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IS YOUR STUDENT READY FOR COLLEGE?

*Launching the
Adolescent Brain
into Post-Secondary
Education*

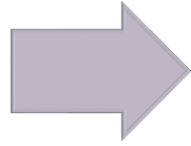
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Director, STEP Autism Support Program
Eastern Illinois University

What Everyone is Hoping For...

Self-Determination

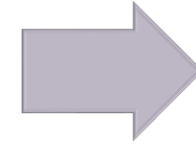
- Set goals
- Make choices
- Make decisions
- Advocate for self

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Self-Management

- Self monitor
- Self-evaluate
- Self-regulate



Independence

- Personal care
- Community and peer interactions
- Financial or vocational

Adjustment Challenges

- *“Nobody is reminding me anymore”*
- *“I usually get prompts”*
- *“I thought I had turned it in”*
- *“I usually didn’t have any due dates”*
- *“I didn’t realize how hard college actually was”*
- *“I only want to study what I like”*
- *“I didn’t realize how much I would have to do on my own”*
- *“It went really well” (getting a 20% on an exam)*
- *“I think I threw my phone away”*
- *“We didn’t realize how much help we were giving...”*

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Brain Development

When are we 'done'?

Age 12

During adolescence, the brain goes through a lot of changes. Gray matter diminishes as connections between neurons are cut back.

Age 16

Because the brain is still developing, it is more sensitive to the effects of drugs.

Age 20

By adulthood, the changes caused by beginning drug use are less likely to “stick” and become hardwired as addiction.

