Working with Adults with Executive Skill Challenges

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What are executive skills?

- Brain-based skills (managed out of the frontal lobes) that take a minimum of 25-years to reach full maturation.

- They're the skills that support goal-directed behavior (or, more simply, the skills required to *execute* tasks).

- More commonly referred to as *executive functions*.

Figure 7.1

Executive functions.

The "Smart but Scattered" Model

Response Inhibition

Working Memory

Emotional Control

Flexibility

Sustained Attention

Task Initiation

Planning/Prioritizing

Organization

Time Management

Goal-Directed Persistence

Metacognition

Stress Tolerance

Response Inhibition

Strength

- Carefully deliberates before making a decision
- Thinks before responding; doesn't interrupt
- Gathers all the facts before acting

Challenge

- Jumps to conclusions
- Blurts out without thinking; may interrupt
- Acts before getting all the facts ("gut instinct")

Working Memory

Strength	Challenge
• Has a head for details (memory like an elephant)	• Has difficulty remembering details
• Remembers what has to be done	• Forgets what he or she has promised to do
• Follows through on obligations without reminders	• Needs reminders to get things done

Emotional Control

Strength	Challenge
• Handles negative feedback easily	• Reacts strongly to criticism
• Is cool as a cucumber	• Becomes upset by "little things"
• Keeps emotions in check	• Gets sidetracked by strong emotions

Flexibility

Strength	Challenge

Strength

- "Goes with the flow" when the unexpected happens
- Adjusts easily to changes in plans
- Changes course easily

Challenge

- Is thrown for a loop by unexpected events
- Is upset by changes in plans
- Resists changing course

Sustained Attention

Strength

- Stays focused on the task at hand
- Once started, keeps working until the task is done
- Gets right back to work after an interruption

Challenge

- Jumps from one task to another
- Is slow to finish tasks (or they don't get done); runs out of steam
- Gets derailed by interruptions; easily distracted

Task Initiation

Strength	Challenge
• Follows through on obligations without reminders	• Needs reminders to get things done
• Gets started right away on chores or other tasks	• Puts off starting things
• Completes tasks well before deadlines	• Leaves things until the last minute

Planning/Prioritizing

Strength	Challenge
• Starts the day with a plan	• Doesn't plan out the day
• Can prioritize when there's a lot to do	• Has trouble prioritizing when time is limited
• Breaks tasks down into subtasks with timelines	• Is not good at project planning

Organization

Strength	Challenge
• Puts things away shortly after use	• Slow to pick up after self
• Keeps personal spaces neat	• Finds it hard to keep personal spaces neat
• Easily maintains organizational systems	• Has difficulty maintaining organizational systems over time

Time Management

Strength	Challenge
• Is good at estimating how long it takes to do something	• Is not good at time estimation
• Completes tasks in the time allotted	• Has difficulty finishing tasks within time constraints
• Arrives on time for things (for example, appointments, family events)	• Has trouble getting places on time

Goal-Directed Persistence

Strength	**Challenge**
• Sets and achieves personal goals	• Is not particularly goal driven
• Sets aside immediate pleasures for long-term gains	• Lives "in the moment"—takes one day at a time
• Sets high standards for self	• Is not highly motivated to set high standards

Metacognition

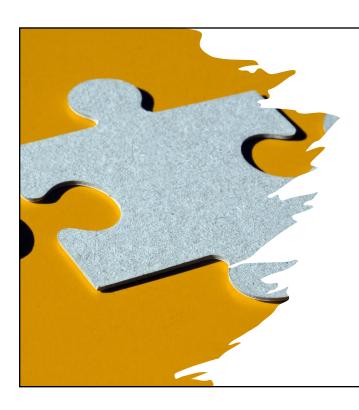| **Strength**	**Challenge**
• Can evaluate a situation and figure out what to do next	• Waits to be told what to do
• "Reads" a situation well to understand the dynamics involved	• May be unaware of underlying conflicts, issues, and so on
• Is a good problem solver	• Looks to others to solve problems

Stress Tolerance

Strength

- Enjoys the unexpected/ unpredictable
- Is at his or her best when the pressure is on
- Prefers action-oriented or exciting leisure activities

Challenge

- Prefers routine and knowing what's coming next
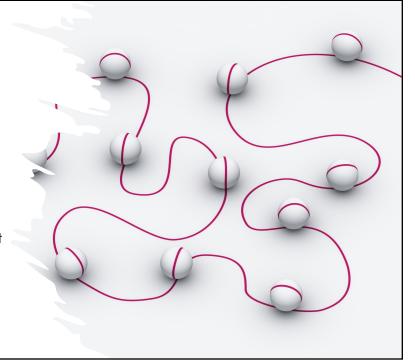- Finds pressure anxiety provoking
- Prefers laid-back leisure activities

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3 Key Strategies to Support or Strengthen Executive Skills

1. Environmental Modifications

2. Short-term incentives for motivation

3. Skill Enhancement

Environmental Modifications

- Change the physical or social environment (e.g., remove distractions, use visual cues, avoid people that act as triggers)
- Modify the task (e.g., make it shorter, build in breaks, use a 1 to 10 scale to adjust effort)
- Enlist the help of others (e.g., someone to cue you, someone to report to)
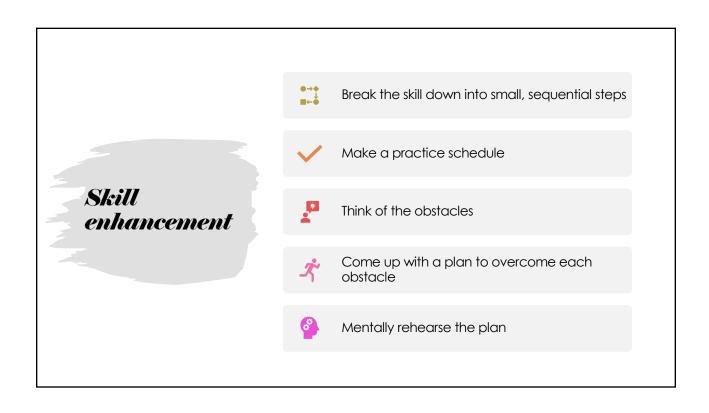
Incentives for motivation

Set a "personal best" goal

Give yourself a reward

Identify something to look forward to doing as soon as the effortful task is done

Skill enhancement

Break the skill down into small, sequential steps

Make a practice schedule

Think of the obstacles

Come up with a plan to overcome each obstacle

Mentally rehearse the plan

Want to learn more?

The full day training will give participants

- Strategies to address specific executive skill challenges
- An array of incentive options
- Step-by-step instructions for training executive skills
- Directions for how to build good habits and break bad habits
- A focus on "the biggest bang for the buck"—short, easy tricks to build lasting behavior change