

The Executive Function Edge: Strategies for Competitive Advantage



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UNDERSTANDING EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS: THE BRAIN'S MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Executive functions manage our thinking processes and emotion regulation. To manage motivation for learning, producing work, and taking appropriate purposeful actions, people need the ability to:

- **STOP** present behavior to make attention mindfully available.
- **SWITCH** attention smoothly from step to step, in the background, without getting stuck or off track.
- **START** an activity by using clear steps for achieving a goal.
- **REGULATE** thoughts and emotions by using effective strategies and resilient thinking.
- **GENERATE** ideas and establish steps to organize and establish a plan with purposeful goals and steps.
- **HOLD** information in mind while simultaneously completing a task, learning and storing new information, managing distractions, refining steps of the plan.
- **ORGANIZE AND MANAGE** resources including physical (and virtual) materials, notebooks, computer files, desk, backpack, living space, and workspace.
- **ASSESS, MONITOR, AND ADJUST** work and social behaviors to improve work outcomes.



WHAT DOES EXECUTIVE FUNCTION CHALLENGE LOOK LIKE IN DAILY LIFE?

Executive function problems can include challenges with task initiation, organization, time management, emotional regulation, and memory. Not everyone with executive function challenges will have all of these symptoms, and these symptoms may be caused by things besides executive functions. Specific symptoms you may see can include:

1. **Difficulty Starting Tasks:** Trouble figuring out how to begin an assignment, particularly when it involves multiple steps.
2. **Problems with Transitioning:** Struggles with stopping one activity and smoothly switching to another, leading to delays or avoidance.
3. **Poor Time Management:** Underestimating how long tasks will take or procrastinating until or past the last minute.
4. **Forgetfulness:** Difficulty holding information in working memory, resulting in forgetting instructions, assignments, or steps needed to complete a task.
5. **Emotional Overwhelm:** Being easily frustrated, anxious, or overwhelmed by tasks that seem simple or routine to others.
6. **Disorganization:** Losing track of materials, assignments, or personal belongings; having a hard time keeping things in order.
7. **Inconsistent Performance:** Exhibiting fluctuating levels of effort or quality in work, sometimes appearing careless or rushed.
8. **Avoidance and Procrastination:** Putting off tasks or looking for distractions as a way to cope with the feelings that arise because of perceived difficulty of a task.



Top 7 Reasons to Strengthen YOUR Executive Functions

Emotional Regulation & Mental Health

Strong EFs help you manage stress, anxiety, and emotional ups and downs. Weaker EFs? It's harder to shift perspectives, break negative thought cycles, and problem-solve effectively—key components of resilience and mental health.

Self-Control & Habit Formation

Ever made an impulsive decision you later regretted? Inhibitory control (a core EF skill) helps curb impulsivity, supporting healthy habits like regular exercise, mindful eating, and better sleep—all of which boost well-being.

Resilience & Stress Management

Unpredictable life? The ability to reframe challenges, stay flexible, and adapt to setbacks—all EF-related skills—determines whether you bounce back or get stuck in stress.

Motivation & Goal Achievement

Planning, prioritizing, and following through on goals are EF-driven skills. Strengthening them helps you stop procrastinating and start achieving with confidence.

Relationships & Communication

Good EFs improve perspective-taking, empathy, and conflict resolution. Weak EFs? They can lead to misunderstandings, social stress, and difficulty maintaining connections.

Career Success & Work-Life Balance

From time management and adaptability to financial decision-making, EF skills are crucial for navigating career transitions, preventing burnout, and making wise choices.

Health & Cognitive Aging

Your EF strengths predict long-term health. Weak self-regulation is linked to chronic stress, poor lifestyle choices, and cognitive decline, while strong EF skills support longevity and brain health.



BUILDING STRONGER EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS: WHERE TO START

A neuropsychologist can diagnose a person and their challenges through formal evaluation. You can also use these strategies that can help support development in task management, organization, emotional regulation, and memory:

1. Set Up Routines and Structure

- **Consistent Schedule:** Establish a daily routine with set times for work, recreation, and relaxation. Consistency helps reduce anxiety about transitions and expectations.
- **Previews of Coming Work:** Provide previews of upcoming tasks to reduce surprises and help the person mentally prepare.

