

# Dr. Liz Angoff

Assessment and support services for students, families and educators.

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## Keeping Kids Motivated in Online Learning

For most students, *getting stuff done* in the online learning world is extremely challenging. However, motivation is actually a **set of skills**. And if we're talking about skills, that means adults can teach it, and students can learn it!

### Why Students Can't Get Things Done

The first step to getting things done is figuring out what's getting in the way. This starts by asking your student:

*I've noticed you've been having difficulty getting \_\_\_ done. What's up?\**

Then, listen to what they have to say. Their response is likely to fall into one of 5 categories:

- Too Much
- Too Hard
- Too Boring
- Too Distracted
- Too Pointless

While many students will have some sort of answer, they may need some help digging deeper to figure out what's making it so hard. This post will help you and your student find the language to explain what's getting in the way, as well as strategies to try out for each obstacle.

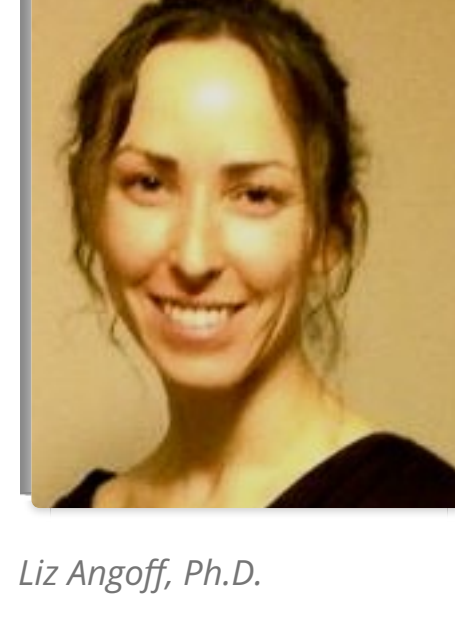
You can access the full list of strategies here:

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Liz Angoff, Ph.D.

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### Obstacle #1: Too Much

Many students are feeling completely overwhelmed in the online world. That feeling of overwhelm is a huge obstacle to motivation.

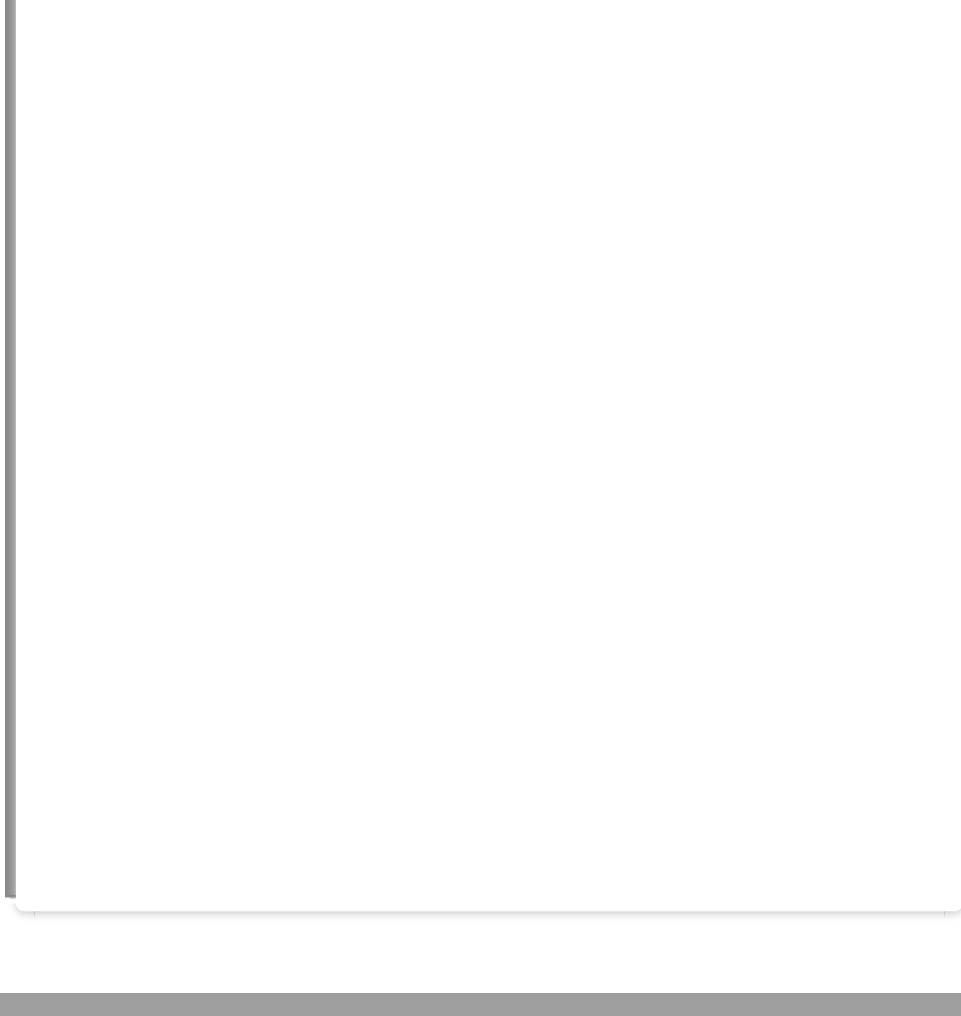
Students may struggle to get started on an assignment because it is just too big, or they may feel overwhelmed by the length of their "to-do" list and have no idea where to begin. If you can't see the end, why even start?

