

Top 10 Executive Function Skills to Turn It Around

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SPEAKERS

Seth Perler

 Seth Perler 00:00

Hey students, what's up? It's me, Seth. Parents, teachers, this one I made for students. You obviously will want to watch this and I think you're gonna love this one parents and teachers. Students, I think you're gonna like it too. I made it just for you. So, what's up? My name is Seth. I'm an executive function coach, which means that I help struggling students navigate this thing called education so that you can have an awesome life. And I was speaking in some conference thing the other day and this, I got this question in the Q&A that was a really good question. Let me tell you this little background here. Basically, here's the deal. I have always struggled with ADHD, executive function, these sorts of things. I was not a good student. I knew that I was smart, but I just was not good at doing the school thing. I almost failed out of high school, I did fail out of college, I went to another college and almost failed out but I dropped out before I failed out. So I felt like a failure and I felt like I was lazy. Feeling like a lazy failure really held me back because those are just stories that I really used as excuses to not do things that I needed to do to have a good life. This person asked me in the Q&A, they said, because I'm always teaching people like how do you work with this stuff? You know, what do you need to do, or what works?

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They asked me, "Seth, what was the most important executive function skill you learned," they asked for one thing, "to help me become successful." Today, I have a good life happy life, I love my life. And I get to be free, and have choices, and opportunities, and possibilities in my life. I'm not limited like I was when I was struggling with a lot of executive function stuff. So basically, I gave them the same answer and then I thought, you know what, this would make a great vlog for you all. So what I'm going to do is I'm going to tell you my top 10, and I have a bonus one for you. I'm gonna do them in reverse order, sort of, but my number one that I get to is going to be the one that I answered this person, that is my number one. So leading up to number one, number 10. You have to understand first that executive function skills are interrelated, they all work together. So if I talk about organization and planning, those two things have to do with each other. So these are interrelated. Number two, you need to understand, students, that executive function skills are skills. You can practice them like guitar to get good at them, like riding a bike, like anything that you're good at, like video games, like using technology, anything that you're good at is a skill that you've practiced. The problem is we often haven't practiced these skills. But that's what these are.

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Number 10: So number 10, number 10. The number 10 executive function skill that helped me to change from a failure to being able to go back to college, being able to get excellent grades, be successful, have a great college experience and create a great life for myself. The number 10 one is what's called metacognition. Metacognition is you or me looking at myself, honestly. So metacognition, introspection, self-reflection, self-awareness, mindfulness, consciousness, these things are all similar. But let's talk about in terms of self-awareness. Am I aware that building the skill of being aware of who I really am, what my strengths and weaknesses are? Because what I did, is I lied to myself. I told myself, "I can get this assignment done in five minutes. Oh, I'll get it done tomorrow. I'll get it done later tonight. Oh, I'll procrastinate on it but I'll get it done." I would lie to myself, and I would think it would be easy, and I would think that I would just get it done. It would take me forever. So being able to be self-aware is a skill. Because it's easier to just lie to ourselves until it's not easier to lie yourself, you know what I mean? So that was a skill I had to build. That was one of the key skills that I built to turn my life around was self-awareness, metacognition.

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Number 9: Number two executive function skill, or number nine, is focus. Focus skills, skills to focus. Focus, concentration, attention, same thing. What's the opposite of focus? Distraction, distractibility, not focused, not paying attention, not concentrating. So I had

to build skills to focus because I couldn't focus. Okay, I had to build skills. It didn't just come because I wanted it to, I had to work at it. It's a skill. These focus skills helped me with study skills, because before then I didn't really study. I always put the least amount of effort into it as possible. Reading skills, I skimmed things, I pretended like I was reading. I would read pages of things and be like, "I don't even know what I just read. This is stupid. I'm not gonna waste my time on this." And I gave up. I had to build the skills in college to learn how to read again. Seriously, I had to re-learn how to read. Listening skills, listening to a teacher, paying attention, focusing. I'd be wanting to daydream so much, la-la-la, teachers talking. I would have to learn and practice the skill of focusing. I'd have to practice skill of getting rid of distractions along with the skill of focusing, I can turn off anything that's a distraction. Close anything that's a distraction. That's a skill to override that.

