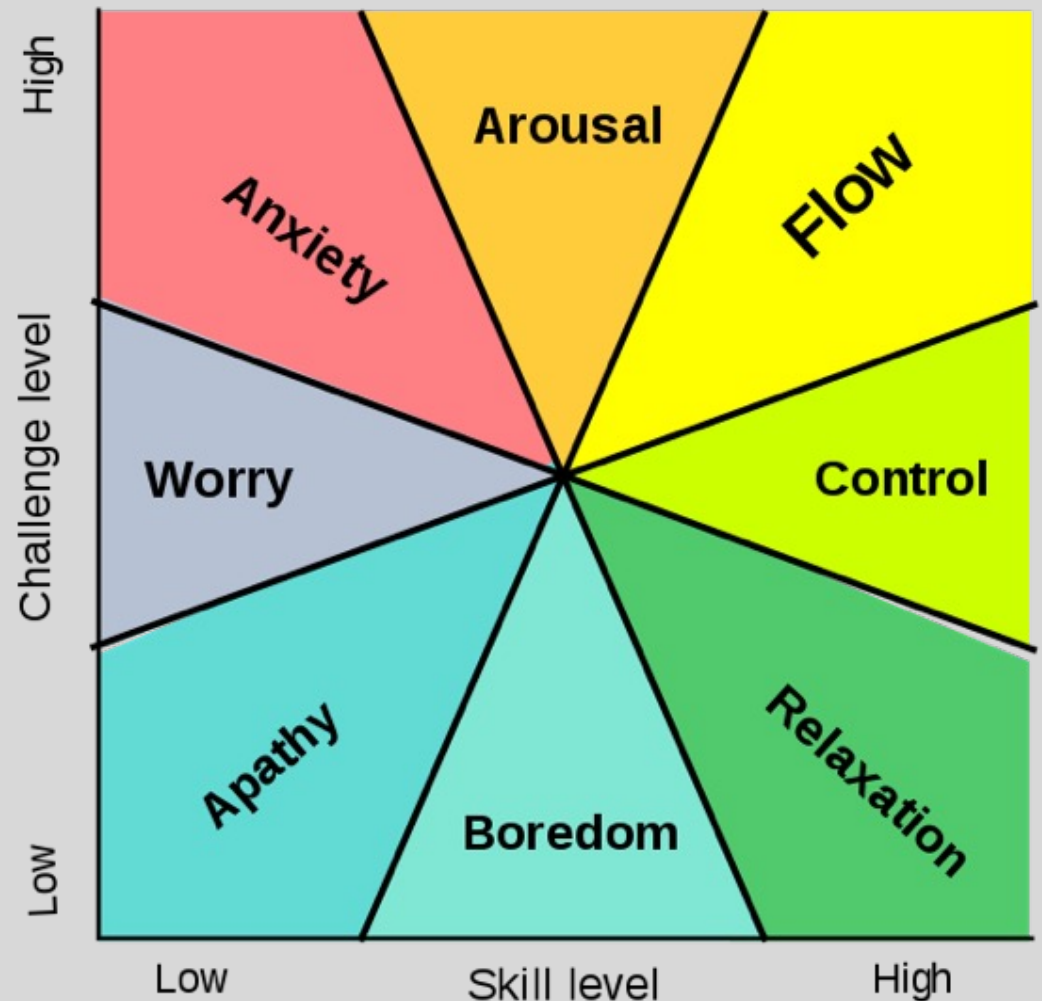
- Creating environments that are catalysts for learning
- Building on a foundation of a quality curriculum
- Using assessment to inform teaching and learning
- Tailoring instruction to assessment-indicated student needs
- Leading and managing a flexible classroom

## Practices

- Planning proactively to address readiness, interest, and learning profile
- Basing instructional approaches on student needs and the nature of the content
- Teaching up
- Assigning respectful tasks
- Using flexible grouping

# Creating Flow

- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
- A highly focused mental state that is conducive to productivity (“in the zone”)
  - Runners high
  - What do you like doing?
  - Time goes away
- Seeking intrinsic motivation – we are doing this because we want to and because we are enjoying it
- Challenge and skill level must match
- Flow undoes getting stuck



