



HOW TO STOP MOVING THE GOALPOSTS

A guide to overcoming
perfectionism in students

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WHO AM I?



Dr. Matt Zakreski – you can call me
"Dr. Matt"



I'm a clinical psychologist,
professional speaker, and
neurodivergence advocate



I'm known as someone who can
bridge neuroscience and clinical
practice to make skills accessible
for you and your loved ones





SETTING EXPECTATIONS

We are here to learn what we can about perfectionism and develop some techniques to manage it

I am going to ask for some participation

This can be a very personal process – embrace the feelings!

We play a role in how perfectionism manifests in our own lives (and in our kids')

LET'S DRAW



PERFECTIONISM

- Characterized by a person's striving for flawlessness and setting high performance standards, accompanied by critical self-evaluations and concerns regarding others' evaluations.
- In a word = ANXIETY
- Multidimensional
 - Cognitive
 - Behavioral
 - Emotional

Best understood as an aspect of personality that plays out in interactions with demand situations (personal and professional)



TYPES

- Adaptive
 - Motivation is high, but healthy/realistic
 - Deriving pleasure from success, opportunities
 - Achievement oriented “What can I do?”
- Maladaptive
 - Unattainable goals and impossible standards
 - Leads to depression and anxiety
 - Success doesn’t lead to pleasure, only relief
 - Failure oriented “What will happen if I don’t succeed?”



- Self-oriented perfectionism – imposing the desire to be perfect on yourself
 - Other-oriented perfectionism - holding others to unrealistic standards of behavior
 - Socially prescribed perfectionism – perceiving unrealistic expectations from others
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DIRECTIONS OF PERFECTIONISM

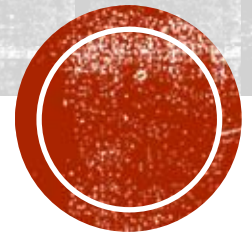


**PEOPLE WHO
AVOID FAILURE
ALSO AVOID
SUCCESS.**

WHAT IS THIS ALL ABOUT?

Avoiding failure (and the pain associated with it)
however you possibly can.