— Less
Developed

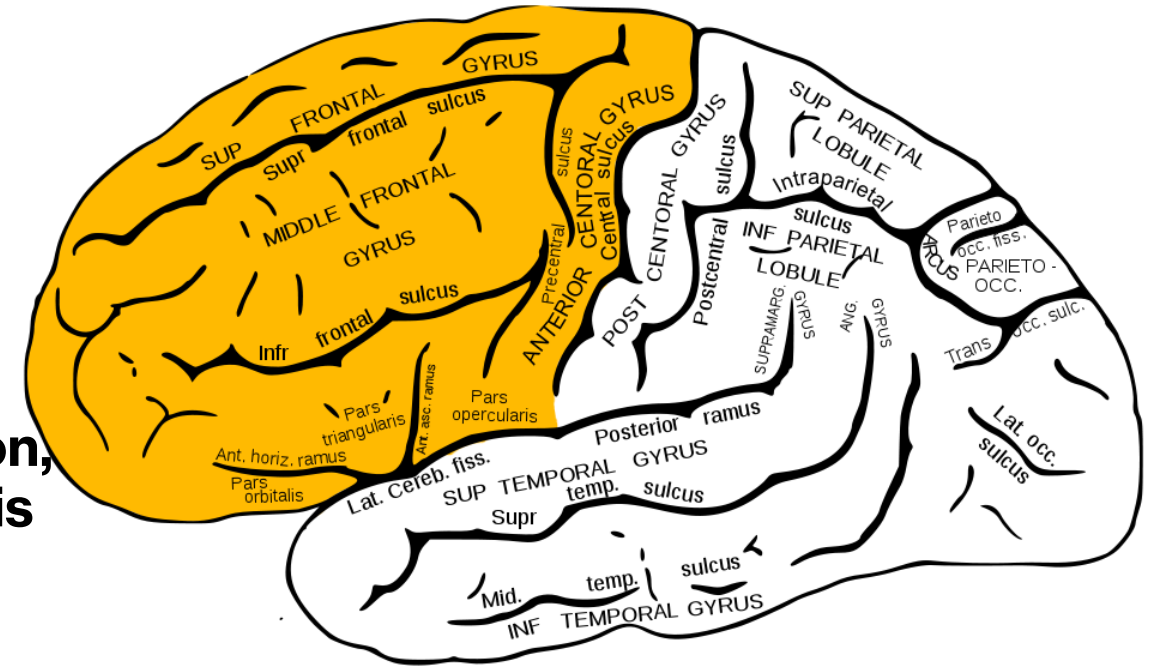
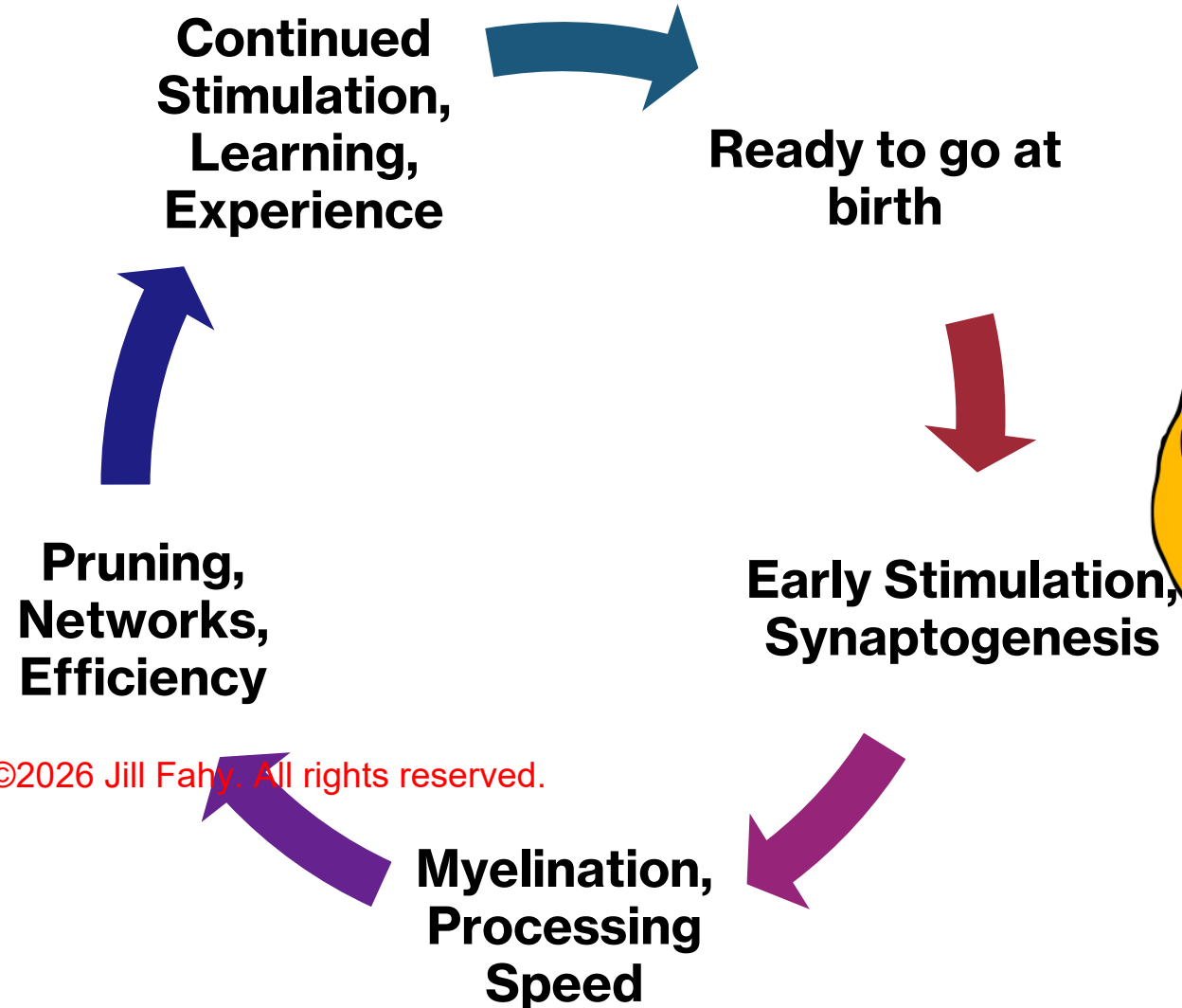
<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2008/09/15/health/20080915-brain-development.html#:~:text=Red%2C%20yellow%20and%20orange%20patterns,a%20maturing%20of%20the%20brain.>

Brain images courtesy of Dr. Paul Thompson, University of California, Los Angeles. Source information provided by Dr. Jay Giedd, National Institutes of Mental Health. Produced by Tara Parker-Pope, Jon Huang, and Mike Mason/The New York Times



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Neurological Maturation



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The Teenage Brain

Another Critical Development Period

- Executive Functions
- Emotional Processing
- Social Perception
- Strategic Planning
- Abstract Language
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- Critical Thinking
- Self-Regulation