2. Incorporate Executive Function into Activities

- **Practice in Low-Stress Situations:** Encourage the person to practice executive function skills in everyday settings, such as planning a meet-up or organizing their space.
- **Relate to Interests:** Link executive function tasks to activities the person enjoys. For example, if they like sports, discuss how planning, organization, and focus are essential in their favorite games and then engage them in implementing strategies.

3. Teach Time Awareness

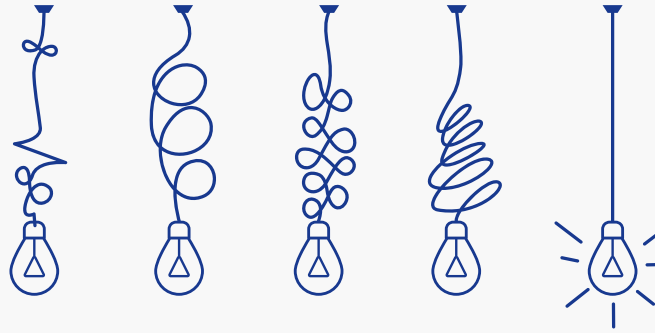
- **Timers and Alarms:** Use timers to help the person understand how long tasks do take versus could/should take them. Work to stay focused on a task for a specific period.
- **Incremental Time Extensions:** Gradually increase the amount of time spent on a type of task to build stamina. Start with short periods (e.g., 5 minutes) and extend them as the person becomes more comfortable.



6. Use the Three Rules for Adulting

- Assign the **Time and Kind** of work to be done
 - While a person may be provided a to-do list or a calendar at school or work, it is essential to have one that can be edited by the user that includes their whole life.
 - Export the school/work calendar into Google Calendar where Time and Kind of work can be assigned--by the person, for the context of their own life. Teach/prompt the person to use its many features: GKeep, GTasks, color, notifications, repeated events, etc.
- **Seek Feedback** about the approach used
 - Using a coach approach, go beyond grades to discover what went well about the approaches the person used and document those. What could be even better?
 - Without shaming, together consider other collected objective data as well as the person's feelings, time, observable behaviors, written evaluator comments, etc.
- **Make Adjustments**
 - Do more of what is working, and tweak what is not. Notice when as a helper/coach you are projecting your desires onto the person you are trying to help. Exasperation does not lead to inspiration!
 - Have the person reassign themselves the Time and Kind of work to do, in Google (or other) Calendar, and make a routine of updating (from GKeep or GTasks), checking, assigning new Time and Kind, following through with work.





4. Simplify and Break Down Tasks

- **Start Small:** Break down specific tasks into smaller, manageable steps. For instance, instead of saying “Do your work,” specify the steps: “First, _____, then _____, and finally, _____.” Build up to getting the person to tell you and record the steps.
- **Use Checklists:** Create a checklist for multi-step tasks, encouraging the person to check off each step as they complete it.

5. Use the “Do-What-How-When” Approach

- **Analyze Assignments:** Teach students how to plan the execution of their assignments using this method:
 - **Do:** What actions are required?
 - **What:** What work needs to be completed?
 - **How:** How should it be done?
 - **When:** When is it due?
- **Planning and Monitoring:** Help the person plan their approach to tasks and regularly check their progress, making adjustments as needed.



7. Use Visual Aids and Organizers

- **Graphic Organizers:** Use tools like flowcharts or graphic organizers to help the person visualize the steps involved in a task.
- **Color-Coding and Labels:** Organize materials and assignments using color-coded folders and labels to make it easier for the person to find what they need.

8. Support Emotional Regulation

- **Mindfulness and Breathing Techniques:** Teach the person simple breathing exercises or mindfulness techniques to help them manage stress or frustration when tasks feel overwhelming. “Let’s take a belly breath together first.”
- **Empathy and Patience:** Understand that executive function struggles are often tied to emotions. Offer empathy and patience rather than shaming judgment.