... and when you're a gifted kid, you have many ways

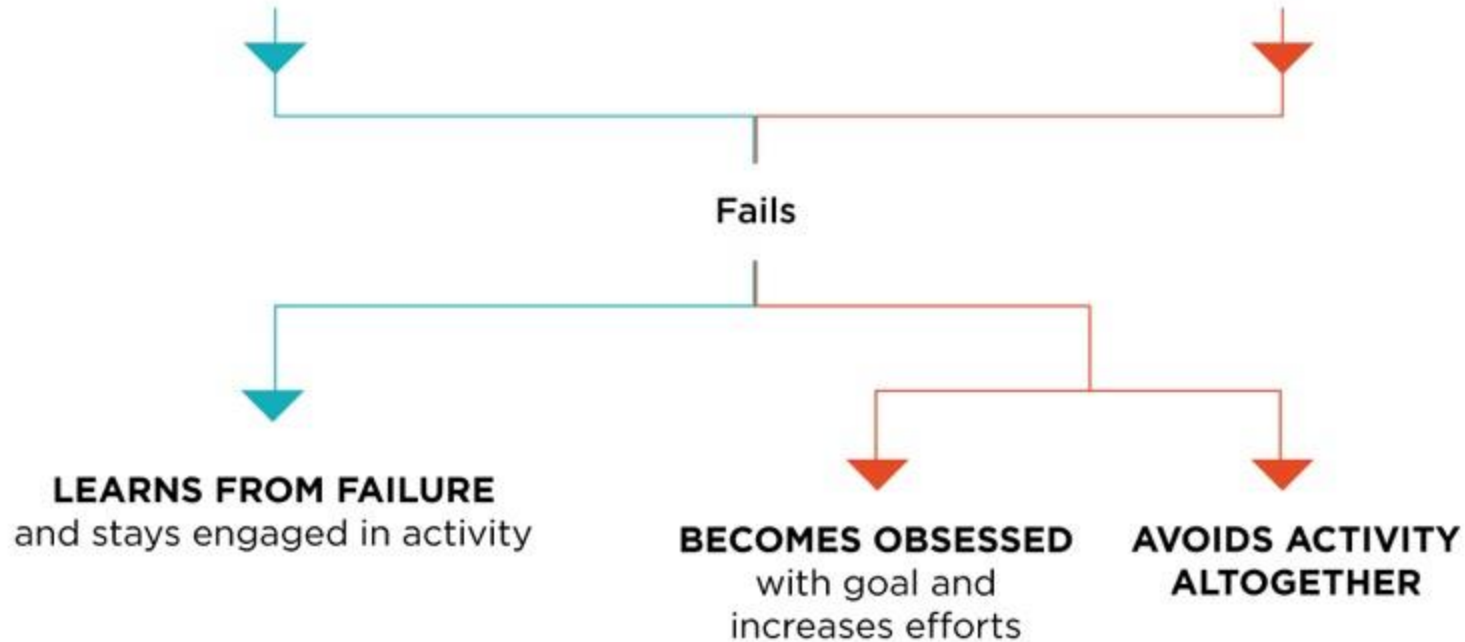


Healthy Perfectionist

Maladaptive Perfectionist

CHALLENGES THEMSELVES
by setting high goals and standards

Sets extremely high and
UNREALISTIC GOALS



Source: Jessica Rohlffing Pryor, core faculty member at the Counseling Program from The Family Institute at Northwestern University.

Created by: Counseling@Northwestern, the Online Master of Arts in Counseling Program from The Family Institute at Northwestern University.



"INVISIBLE" PERFECTIONISM

- Many people are overwhelmed, overworked, and stressed out
- High level of desire for things to be easy (or “perfect”)
 - I’m at my limit
 - I deserve a break
 - I can’t handle any more challenges
- Things are never/rarely perfect – leads to explosive feelings of upset/anger
- Shame accompanies the explosive feelings
 - Don’t know where it comes from
 - Denies/doesn’t know about the role of perfectionism





POTENTIAL OUTCOMES OF PERFECTIONISM

- Low self-esteem
- Feelings of contingent worthiness – I only have value if I succeed
- All-or-nothing thinking
- Depression
- High anxiety/panic attacks
- Workplace dissatisfaction
- Medical problems – high BP, stroke, ulcer
- Diminishing social and romantic connections
- Lack of creativity
- Procrastination