Threats to Adolescent Brain Development

- Sleep deprivation
- Disrupted consistency of sleep routines
- Chronic stress/environmental-situational trauma
- Prolonged screen time
- Social withdrawal/disrupted connections
- On top of genetic, developmental, SES circumstances
- ©2026 Jill Fahy. All rights reserved. **Undermine assumed 'routines'** *that actually require teaching, practice, and experience....*



Brains Need Practice

Thinking, Evaluating

Observing, Comparing

Anticipating, Deciding

Strategizing, Regulating

Initiating, Persisting

Shifting, Adapting, Coping

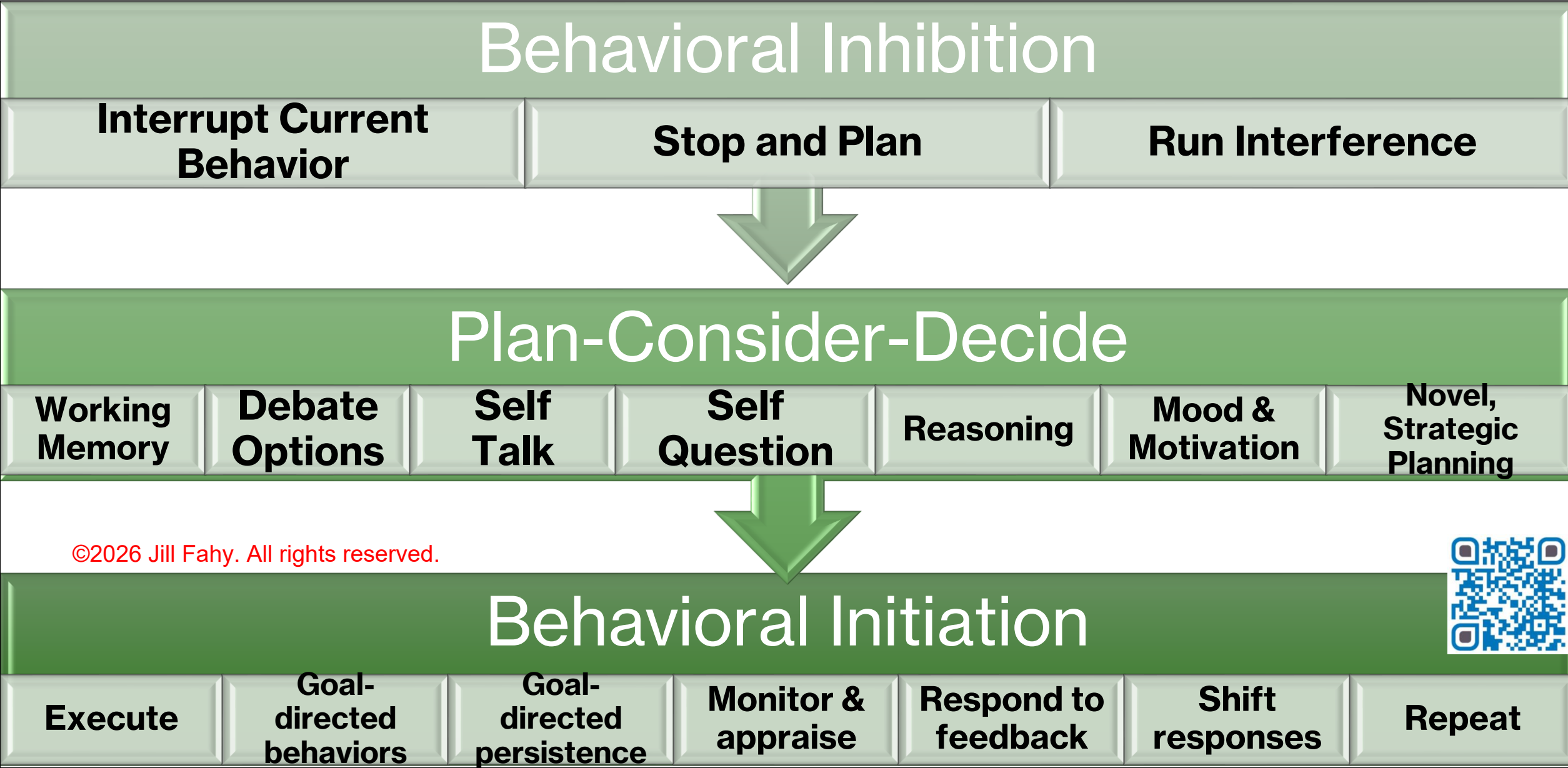
Tolerating, Delaying

Interpreting, Connecting, Advocating

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Executive Functions: *How We Self-Regulate*