You may hear them say:

- There are too many things I have to do.
- This is going to take way too long.
- This hurts my brain!

Here are a few things you can do to help:

- **Make a plan** – even if you deviate from your plan, *the act of making the plan* will help your brain stay organized
- **Make a list** of small steps using post-its or a whiteboard so it is easy to remove items once complete
- **Estimate** the time for each step
- **Work in small time chunks** (10-20 minutes) or use the [Pomodoro](#) method
- **Use small rewards** after completing each piece
- **Cut the work in half** (or more) so it's less daunting
- **Rate and delegate:**
  - Rate each task on a scale of 1-5 for *importance* and a scale of 1-5 for *urgency*
  - Complete the important and urgent items first
  - Schedule or make a plan for the things that are important but not urgent
  - Delegate or ask for help with things that are urgent but not important
  - Leave for later (or drop entirely) things that are neither important nor urgent



### Obstacle #2: Too Hard

Of course, sometimes things are just too hard. This may take some students by surprise during online learning because they may have been getting a lot of little supports from being physically at school. Now on their own, things seem so much harder.

You may hear them say:

- I don't understand.
- My teacher didn't explain it.
- I don't want to!

Here are a few things that may help:

- **Ask a teacher.** Remember that this is much harder in the online world and your student may need help (see item #2 in my [previous post](#)).
- **Phone a friend.** It can often be easier to understand it from a peer than a teacher.
- **Use visual prompts** to map out the concepts
- **Chunk the assignment** into small, manageable steps
- **Use self-talk** or positive mantras to talk yourself through

### Obstacle #3: Too Boring

Boring is a popular word right now. Not being in school with all your friends and teachers is boring.

You may hear them say:

- Arrrrg!
- I'm so bored!
- Can I go outside now?

When things are boring, it's nearly impossible to stay motivated. Besides, life in general is much more boring right now, without our typical activities available. Empathize with your student... and then try this:

- **Work in small time chunks** (10-20 minutes) or use the [Pomodoro](#) method
- **Alternate** between preferred and non-preferred tasks
- **Use small rewards** to mark progress
- **Take brain breaks** to keep energy levels up – do pushups, go for a walk, do a handstand, jump, etc.
- **Connect** the assignment to real-world goals or skills
- **Add a layer of interesting** by asking your teacher if you can turn the assignment into a video project, oral presentation, or art project – this may give your student an opportunity to practice other skills even if the content is not their jam

### Obstacle #4: Too Distracted

Being at home is distracting. Students are struggling to get things done because there are many more interesting things to do, and fewer people telling them not to. There's also a lot more to worry about, and adults can't always guarantee it's "going to be ok," because we're all pretty worried, too.

You may hear them say:

- Wait, what assignment?
- Just let me check this one thing on TikTok...
- I'm stressed out about other things and can't focus.

Here are some things that may help:

- **Set up controls** on the phone and computer for restricting certain websites during work time – I recommend doing this with your child, not to your child
- **Write the schedule** or task list on a large, always-visible surface
- **Cut down the assignment** or amount of homework – many students can do more when there's less to do
- **Take a lot of short breaks** – make a list of 2-5 minute breaks that don't involve screens (movement, snack, chatting with someone)
- **Talk it out** – ask what's on their mind and take a moment to give space to those worries without necessarily trying to solve them

### Obstacle #5: Too Pointless

We are all struggling with fatigue: pandemic fatigue, Zoom fatigue, tech-failure fatigue, and – if you're on the west coast like me – too-smoky-to-even-go-outside fatigue. It's no wonder things feel exhausting and pointless. In other words, your student may simply be sad, which is a very normal reaction to quite abnormal circumstances.\*\*

You may hear them say:

- Why bother?
- No! [hides under covers]
- This is dumb.

Here are some things that may help:

- **Find your why.** Regardless of what the school says, what is your goal for this year? Get better at typing? Learn video editing? Become an expert on \_\_\_ by making every project about it? Start your YouTube channel?
- **Focus more on resiliency skills** and less on academic skills. Help your student learn to roll with tech glitches, to empathize with teachers trying the best they can, to get creative about solving problems, and to notice when friends need help.
- **Listen and empathize.** Your student may need a space to say (a lot) how much this all sucks. You can empathize without trying to "fix" it (because we can't fix it right now) by saying:
  - You're right.
  - What's making it particularly hard today?
  - I hear you.
  - That sounds really tough.
  - (And not adding "but..." or "why don't you just...")
- **Connect, connect, connect.** As much as possible, do work with friends, have socially-distanced study dates, and find ways to help others.

\*\*Note: If your child shows extreme signs of withdrawal, has had a dramatic change in mood, or is talking about self-harm, please contact a mental health professional or the [Suicide Prevention Hotline](#) for support.

### General Notes

Overall, difficulties with motivation mean difficulties with problem-solving skills. By helping students understand what's getting in the way, we can help them get through.

Remember that your student's (and your) bandwidth is much smaller during this time. Above all else, learning to cut things into smaller pieces, prioritize, and connect to the "why" are skills that will help increase motivation through these challenging times – and beyond.

**If it seems possible and feels useful, it's way easier to get it done.**

I hope this was helpful! Hang in there everyone.

*Special thanks to Dr. Peg Dawson for the document that inspired this post. Check out the [Smart, but Scattered](#) series for more about her very practical approaches to developing executive skills.*

\*From the [Collaborative Proactive Solutions](#) approach to helping children with challenges.

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