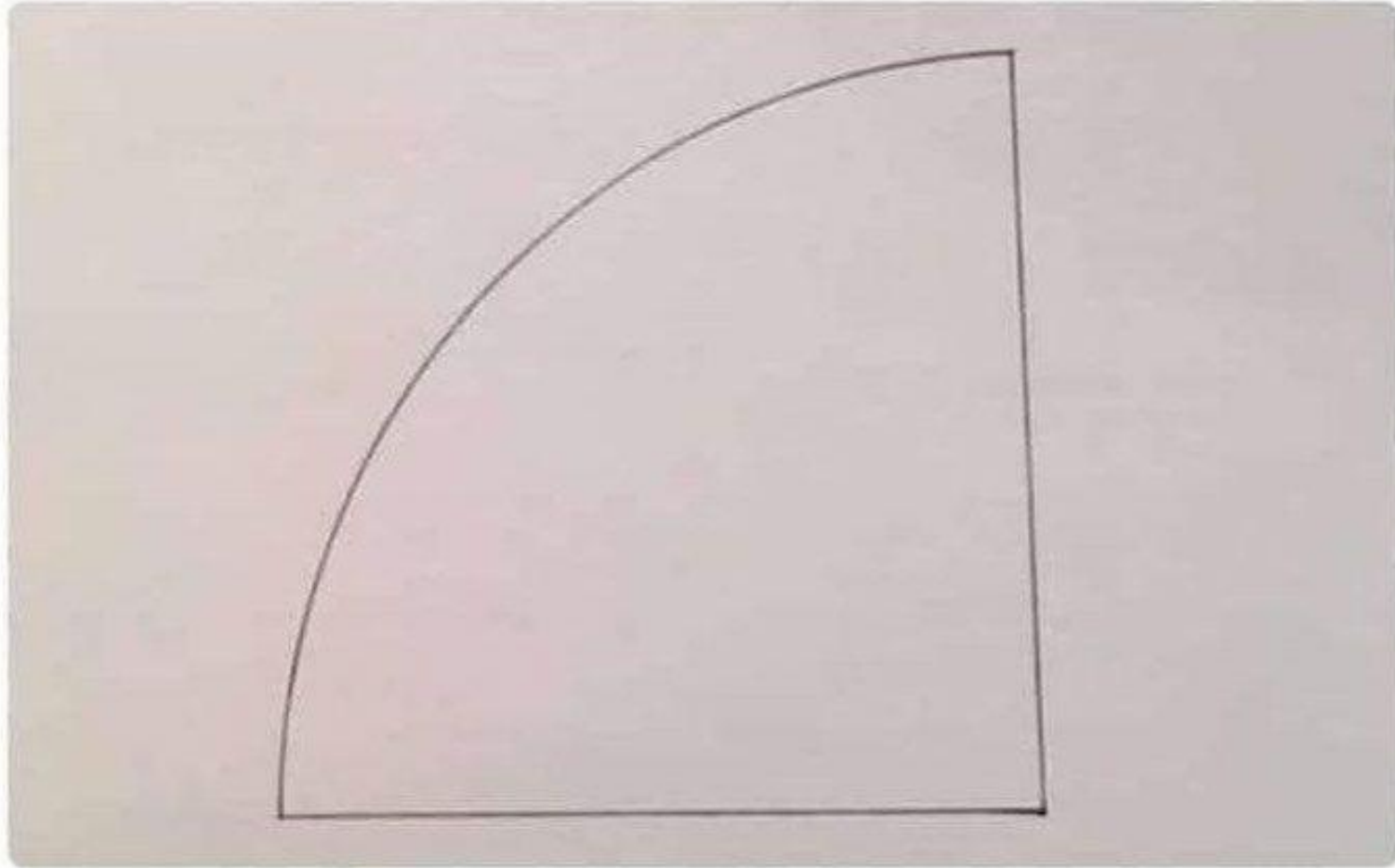


PROCRASTINATION? REALLY?

- Who here has ever procrastinated on a big project?
- Procrastination is about trying to **control** anxiety
 - If I never turn it in, I don't have to get feedback
 - As long as I keep my idea in my mind, it gets to stay perfect
 - One more paragraph will really drive my point home...
 - If I do 5x the work that's expected of me, they will be so excited that they won't look too closely
- Anxiety makes the problem seem bigger – and keeps us avoiding it
- “There are no awards given for books that were never written”



Hey, perfectionists.
This is an 89° angle. Have a good day!





COMPARISON EFFECT

- Perfectionistic feelings are increasing across the globe across all SES and cultural groups
 - Closely follows the rise of 24/7 media and social media
- It is difficult (impossible?) to not compare yourself to others
- If we compare
 - Find **REALISTIC** targets for comparison
 - Focus on what you can learn from a person/work
 - Remember that we **NEVER** know the whole story of others – but we **ALWAYS** know our own story

“Don’t Compare your chapter to someone else’s completed book.”