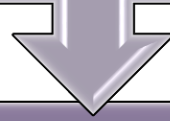
Development of Executive Functions

Birth – Five: EXTERNAL Monitoring

Simple Inhibition (Shifting)

Sustained Attention (WM)

Minimal Strategic Planning



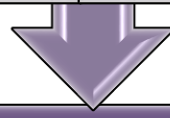
Childhood (7-12): Shift to INTERNAL Monitoring

More Controlled Inhibition

Shifting Emerges Separate from Inhibition & WM

Selective Attention/WM

Simple Strategic Planning



Adolescence (13-15): Develop INTERNAL Monitoring

Relatively Mature Inhibition

Relatively Mature Shifting

Alternating Attention

Working Memory

Complex Planning



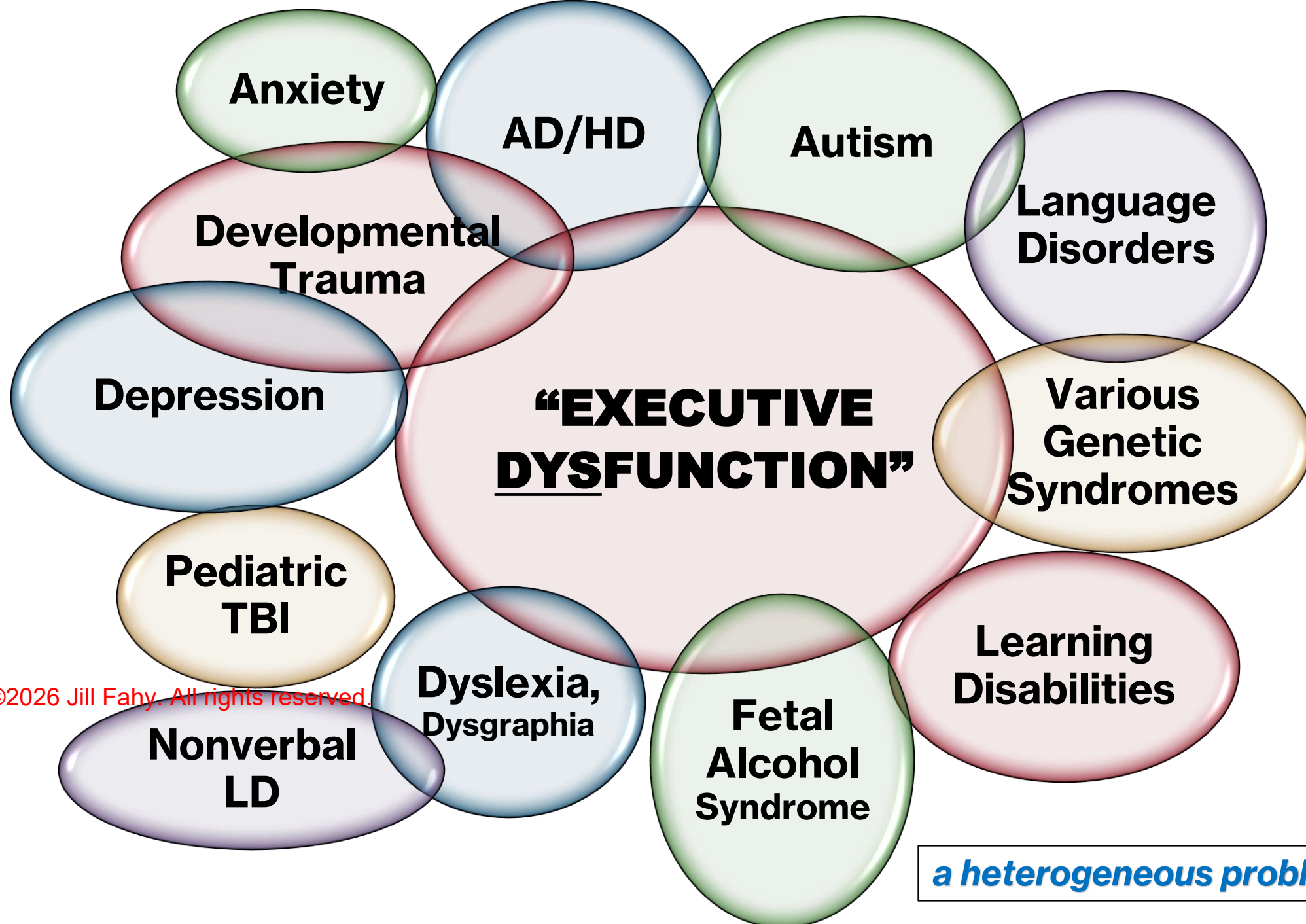
Late Teen/Early Adult: Practice/Refine SELF-MONITORING