# B - Behavior

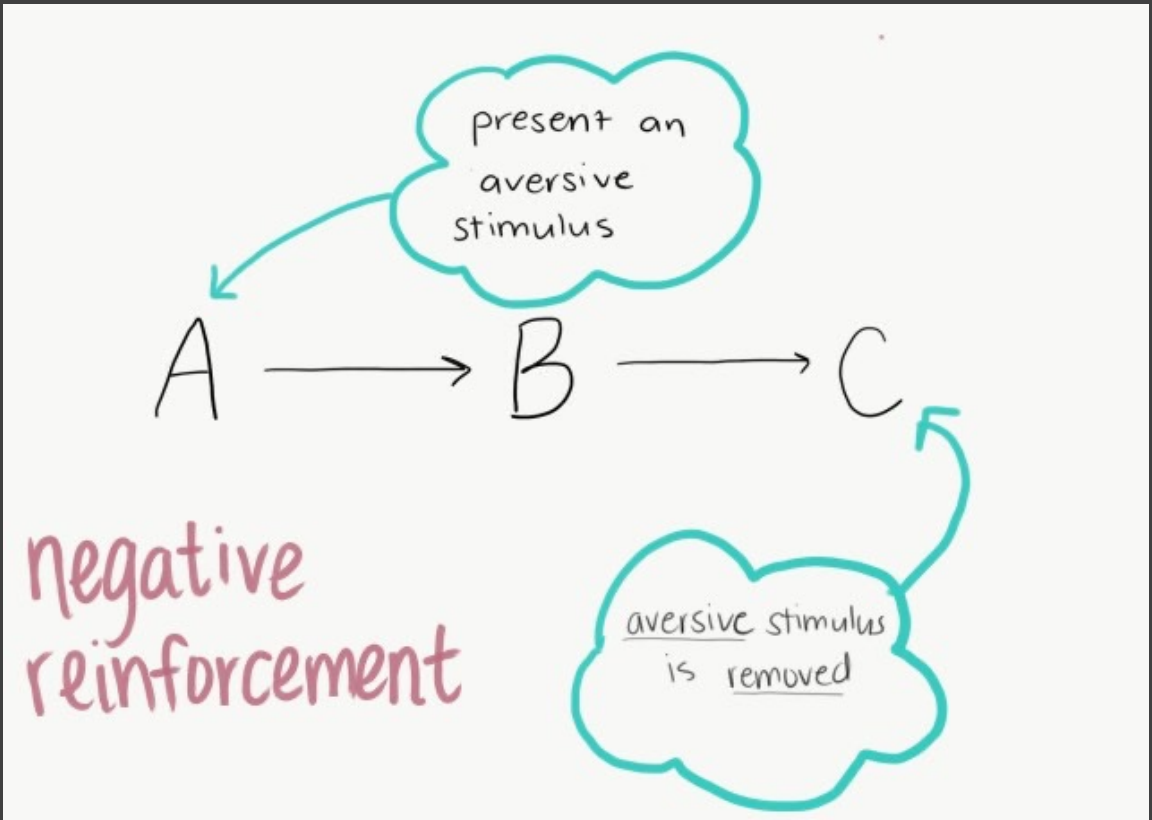
## Quick behavioral primer

- Reinforcement – we want a behavior to increase in frequency
- Punishment – we want a behavior to decrease in frequency
- Positive – we are adding something to the situation
- Negative – we are taking something away from the situation

Praise the behaviors that we want to see

Try to ignore and/or redirect the behaviors we don't want to see

# THE ROLE ADULTS PLAY





# THE COERCIVE CYCLE



# Consequences over Punishment

- Punishment doesn't work! (At least not how we think it does)
  - We get frustrated
  - Punishment is about US (Consequences are about the kids)
- Natural consequences –
  - work at home
  - Potentially failing a test
- Speed trap

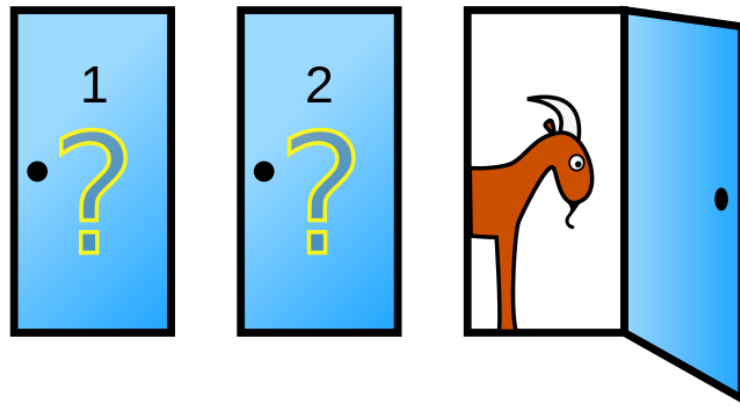




Beneath every behavior  
there is a feeling.