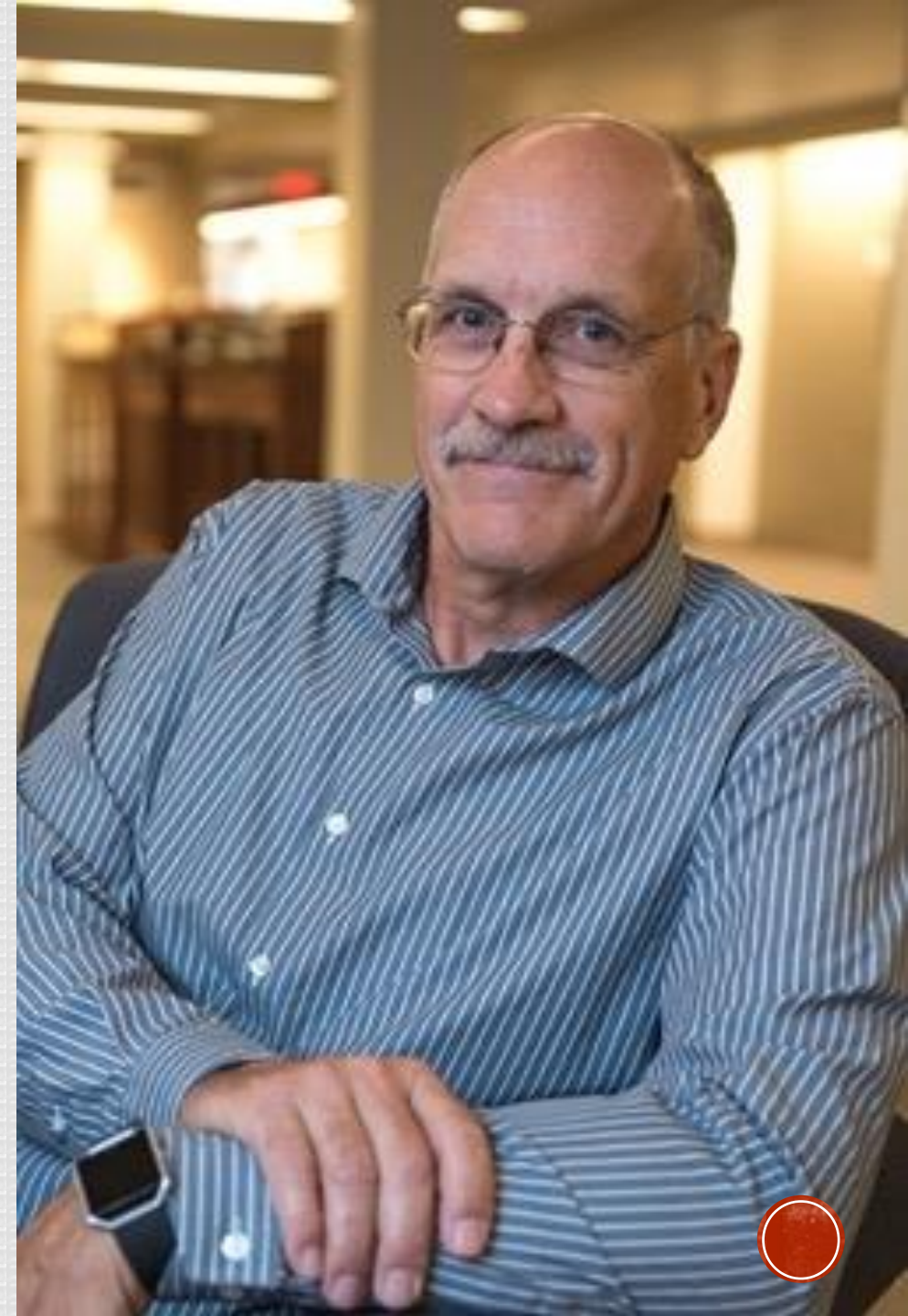


RANDY FROST - FMPS

Created the "Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale"

Perfectionism is marked by:

- Heightened concern over making mistakes (catastrophizing)
- High personal standards (striving for excellence)
- The **perception** of high parental expectations
- The **perception** of high parental criticism
- The doubting of the quality of one's actions
- A preference for order and organization.





WHY GIFTED/2E KIDS?

- Intellectual OE – deep engagement with areas of interest, coupled with more emotional weight given to one's ideas
- Heightened creativity – can see/conceptualize things that others cannot
- Intersection with skills/development – asynchrony can contribute to perfectionism when mismatch occurs





ASYNCHRONY

- Developmental spread
- Fine motor skills – OT?
- What do schools/sports tend to see?
 - We need to be strengths-based
 - Accommodate/acknowledge weaknesses
 - What do you want to focus on?
 - Curious, not critical



CASE STUDY



- Carl Friederich Gauss was a German mathematician and scientist who lived from 1777-1855
- Sometimes referred to as the *Princeps mathematicorum*
 - Number theory
 - Polynomial algebra
- Refused to publish any work that was not complete AND above criticism
- “If Carl Friederich Gauss had published his work in a timely manner, he would have advanced mathematics by 50 years.”
– Eric Temple Bell





YOU MIGHT BE A PERFECTIONIST IF...

- Spending 30 minutes writing and rewriting a two-sentence email.
- Believing that missing two points on a test is a sign of failure.
- Difficulty being happy for others who are successful.
- Holding oneself to the standards of others' accomplishments or comparing oneself unfavorably and unrealistically to others.
- Skipping class or avoiding a chore because it is pointless to try unless perfection can be achieved.
- Focusing on the product rather than the process of learning.
- Avoiding playing a game or trying a new activity with friends for fear of being shown up as less than perfect.