Abstract Language, Social Perception, Verbal Reasoning

Practice Using EFs in Complicated, Complex, Real-World Demands

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a heterogeneous problem



ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS

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- ☐ Reasonably aware of differences between HS & college
- ☐ Desire to continue with academic studies towards end goal
- ☐ Mostly gen ed and/or some college prep classes

- ☐ Manage own sleep, wake, screens, meds, nutrition routines
- ☐ Have mental health supports in place
- ☐ Use emotional coping strategies to live away from home

- ☐ Make daily decisions to meet obligations and priorities
- ☐ Experience using planners to track, update, anticipate
- ☐ Read and answer texts, emails, calls
- ☐ Able to redirect self to classroom instruction
- ☐ Able to self-start academic work outside of class

- ☐ Reasonably aware of supports & strategies they have/need
- ☐ Open to collaboration, learning, and practice
- ☐ Ready to seek and make use of supports on campus

COMMON THREATS TO COLLEGE SUCCESS

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- ☐ Unable to manage self-care routines (sleep, wake, meds, food, hygiene)
- ☐ Lack experience making routine daily decisions, solving problems
- ☐ Unable to regulate screen time or other extracurriculars

- ☐ Inconsistent/inadequate coping strategies undermine efforts to adjust
- ☐ Comorbid psychiatric disorders may undermine all else, if unmanaged
- ☐ Underestimate timing and workload of a typical semester
- ☐ Not fully aware of college demands, differences from high school

- ☐ Lack insight into their own learning profile
- ☐ May not want to take advantage of supports on campus
- ☐ Underestimate help they have had or may still need
- ☐ Assumes others will oversee, direct, advise, confirm, remind, solve

- ☐ INSUFFICIENT PRACTICE!
- ☐ Need to experience noticing, considering, deciding, doing

COLLEGE READY?

Be realistic
Be honest
Find the gap

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- ☐ How much help are you providing?
- ☐ What kind of help are you providing?
- ☐ How often, when, where are you offering those supports?
- ☐ What environmental structure is embedded at home?
- ☐ What environmental structure is embedded at school?
- ☐ Who manages information, details, correspondence?
- ☐ Who manages due dates, grades, assignments?
- ☐ Who manages getting to sleep, waking up, getting ready?
- ☐ Who manages filling and taking meds, making food choices?
- ☐ Who regulates screen time?
- ☐ Who decides daily schedules, priorities, activities?
- ☐ Who evaluates academic needs, skills, or success?



WHO IS DRIVING THE BUS?

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WHO IS PLANNING DAILY LIFE?

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HOW AWARE IS THE STUDENT OF THEIR SUPPORT SYSTEMS?

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Assumptions.....

He'll figure it out when he gets there.

I've talked with them about how important it is to.....

She just needs someone to show her how to.....

He does it by himself at home. I think it will be fine at college.

She's pretty independent. I just remind her, check on it, organize it, confirm it.

They're still working on getting organized. I usually help after dinner.

Her teachers do a great job of making sure she is following along.

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KEY DIFFERENCES to Consider

High School	College
IDEA – Individuals w/Disabilities Act	<i>ADA – Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990/2008 Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 Ensure equal access. No discrimination</i>
IEPs or 504 Plans	<i>NO IEPs or 504s</i>
Accommodations, modifications, specialized instruction ensure success	<i>No modifications or specialized instruction; accommodations to ensure access</i>
Team delivered supports	<i>No case manager, team coordinator</i>
Student receives supports from team	<i>Student must initiate, communicate</i>
©2026 Jill Fahy. All rights reserved. Parents may be heavily involved	<i>Parents have no access to student's plans, grades, needs</i>
Documentation process will change....	<i>May need comprehensive evaluations beyond school based – PLAN AHEAD</i>