And beneath each feeling is a need.  
And when we meet that need rather than  
focus on the behavior, we begin to  
deal with the cause not the symptom.

- ASHLEIGH WARNER



## A - Alternatives

- Getting stuck has its roots in ANXIETY – fight or flight responses in students and us
- Third Door – not just dig in or give in.
- Step out of the conflict cycle
- Remember, we are playing the long game – whatever gets done is a step in the right direction
- What else can we do?
  - Bored/Break Box
  - Move your body
  - Do support work

## Phrases to Use When You Hear “I Can’t!!!!”

Instead of	Use
“Yes, You Can!!!”	“This is definitely hard to do. You’ve done a lot of hard things in the past, too. And this is really hard right now.”
“Ask [adult] to help you.”	”Do you want to keep trying or ask for help?”
“Move over, I’ll do it.”	“What resources do you have available to help you do this?”
“Positive vibes only!!!”	“This looks like it’s frustrating you. Let’s take a break together.”



## R - Relationships

- All students do better when they feel like they are seen, understood, liked, and valued
- Teaching/therapy/coaching is an inherently personal act
- The relationship is like a bank account – you can make a withdrawal, but you need "money"
- You can get a kid to move without a relationship, but they hold the key – what happens if you try to open a door without a key?





Relationships before rigor

Grace before grades

Patience before programs

Love before lessons ♡

- Brad Johnson



# It's Not Just the Kids! Ways Adults keep our kids struggling

1. Being helicopter parents. (Or teachers)

2. Adopting the "everyone gets a trophy" mentality.

3. Turning them into praise hounds.

4. Not giving them chores.

5. Over-programming them.

6. Being a friend and not a parent. (Or teacher)

7. Not letting them fail.

**PEOPLE WHO  
AVOID FAILURE  
ALSO AVOID  
SUCCESS.**

What is getting stuck  
all about?

- Avoiding failure (and the pain associated with it) however you possibly can.
  - and when you're a neurodivergent kid, you have many ways to avoid pain
  - And you're probably way too experienced at failure
- We need to NORMALIZE
  - Struggling
  - Trying and failing
  - Learning from our mistakes



LET'S PLAY A GAME!

# How to fail

Often “getting stuck” is linked to a fear of failure. Reframing failure is another key to getting unstuck

- F.A.I.L. = Frequent Attempts in Learning.
- F.A.I.L. = Frustrated? Angry? Insecure? LEAN-IN!
- F.A.I.L. = Finally Actively Investigating Looks







# Traps

- When we face challenges, we can easily fall into insecurity or **defensiveness**, a response that inhibits growth and keeps us stuck.
  - Focus the person on their own journey
  - Acknowledge that comparing self to others is normal
- When we assume a “either/or” approach to any activity, we shame struggling as being wrong
  - Meet our kids/clients where they are in that moment.
- When we only see failure as a “step towards growth,” we risk missing the pain/frustration that comes in failing by taking a “toxic positivity” stance
  - Frustration is normal. Welcome it. Process it. Use it.
  - Once I accept myself as I am, I can begin to move

# Techniques to use



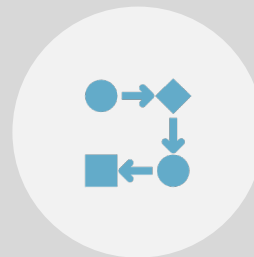
Five-minute doodles – just keep your pen/pencil on the page for 5 min, moving as much/little as you want



Two-minute mountain – the first two minutes are the hardest; if you can get grit your teeth and get through them, everything else gets easier



“Now you can’t” challenge – you wanted to do your project this way, imagine that now you can’t, what would you do instead



Reverse engineer – imagine you did it and you’re done! Explain to me how you did it

## Questions to ask

What does this student know about this topic before we get started?

How does this student like to learn?

What gets this student stuck?

How does this student like to show what they know?

What holds this student's interest?

How well do they work independently? In groups? At home?

## HOW TO *FINISH*.

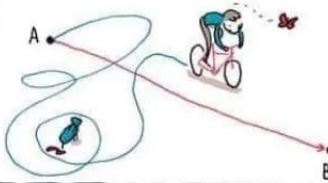
SET THE BAR LOWER.



SIMPLIFY YOUR TASK.



TAKE TWICE AS LONG.



NEGLECT THE UNIMPORTANT.