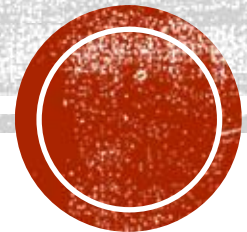
Perfectionism



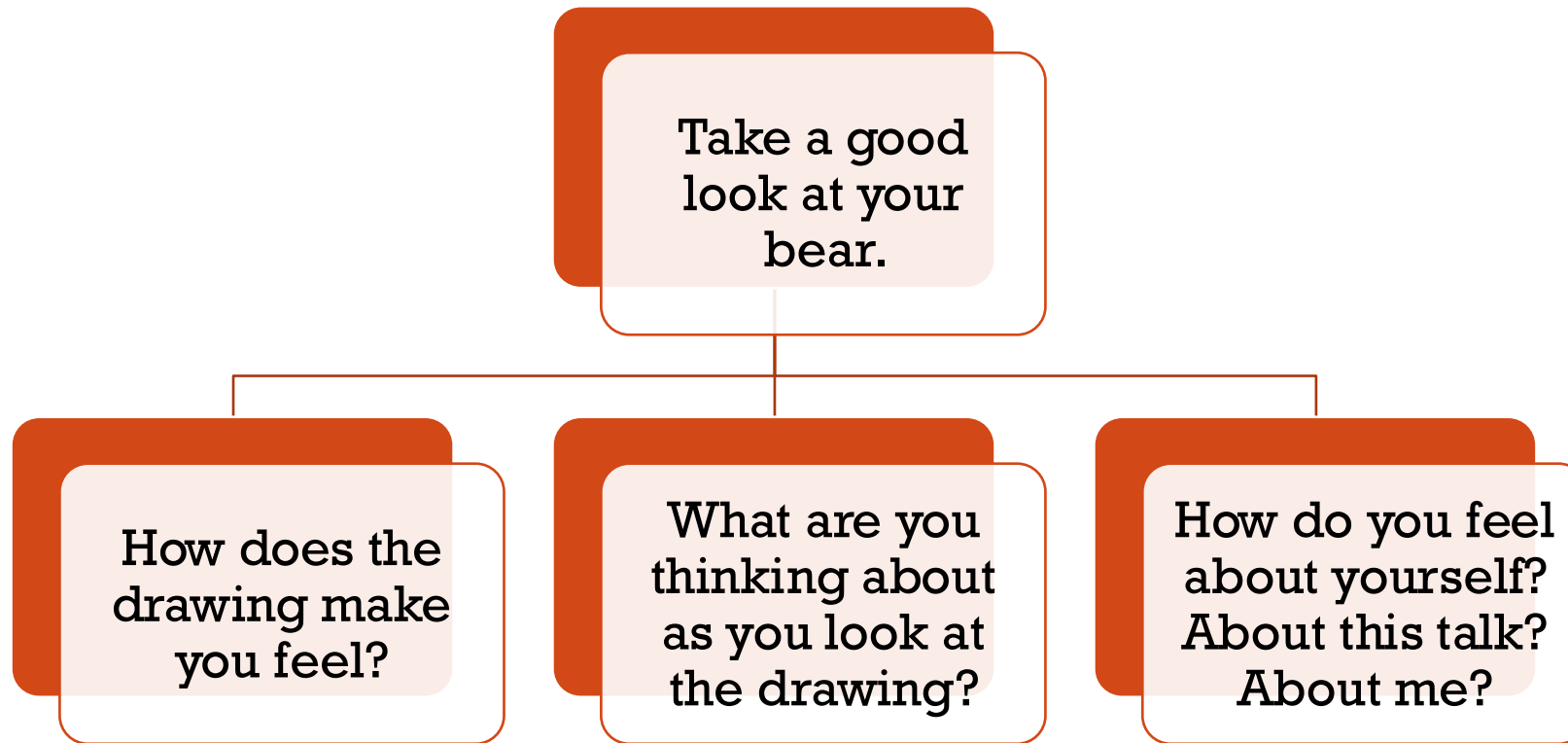
Excellence



TREATMENTS



BUT WHAT ABOUT THE BEAR, DR. MATT?!?!?