9. Encourage Self-Advocacy

- **Positive Reinforcement:** Reinforce their attempts to seek help or clarify instructions, which can build confidence and reduce feelings of frustration.
- **Asking for Help:** Teach the person how to ask for help when they’re stuck. Role-play scenarios where they might need to ask someone for assistance. Do ask what help they have sought before you jump in to fix things.

10. Promote a Growth Mindset

- **Praise specific efforts,** not just results, even if the outcome isn’t perfect. This can help them build resilience and a positive attitude toward challenges.
- **Encourage reflective thinking:** After completing a task, seek feedback. Discuss what went well and what could be even better. This helps the person learn from their experiences.



11. Build in Flexibility and Adjustments

- **Adapt Strategies:** If a strategy isn't working, use this as Feedback and don't be afraid to Make Adjustments. Sometimes, simplifying a plan even further can lead to better outcomes.
- **Embrace Trial and Error:** Let the person know it's okay to try different methods to find what works best for them. The key is to keep experimenting and Make Adjustments.

12. Collaborate

- **Communicate Needs**

--For School:

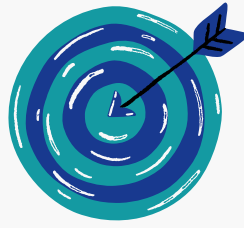
- If the person with executive function challenges is a student, **work collaboratively with classroom and extracurricular teachers** to ensure they understand the specific challenges the child faces, and so they can provide appropriate accommodations.
- You may want to **meet with the school's Child Study Team (K-12) or Office of Student Services (College) to get the needed accommodations in writing.** This will often require testing and diagnosis, but many kinds of help can happen as the result of sharing what you/the student notice about the student's struggles. Most people will help if they know what can work.
- A student will benefit from **consistency between home and school in terms of strategies and expectations.** Focus on what is going well to get more of that. For older students and young adults, teach them how to implement strategies, work collaboratively, and use effective communication with their educators and support staff.



--For Work:

- **Learning, attention, and executive function challenges can manifest in various ways**, including difficulties with organization, time management, focus, and task completion. When left unaddressed, these issues can lead to decreased productivity, lower job satisfaction, and even higher turnover rates. When this happens at work, other people can also be impacted.
- **Employees may struggle to meet expectations despite their best efforts**, leading to a cycle of frustration and disengagement that not only affects individual performance but also team dynamics and overall organizational success. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is crucial for creating an inclusive work environment where all employees can thrive.
- **In the workplace, the widely held belief that increased effort leads to better performance is often misleading**, particularly for employees facing learning, attention, and executive function challenges. These challenges can create significant barriers to productivity and success that cannot be overcome by effort alone and exacerbate feelings of frustration, inadequacy, and burnout. When managers shift the focus from sheer effort to effective, personalized support, it can help all employees unlock their potential and contribute meaningfully to their teams.
- **Implementing these strategies consistently and with self-aware patience can make a significant difference** in helping a person to both manage their executive function challenges and build the skills they need to succeed.





WHAT IF I HAVE EXECUTIVE FUNCTION CHALLENGES OF MY OWN? HOW CAN I HELP?

You can help with well-designed home and work accommodations for managing executive functions. This will help you and the other person regulate emotional responses to responsibilities and in relationships. By limiting both the number of switches and the working memory required to perform goal-directed behaviors, frustration can be reduced and you can become allies. Here's how:

1. Simplify and Structure Together

- **Joint Routines:** Establish daily routines that work for both of you, such as a set time for doing tasks together, whether it's homework, chores, or planning the week ahead.
- **Break Down Tasks:** Practice breaking down tasks into smaller steps together. You can each take turns describing or writing down steps for a shared task, like planning a meal or organizing a room.