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Number 8: Planning skills, I was able to turn my life around because I worked on my planning, my calendaring, my agendas. I learned to have certain planning skills, like one of them was to over plan. So I would think, "Oh, I'm going to work on, I'm going to plan a half hour to study for this test." While I learned that I really needed to plan two hours to study for a test for one hour because I would lie to myself or I would mis-estimate how long things would be. I learned to overplay and that was a skill because I underestimate the amount of time and energy it takes to do my homework and studying. I learned to plan my study times, which I hadn't been doing. I learned to plan, I got everything on my planner. That was a skill because I learned that I can't rely on my brain and I shouldn't rely on my brain for planning, and for remembering details, and remembering what my homework is and when the test is. I used to try to keep it all in my head, and I thought that I was doing it even though I was lying to myself, but I wasn't as evidenced by my D's and F's and everything.

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Number 7: The next one, number seven is self-starting skills. I am a procrastinator, I do not feel motivated to start things. So I had to learn how do you self-start. And what I thought I would do is I would wait until I was motivated, I do not do that anymore. I learned to not wait until I was motivated because that doesn't work. I'm never motivated do something I'm not motivated to do. So I procrastinate a lot and I had to learn how to self-start. In doing that I learned to use timers, I learned to use accountability, that we'll talk about more in a minute. I learned to chunk things down into small chunks that I could see myself actually doing it, you know, five minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes of something. Rather than thinking, you know, "I'm going to study forever," I would study for long periods of time. But

in order to start, I had to think of it as a smaller chunk. So anyhow, I had to build skills for starting skills for starting. It's not just, "Hey, choose to start, you just need to motivate yourself." I don't do that. So I had to trick myself into starting. I had to learn those skills.

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Number 6: Next, number six. Maintenance skills. One of my problems was that I might set up a great system of folders, I might set up my bedroom, or office, or study area in a great way. I might, you know, organize all my papers, or all my emails, and get everything organized. Well, the problem was that I didn't maintain those organizational systems. I didn't maintain my planners. Because I didn't maintain them, they fell apart. What I had to do is learn that it's not just do it once and you're done. Like I have to maintain it's like sharpening a sword, you know, gets the dollar. So you have to maintain it. And with a car, you have to get oil changes to maintain it. Like I had to maintain my systems, my organization, all of those things.

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Number 5: The next number five was Frankenstudy skills. So basically that was I had to learn how to take notes, how to study, how to show up to class on time, how to do all these things my way. There are so many people that give advice, "Here's how you use a calendar, and a planner, and the folders, and the three-ring binders." Some of it worked for me and some didn't. But what I had to learn was to take the advice that they gave me and pick the parts of it that I liked and apply it to myself and not just say, what I used to do is I'd be like, "Oh, planning doesn't work for me." And I would make these stupid excuses, "Oh, yeah, studying doesn't work for me. Oh, that doesn't blah blah". I would have these things and I would just put myself in a position where I'm not able to get anything done. I'm lying to myself, saying it doesn't work for me because I wanted to give up because it wasn't easy. I just wanted to do things that were easy. That did not get me anywhere in life. The next one is the sacred, oh, you know what, with my own Frankenstudy skills, I learned to tape record my notes. Not the teachers lectures, but my notes, me reading my notes and listening to them. Oh my gosh, I felt like I was cheating. It was so easy. I would hear my notes, and then I could hear them in my head. It was one of the most helpful things ever did. I would draw my notes, I would doodle on my notes, I would make visual reminders for myself. All these things to Frankenstudy and tailor it to myself really worked for me. Drawing my notes, I'm creative and drawing my notes, just drawing and doodling on them really helped me learn faster and easier. My notes did not look like anybody else's outline notes, like my notes look like a big piece of art and I learned better that way.

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Number 4: Sacred study space skills, number four. I had to build skills to maintain a study space. Right now, I'm sitting at my sacred study space. Literally, I'm at a standing desk, I have my chair, I sometimes stand when I'm working, I have my microphone here, I have my drawer with all my sticky notes, I have whiteboards, I have everything in the sacred study space. It's clean, I have the lighting I want, I have plants here. I've made it mine, I had to learn to create it. I couldn't just study at the table, I couldn't study in bed, I couldn't study on the couch, you know. Because when I did that, I didn't get anything done and it took me forever. I wanted to get on to doing fun things and really learn how to study. So making a great sacred study space was number four.

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Number 3: The decision-making skill. Part of executive function, part of what the front part of our brain does is executive function. It does all those things that I mentioned, but this also helps us to make good decisions or not make good decisions. With my executive function, I did not make a lot of good decisions. I had to learn to do what I call take contrary action. Meaning my first decision that I make in my mind usually is not a good one when it comes to school, because my first decision is "I'm going to put it off, I'm going to procrastinate, I'm going to make excuses. I'm going to get my parents off my back, my teachers off my back. Don't bug me, my decision is I don't want to do this thing, because I got more fun things to do." But that was setting me up for miserable life where I failed out of college, dropped out of the next college, I just didn't have a lot of opportunities and that did not work for me because I lied to myself. So with the decision-making, take contrary action. do the opposite of what I think I should do. My first instinct was "No, I don't want to do it." Doing the opposite of those things was really important in my decision making.