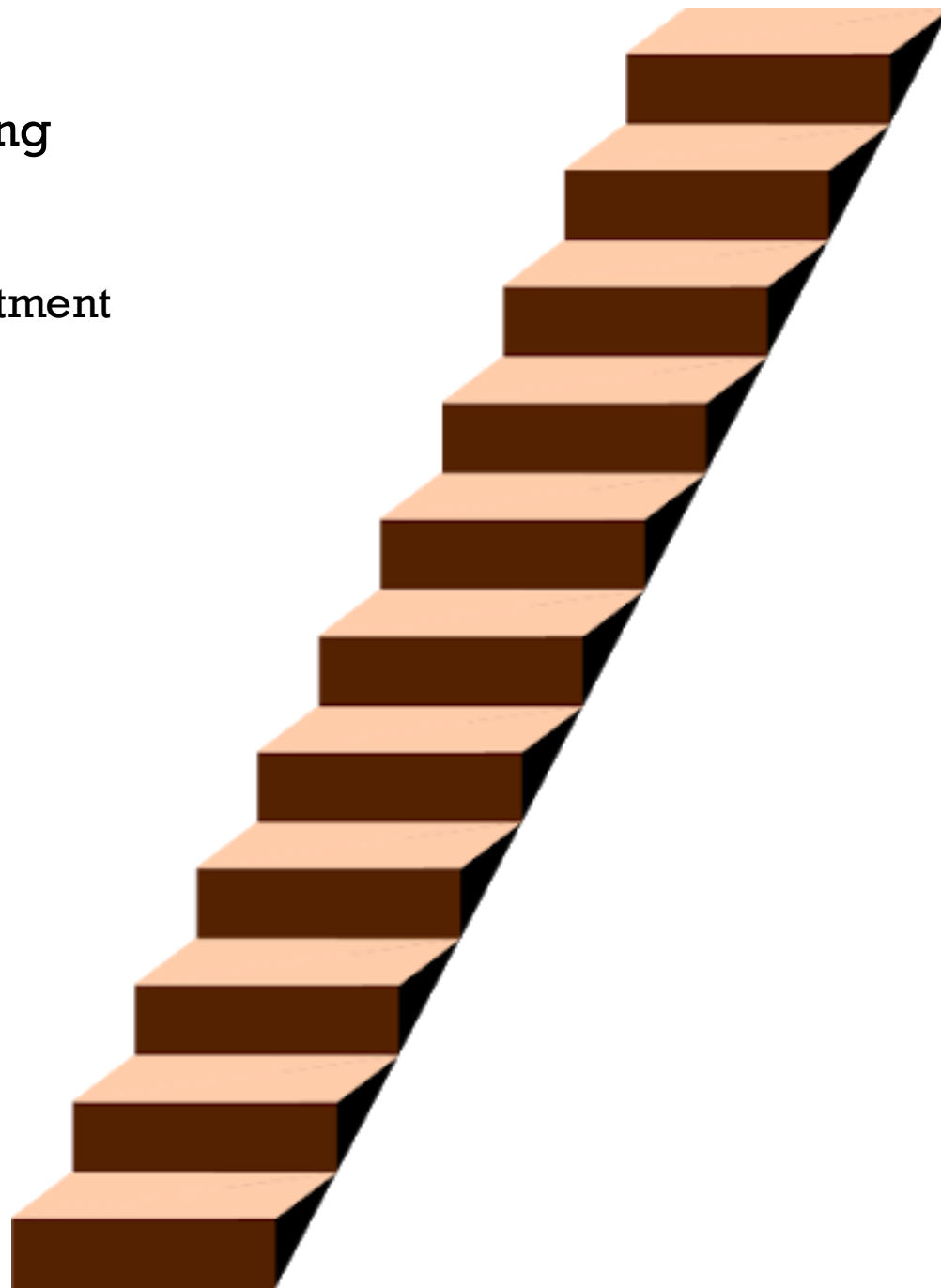
COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY (CBT)

- Changing your cognitive relationship to your thoughts
- Perfectionism gives us maladaptive thinking patterns
 - All-or-nothing (“If I don’t get a 100%, I’ve failed!”)
 - Catastrophizing (“If I get a note flat, I’ll be kicked out of the orchestra”)
 - Black and white (“I’m either perfect at this, or not worth anyone’s time”)
- Work on “bottom up” thinking (instead of “top down”) thinking
 - What have you done?
 - What can you give yourself credit for?
 - How much progress have you made?
- Watch your “shoulds”
- Name perfectionism for what it is... **ANXIETY!**



- If you do “top down” thinking
 - What is left to do
 - Results-oriented
 - First sensation is disappointment

- “Bottom up” thinking
 - How far you’ve come
 - Aspirational
 - Allows for process



EXPOSURE AND RESPONSE PREVENTION (ERP)

- It is really hard to “just stop” being perfectionistic
- Treat it as an anxiety regimen
- Work on something and then stop BEFORE you want to/it's done
 - How do you feel?
 - How hard is it to stop working on it?
 - What thoughts are coming up? Feelings?
 - How can you calm yourself? (In addition to working on it some more)
- Repeat until you improve the resiliency time and your coping skills (the bear!)
- Anxiety lies to us! You are training your body to know otherwise





ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY (ACT)

- Our feelings can overwhelm us, and we spend tremendous energy trying to ignore and/or fight off these feelings
- When we see the feeling and acknowledge it, we make room for it – lessening its power over us
- “Oh, this is something that makes me feel perfectionistic.”
← no value judgement
- Feelings are not good or bad – they simply exist to be observed like us
 - Step out of the traffic jam and watch the cars go by





THE 95-3-1-1 RULE

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO

- Understand the perfectionism isn't rational – it is hard to “just stop”
- Be proactive – what causes problems? How can we plan ahead?
- Help model emotionally-focused language – help name feelings for feelings
- Encourage breaks
- Encourage perspective-taking (from empathy – “I know that this feels like the most important audition ever. There will be others in the future, but right now this is the most pressing thing.”
- Don't problem-solve: “How can I help?”
 - Two most powerful words in the English language?
- Communicate with teachers/school



HOW TO *FINISH*.