MORE DIFFERENCES IN COLLEGE: Accommodations, not Modifications

- **Accommodations – provide equal access to learning environment**
 - *But do not necessarily guarantee success*
 - **No change in content, curriculum, instruction, assessment, responsibilities**
 - Extra time on tests or quizzes, alternative test-taking environment
 - Note taker or audio record lectures, speech-to-text notes, Priority registration
- Modifications alter requirements – typically does NOT happen in college
 - Provided to work towards success, coordinated by others
 - Changes in content, curriculum, evaluation, grading
 - Specialized or differentiated instruction
 - Waived or modified requirements ‘might’ occur in college – exception

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Shifting Responsibilities to the Student

**College
Framework**

**College
Environment**

**College
Requirements**

**STUDENT
MANAGES**

- Most HW done outside of class
- ©2026 Jill Fahy. All rights reserved. Self-directed academic work, learning, connecting
- Self-directed daily decisions, problem solving, schedu"



But What About General Academic Supports In College?

- **Yes! But, not individualized, specialized, or intensive instruction**
- Typical college support systems:
 - Disability Services/Office of Accessibility & Accommodations
 - Academic Support Services, campus writing centers
 - Departmental tutors, professor office hours
- Again – these are student initiated, student driven!
 - Student must self-analyze own learning, thinking, academics, grades
 - Student must seek, read, apply feedback, anticipate problems or gaps
 - Student must communicate, explain, inquire, follow-up, etc.

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Neurodivergent Support Programs

- Post-secondary ed students w/diagnoses on ND spectrum, or ASD only
 - Degree-seeking, academically college-ready
 - Need to have supporting documentation*
 - Over 100 across the nation, both in public and private universities
- Varied types of support, structure
 - Social structure, peer support, events
 - Executive function skill-building/strategies
 - Strategic/effective communication skill-building/strategies
 - Academic coaching, pre-advising support
 - Housing, move-in, orientation, schedules
- May be associated with different departments or professionals on campus

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What is Right for Your Student?

- Many factors, no 'one' right answer
- Goals, interests
- Academic readiness
- Self-awareness, insight into needs
- Nature of supports, structure needed
- Essential executive functions
- Essential coping & adjustment skills
- ©2026 Jill Fahy. All rights reserved. Essential self-care/daily management
- Experience driving their day



Considering College Options

COMMUNITY COLLEGE

- 2-year associate's degree
- General education requirements
- Certifications, technical training
- Less risky commitment
- 1-2 lower-level college courses/semester
- Gradual shift in responsibility, advocacy
- Explore interests and options
- Time for maturity, development
- Practice and refine skills
- Smaller scale

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UNIVERSITY

- 4-year bachelor's degree
- Graduate degrees
- Internship opportunities
- Major commitment
- Taking 4-5 college-level courses/semester
- Abrupt shift in responsibility, advocacy
- Self-management from day one
- Less time for maturity, development
- More nuanced social demands
- Larger scale





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PARENTING FROM AFAR: Changes & Challenges



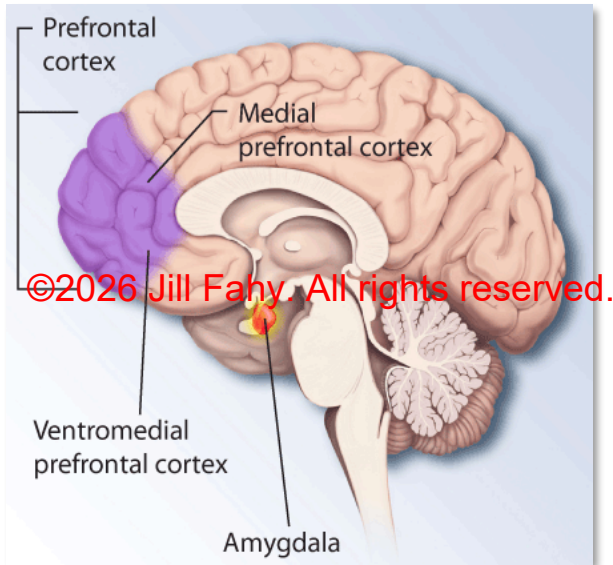
New Reality, New Role, New Worries

- Environment and systems expect student to solve
 - *Cannot manage your student's college email*
 - *Do not call student's professor*
- Student in charge of outcomes
 - *Or have and use scaffolded support that preserves self-determination, accountability*
- What does this mean?
- Deliberately prepare for transition
- Seek to find balance with new role