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Number 2: The number two skill was the accountability skill. That means going to study groups telling my parents, "Hey, will you bug me about this? Will you remind me about this?" Telling friends, "Will you remind me about this?" Telling people, "Oh yes, I will be there at the study group. I will study with you from this time to this time." Accountability. I wasn't motivated to do all my work on my own, but when I would tell people I'll be there, I at least would show up and get a bunch of stuff done with other people. It was more fun that way. Accountability on Zoom, or whatever, there's so many ways to have accountability but that was the next skill.

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Number 1: Now, the number one most important skill, when this person asked this question, executive function skill that I used to turn my life around, the number one most important thing is, literally the number one most important thing that turned my life around is learning the skills of asking for help. It's so hard to ask for help. It was so hard for me to ask for help at first. That got easy, I didn't know it would be so easy until I tried it several times. Advocating for myself saying, "I care about myself, I love myself, I want to have a good life. I don't care that my brain tells me not to do a bunch of stuff. I'm going to figure this out. I'm not going to let my mind hold me back with my resistance and my decision-making. I'm going to make a good life for myself. And I need help. I cannot figure this out. I don't know how to do this. Other people have figured it out, I'm going to ask people, how do you do this? I will go to office hours with professors or teachers. I would go to the writing center, the tutoring center, tutors, therapists," I've had plenty of therapists, they've been so helpful to me. Some people think that seeing therapists or counselors or psychiatrists or psychologists means that there's something wrong with you. There's nothing wrong with me, I'm not broken, I don't need to be fixed. I am good enough. But asking those people, therapists, they know what they're doing. That's what they're trained in, for help. They have helped my life. Tutors have helped my life. Getting tutors proactively, not waiting until there's a problem and learning to ask for help before this problem. Like at the beginning of a semester, math was hard for me. So I would go to the tutors at the beginning of the semester and get off on a strong footing with that. Asking for help is the number one most important thing. Telling my parents, "Hey, I need help. I don't know how to do this." Telling my friends, "I don't know how to." It's so easy for me nowadays to say "Can you help me?" in any situation. It's crazy. It's just so easy now because I don't have my ego tied up and thinking that there's something wrong with me if I need help. Everyone needs help. Every single successful person, successful athlete, musician, artists, entrepreneur, every single successful person that you admire and respect has learned to ask for help. They would not be where they are without asking for help. None of them. I 100% guarantee that.

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Bonus Skill: And I told you I do a bonus, so those were the 10, my bonus is this. My bonus skill that I learned, and I think this is really important, really big picture, but the bonus skill that I learned that really helped my life and really help me be happy is the skill of service. The skill of giving. Every Sunday I make a video for people, why? I want to give, this is part of how I give back to the world. People gave to me, I give it back. The skill of service, of helping people, helping my parents with the dishes or cleaning the house and not complaining, like offering help. Helping somebody who's in trouble, helping somebody who's broken down on the side of the road with their car, like just being helpful to people

and not expecting anything, just being helpful to be helpful is one of the biggest skills. It's called generosity. We live in a scarcity world, a world that says, "Oh, I'm not going to have enough." But the trick is that the more we give, the more we get. The more we're giving, the more we really get. It brings us happiness and joy, it brings us connection. So service, generosity, and kindness. Kindness. Building the kindness skills, like really trying to be of service, to be helpful, to be generous, to be kind to people, has been one of the best things I've ever done in my life.



Seth Perler 15:41

So there you go. There are 10 executive function skills, tips. And those are really real things that really helped me turn my life around when I was in a really scary dark place where I felt really hopeless and I felt like I wasn't going to be able to make anything of myself. Those are the things that helped me. Again, my name is Seth Perler. Give us a thumbs up if you like it. Leave a comment. What skills have been most important for you? Or what skills do you really want to develop to create more change in your life? What stood out to you? And leave a comment below, and on my website, SethPerler.com. Go ahead and subscribe, I send something out every Sunday. The world needs you. You have amazing talent, skills, and gifts. And we need you to develop who you are. I hope this was helpful to you. Have a fantastic day, go connect with people, go laugh with people, go be good yourself. Take care.