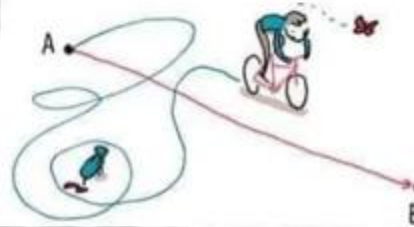
SET THE BAR LOWER.



SIMPLIFY YOUR TASK.



TAKE TWICE AS LONG.



NEGLECT THE UNIMPORTANT.



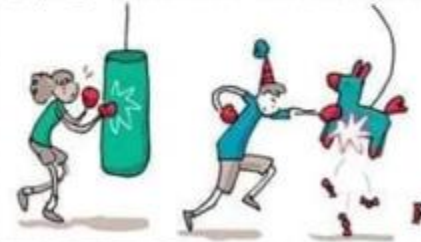
KILL "UNTIL."



GET RID OF SECRET RULES.



HAVE TWICE AS MUCH FUN.



TRADE PERFECT FOR DONE.



Do we even need
grades? (Narrative and
qualitative > letters)

“Good can be the enemy
of great, but great can be
the enemy of done”

Rubrics – set clear
expectations

Get it done, then get in
deep

Extra credit / passion
projects – use liberally

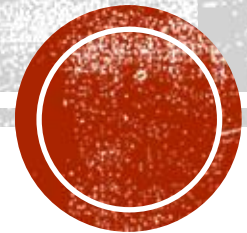
Focus on the process, not
the content (especially
grades) – help the
students find the positive
in whatever they were
able to do.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO





SEARCH FOR STRENGTHS



LET'S BE "ANTI-PERFECT"

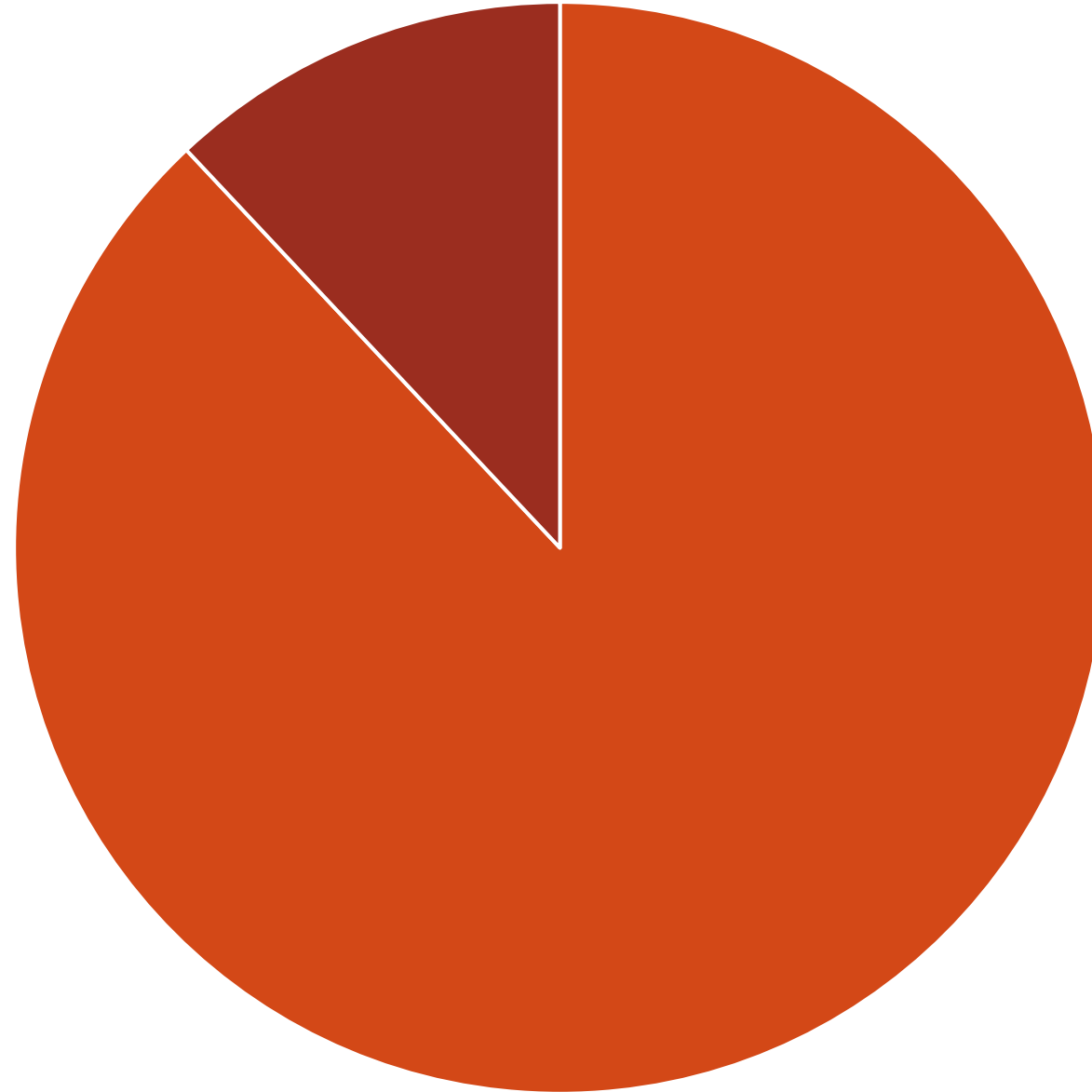
- Context ALWAYS matters
- Perfect is boring!
- “You either win, or you learn.”
- The 93/7 Rule
- Everyone gets feedback. Everyone Googles. Everyone has to try again sometimes
- Struggling means that you’re going in the right direction.
- “Done is better than perfect.”
- Frequent Attempts in Learning (F.A.I.L.)