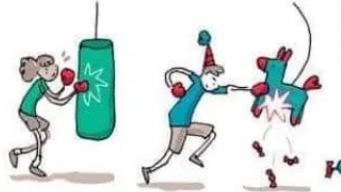
KILL "UNTIL."



GET RID OF SECRET RULES.



HAVE TWICE AS MUCH FUN.

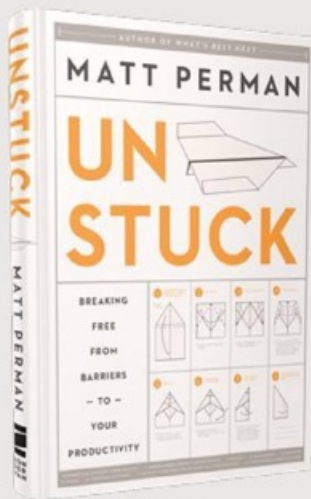


TRADE PERFECT FOR DONE.



GRANT SNIDER × JON ACUFF





**AS WE GET  
UNSTUCK,  
WE CAN  
CHANGE THE  
WORLD.**

- MATT PERMAN

**#HOWTOGETUNSTUCK**

WHAT  
HAPPENED  
TO BRYCE?

# Takeaways



Relationships matter - with your students, parents, administrators, coaches, etc.



Context matters - pay attention to what is going on (and ask about what you don't know)



Step out of the coercive cycle when you can



Kids don't **choose** to get stuck - anxiety gets them stuck



Be curious when you can



Differentiated instruction can provide the pedagogy to stay on curriculum



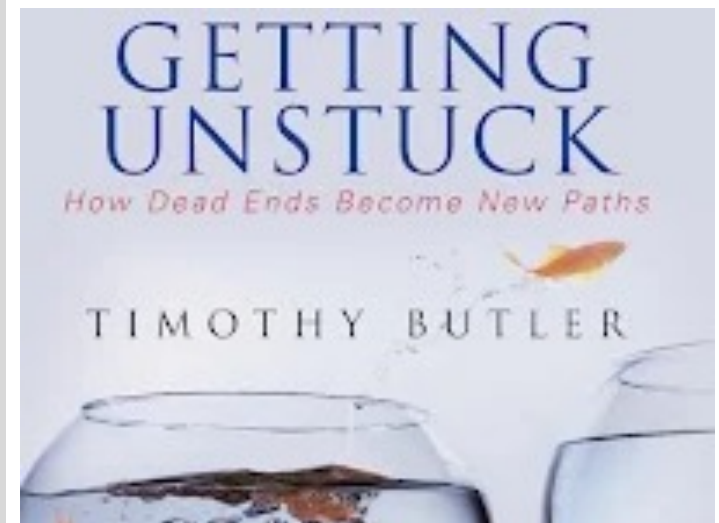
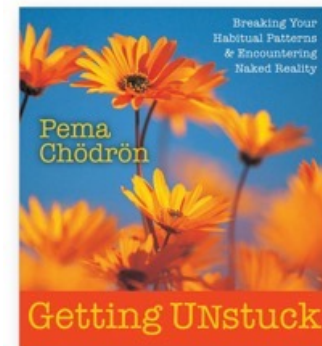
Take the long view



If it was easy...

# More resources

- <https://blog.brookespublishing.com/how-to-get-students-unstuck-on-target-an-executive-function-qa/>
- <http://www2.edc.org/makingmath/handbook/teacher/StuckAndUnstuck/StuckAndUnstuck.asp>
- <https://www.edutopia.org/article/writing-getting-students-unstuck>
- <https://www.pinterest.com.mx/pin/141441244537207163/>
- <https://biglifejournal.com/blogs/blog/struggle-is-important>
- <https://logicaloperations.com/insights/blog/829/unstuck-your-virtual-student/> (For virtual learners!)
- <https://www.jmring.com/how-to-get-unstuck/>
- [https://pdo.ascd.org/LMSCourses/PD11OC115M/media/DI-Intro\\_M1\\_Reading\\_What\\_Is\\_DI.pdf](https://pdo.ascd.org/LMSCourses/PD11OC115M/media/DI-Intro_M1_Reading_What_Is_DI.pdf)





## Questions?

Feel free to reach out to me with more questions at:

[drmatt@theneurodiversitycollective.com](mailto:drmatt@theneurodiversitycollective.com)

[www.Facebook.com/drmattzakreski](https://www.Facebook.com/drmattzakreski)

[www.Drmattzakreski.com](http://www.Drmattzakreski.com)

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