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Teach skills
Practice skills
Allow for failure
More practice
Handoff skills



- ❑ Skills, routines, habits need to be taught, not assumed
- ❑ Negotiate stages and steps to transition to the student
- ❑ Anticipate and provide ongoing, consistent opportunities to practice – double or triple the time you might otherwise think
- ❑ Allow for extra time so student can think through options and strategies – if time allows in that moment
- ❑ Expect and plan for natural consequences and tolerable failure
- ❑ Negotiate what 'tolerable failure' means for you and student

Prefrontal cortex brain
development requires real-world
practice, novel or complicated
challenges, risk and failure



An Automatic Habit? *Or New Problem to Solve*

- Routines are 'automatic' - performed with min need for thought, effort, planning
- Unfamiliar problems require planning, self-control, analysis, monitoring, shifting
- **ROUTINES IN UNFAMILIAR PLACES ARE NOVEL**
- Making new things feel 'easy' requires repetition
- 66 days to reach automaticity (range 18 – 254 days)
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- Complex behaviors require more repetitions than simple behaviors
- Environmental engineering completely different between home – dorm



HOW TO MAKE A HABIT STICK?

Start small, write small steps, doable increments

Evaluate environment – what pulls me back to old routine

Engineer environment – what sets me up for new routine

Apply effort daily, consistently, purposefully – ‘big deal’

Be prepared for the old habit/routine to creep in

Do not give up if you miss the habit for a day

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Think long-term habit stacking

Prepare to transport habit to new environment

(ADDITUDE How to Change Hab
New Behaviors Stick“)



STRATEGY HIERARCHY

GET
AWARENESS

**WHY &
WHEN** use
strategies?

USE
strategies
independently

TEACH
strategies

USE
strategies
with support

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3 Levels of Awareness

- Problem? What problem? That was just.....
- Label consequences, risks, incongruous perceptions
 - *That was late, incomplete, inaccurate, dangerous, at risk*
 - *Actually, you have missed the last deadline*
 - *Actually, you haven't had your meds for 3 days*
- Label environmental organization
 - *Where we keep the...., how we update our....*
 - *How I remind myself...*
- Label your anticipation, planning, cues
 - *I noticed...., I'm reminding you about....*
- Label their use of strategies
 - *I noticed you're checking/considering.....*

ANTICIPATORY:
Anticipate failure & use strategies to minimize risk

EMERGENT:
Recognition of problems in the moment

INTELLECTUAL:
The idea that a problem even exists

Barco, Crosson, et al (1991)



Use Therapeutic* Failure to Build Awareness, Skills, Experience

- If you always intervene, and solve the problem
- You prevent learning opportunities to:
 - Gain awareness
 - Develop accurate sense of skills, needs, goals, supports
 - Attempts to self-monitor and self-solve
 - Practice EF skills, such as noticing, monitoring, anticipating, generating, prioritizing, shifting, starting, delaying, adjusting, etc.)

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*Allow
Opportunities
to Learn from
Mistakes*



How to Work Through Therapeutic Failure to Promote Learning

- Structure situations for gradual shift to student
- Scaffold environment for support as needed
- Label supports as they're offered
- Allow student to notice, realize, locate, plan....
- Allow practice generating solutions
- Allow practice predicting outcomes
- ©2026 Jill Fahy. All rights reserved. Wait for processing, conclusions, inferences, and the Ah-HAH moment
- Allow failure to occur within reason, as agreed
- Allow consequences to occur as agreed



Practice Managing Anxiety in Problem-Solving Moments

- Negotiate tolerable consequences. Where is the ceiling? Within that context:
 - Avoid totally controlling environment to eliminate all difficulty at all times
 - Avoid over-managing to prevent consequences or learning experiences
 - Avoid over-accommodating to create unrealistic conditions or insight
 - Avoid immediately fixing unexpected problems
- Use 'failures' as thinking moments to identify, describe, locate, consider, strategize, anticipate, predict
- Avoid 'routine' stress of thinking through a situation – *use as practice building resilience, confidence, and experience with the discomfort of figuring out*