2. Acknowledge and Accept Shared Challenges

- **Open Dialogue:** Discuss with your child that both of you face similar challenges. This helps normalize the experience and reduces feelings of isolation.
- **Model Vulnerability:** Show your child that it's okay to struggle and ask for help. This can build a strong, empathetic bond and reduce the stigma around executive function issues.



3. Create Collaborative Tools

- **Team Approach:** Frame executive function management as something you work on together. This could involve setting goals, creating routines, and finding solutions as a team.
- **Shared Tools and Systems:** Use the same organizational tools (like calendars, checklists, or timers) so you both become familiar with them and can support each other in using them effectively.

4. Use External Supports

- **Apps and Technology:** Use reminder apps, digital calendars, or task management tools that can help both of you stay on track. Set up notifications or alarms to keep each other accountable.
- **Visual Aids:** Create visual schedules or checklists that you both follow. These can be displayed in a common area, like the kitchen or living room, where you can easily reference them.

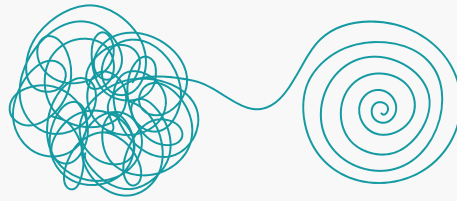
5. Set Up a Supportive Environment

- **Organize Spaces Together:** Work together to organize common areas, like a homework station or a kitchen command center. Keep these areas clutter-free and stocked with necessary supplies.
- **Create “Brain Break” Zones:** Set up areas where either of you can take a break when feeling overwhelmed. Include items like stress balls, puzzles, or comfortable seating.

6. Practice Mindfulness and Emotional Regulation Together

- **Mindfulness Exercises:** Practice simple mindfulness techniques together, like deep breathing or short meditation sessions. This can help both of you manage stress and stay focused.
- **Check-In Routine:** Develop a routine where you check in with each other about how you’re feeling, especially when starting a challenging task. This helps build awareness and emotional regulation.





7. Use the “Do-What-How-When” Strategy Together

- **Analyze Tasks:** Apply this method together when tackling tasks. For example, when facing a shared responsibility like planning a family outing, break it down into:
 - **Do:** What do we need to do?
 - **What:** What exactly needs to be done?
 - **How:** How will we do it?
 - **When:** When do we need to complete it?
- **Mutual Accountability:** Hold each other accountable for following through with the plan. This fosters a sense of shared responsibility.

8. Focus on Strengths and Celebrate Small Wins

- **Highlight Strengths:** Focus on what each of you does well. For example, if one of you is better at organizing and the other at planning, use these strengths to complement each other.
- **Celebrate Achievements:** Celebrate small victories together, like completing a task on time or successfully sticking to a routine. Positive reinforcement can boost motivation for both of you.

9. Build Flexibility into Your Approach

- **Adjust Plans Together:** If a plan or strategy isn’t working for either of you, brainstorm adjustments together. This collaborative problem-solving can help you both feel more in control.
- **Embrace Trial and Error:** Acknowledge that it’s okay to try different approaches until you find what works. This mindset can reduce pressure and encourage a more relaxed, experimental approach.



10. Model Lifelong Learning

- **Show Willingness to Learn:** Demonstrate that you're committed to improving your own executive function skills. Whether it's learning new organizational strategies or practicing self-regulation techniques, your example will encourage your child to adopt a growth mindset.
- **Work together and leverage shared experiences:** Both you and your child can make progress in managing executive function challenges, creating a more supportive and understanding environment.

11. Seek External Support When Needed

- **Professional Help:** Don't hesitate to seek guidance from a coach, therapist, or counselor who specializes in executive function. This support can provide tailored strategies for both you and your child.
- **Support Groups:** Join or form a support group with other parents facing similar challenges. Sharing experiences and solutions can provide new insights and reduce the sense of isolation.

**Executive functions are not just about managing difficulties.
They unlock superior performance and distinct advantages.**

They help define your learner's future.

**When you understand how unique minds work, you can
create the confidence and systems they need to thrive.**

Discover what that can look like for your family →





Sherri Fisher

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