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Your Chosen Area

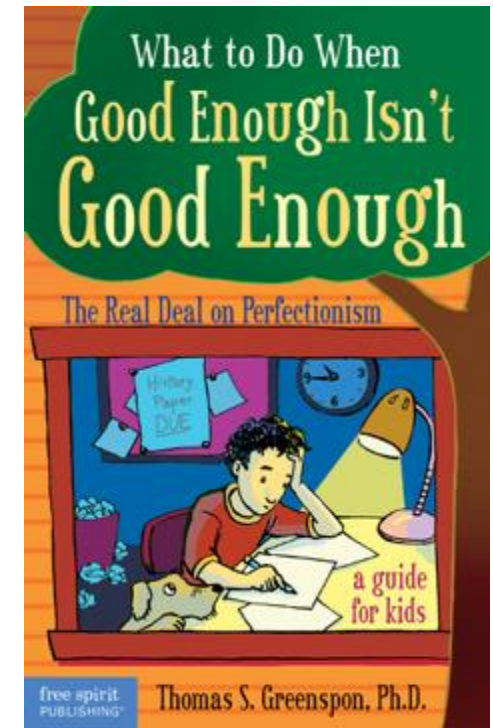
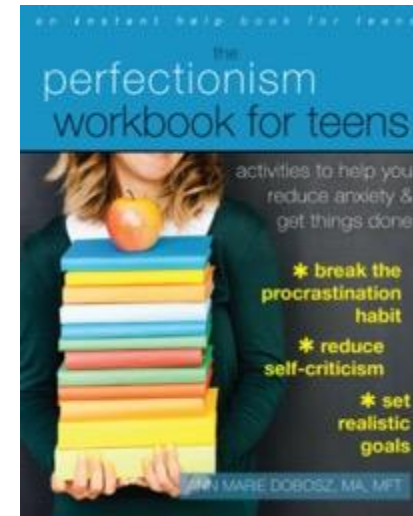


■ Item A ■ Item B



MORE RESOURCES

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAoakO64ixA>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPL2FE7ZPTg> (TedX Syracuse)
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GR_hq7OVzHU (TedX University of Nevada)
- <https://www.anxietycanada.com/sites/default/files/Perfectionism.pdf>
- <http://kennethwang.com/apsr/scales/APSR-English.pdf>
- <https://www.psycom.net/perfectionism-teen-anxiety/>
- <https://middleearthnj.wordpress.com/2019/10/14/how-to-combat-perfectionism-in-teens/>
- <https://www.withunderstandingcomescalm.com/perspective-perseverance-perfectionism/> (for 2e learners)





Give feedback to Dr. Matt

Scan this QR code



Or go to

<https://talk.ac/drmattzakreski>

and enter this code when prompted

WTWG

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QUESTIONS?

- Feel free to email me at drmatt@theneurodiversitycollective.com
- Follow me at www.facebook.com/drmattzakreski
- Check out www.theneurodiversitycollective.com or www.drmattzakreski.com



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