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Use Guided Discovery

- Inquiry-based instruction for problem solving
- Pose yourself as a 'colleague' exploring and evaluating with student
- Notice and label the problem, desired outcome
- Resist natural urge to point out problem and offer solution (stressful....)
- Allow moment, situation to unfold in real time (within reason for safety, time)
- Ask discovery questions
 - Wonder what might work, wonder where we might find that
 - Wonder how that might turn out, wonder what might go wrong
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Wonder which things we would need in order to do that
- Foster insight through collaboration
- Promote the Ah-HAH! Insight (not just an answer)



Label Supports, Skills, Strategies

- Have honest conversations
- Provide concrete, specific descriptions of collegiate learning and living environments
- Do visits early and often
- Look at images of typical college dorm rooms
- Look at examples of course sequences for majors or minors
- Look at typical daily schedules
- Make the collegiate environment as real as possible
- **Academics? Yes..... Social? Yes.....**
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- But do not underestimate the necessity and importance of daily decision-making and self-care routines





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SKILLS TO PRACTICE



- ❑ EMAILS & TEXTS: Read, understand, capture, update, respond
- ❑ CLASS SYLLABI: Locate due dates, requirements, materials, assignments
- ❑ COURSE MATERIALS: Locate, collect, organize, manage, save, store, upload
- ❑ ONLINE LEARNING PLATFORMS: No more Google Classroom!
- ❑ MEDICATIONS: Organize, take, anticipate when out, call for refills
- ❑ HEALTH: Make daily choices for nutrition, exercise, sleep
- ❑ SLEEP/WAKE: Get self to sleep/wake up. Set & respond to alarms
- ❑ SCREENS: Regulate own screen time to prioritize sleep/other
- ❑ POSSESSIONS: Where, when, what, charged, ready, located, stored
- ❑ LAUNDRY: Wash, dry, fold/hang, sort, maintain
- ❑ ILLNESSES: Identify, rate, describe symptoms or pain
- ❑ HEALTHCARE: Determine when to see a physician, OTC meds, or

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SKILLS TO PRACTICE



- ☐ COPE & ADJUST: Have strategies on board before college
- ☐ TOLERATE STRESS: Reasonable degrees of stress – need practice
- ☐ MAKE APPOINTMENTS: With counselors, academic advisors, others
- ☐ PLAN A DAY: Look at obligations, schedule, appointments, times
- ☐ MONITOR TIME: Notice how long they require to be ready and prepared
- ☐ DOUBLE CHECK: Details, dates, times, requirements, notes, instructions
- ☐ SHIFT: Practice coming up with Plan A, Plan B, Plan C,.....
- ☐ BREAK IT DOWN: Practice listing as many steps as you can think of
- ☐ ANTICIPATE: What could go wrong?
- ☐ INSIGHT: What are my go-to strategies? When/why/how do I use?
- ☐ ORGANIZE: Engineer my environment – I keep these things HE
- ☐ FIND: Practice logical search patterns

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SKILLS TO PRACTICE



- ❑MANAGE ENVIRONMENT: Remove distractors, make essentials visible
- ❑ENGINEER STORAGE: Categorize by type, purpose, location, frequency
- ❑ESTABLISH ROUTINES: Label them, simplify them, do them over and over
- ❑EVALUATE ASSIGNMENTS: Do what? When/how/where? Find all materials
- ❑EVALUATE STUDYING: Memorize? Explain? Compare? Argue? Identify?
- ❑EVALUATE GRADES: Incomplete? Late? Inaccurate? Forgot to do?
- ❑PRACTICE STARTING: Starting is the accomplishment!
- ❑PRACTICE PERSEVERING: How long can I concentrate? What interferes?
- ❑BE REAL: No do-overs, no test-corrections, no full points late
- ❑USE A PLANNER: Practice owning the planner; it's a living document
- ❑CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR: Be present, share learning space, capture it
- ❑COMMUNICATION GOALS: Clarify? Inform? Correct? Inquire? Negotiate

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One more for the road.....

- Practice tolerating distress (theirs, and yours)
- Look closely at how much you are doing – be honest (it's ok)
- Anticipate time for teaching, scaffolding, practicing next-round skills
- Negotiate step-wise shifts in skills → routines → ownership of goals
- Set small, *verb-able*, discrete goals – daily, weekly
- Make targets visible – white board to track goals, self-cued, you-cued
- Try for consistency, accuracy, awareness, and self-regulation
- It isn't just about academics or even making friends.....
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- It's about driving your day, your self, and your life to your own satisfaction
- Hang on tight for the next round

