

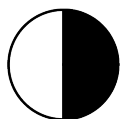
EXERCISE: THE UNSTUCK TOOLBOX

Sometimes you WANT to do something—clean your corner, organize your backpack, tackle a goal—but you just...can't. You're stuck. Frozen. Overwhelmed. Unmotivated. This isn't laziness. This is your brain and body protecting you from more stress.

This exercise gives you strategies to get unstuck and start moving again, even when it feels impossible.

Time Needed

5-30 minutes
(depending on which
strategy you use)



What You'll Need

Varies by strategy

Energy Level

Low

(These are designed for
for when you're stuck)



When to Do This

Whenever you feel paralyzed, overwhelmed,
or unable to start

Understanding “Stuck”

You might feel stuck when:

- You know what you need to do but can't make yourself start
- Everything feels like too much
- You're avoiding a task or space because it's overwhelming
- You keep saying, “I'll do it later,” but you never do
- You feel frozen even though you want to make progress
- You're exhausted just thinking about the task

Why you get stuck:

- The task feels too big
- You don't know where to start
- You're emotionally overwhelmed
- You're physically exhausted
- You're trying to do too much at once
- You're afraid of failing or not doing it perfectly
- The situation feels hopeless

Getting stuck is NOT:

- Laziness
- Not caring
- Being weak
- A character flaw

It's a sign you need a different approach.

The Unstuck Toolbox

Here are 10 strategies for getting unstuck. Try them in order, or jump to whichever one feels right for where you are.

Strategy 1: The Tiny First Step

When the whole task feels impossible, just do the TINIEST first step.

How it works:

- Break the task down into the smallest possible action
- Commit to ONLY that one tiny step
- Don't think about what comes after
- Just do the first micro-action

Examples:

Instead of:

- Clean my room
- Organize my desk
- Do my homework
- Get ready for bed

Tiny First Step:

- Pick up one piece of trash
- Move one item off my desk
- Open my notebook
- Stand up

The rule:

After the tiny step, you can stop if you want. Often, starting is the hardest part and you'll keep going. But if you don't, at least you did SOMETHING.

My tiny first step right now: _____

Strategy 2: The 2-Minute Rule

Commit to working on the task for ONLY 2 minutes. Set a timer.

How it works:

- Set a timer for 2 minutes
- Work on the task until the timer goes off
- When it beeps, you can stop - no guilt
- Often you'll keep going, but if not, 2 minutes is better than nothing

Why this works:

- 2 minutes feels manageable
- Starting is the hardest part
- Momentum builds once you begin
- Even 2 minutes of progress is progress

Set the timer. Do the thing. Stop when it beeps if you need to.

Strategy 3: Body Doubling

Do the task while someone else is nearby (even if they're not helping).

How it works:

- Ask someone to just BE in the room while you work
- They can do their own thing (homework, reading, phone)
- Their presence helps you stay focused and accountable
- You don't have to talk or explain; just having them there helps

Who could body double for you:

- Friend (in person or on video call)
- Sibling
- Parent (if relationship allows)
- Anyone who won't judge or criticize

Virtual body doubling:

- FaceTime/video call with a friend while you both work on your own stuff
- Join an online study room or accountability group
- Even just texting someone, "I'm doing this now," can help

Why this works:

Isolation makes tasks harder. Presence (even silent) provides motivation and accountability.

Strategy 4: The Bargain

Negotiate with yourself - trade something hard for something you want.

How it works:

- Pick a task you're avoiding
- Pick a reward you actually want
- Make a concrete deal with yourself
- Follow through on BOTH parts

Examples:

- "If I clean my calm corner for 10 minutes, I get 30 minutes of gaming"
- "If I organize my backpack, I can watch an episode of my show"
- "If I do my homework, I get to eat the snack I've been saving"
- "If I shower and brush my teeth, I can stay up an extra 30 minutes"

Rules for good bargains:

- The reward has to be IMMEDIATE (not “someday”)
- The reward has to be something you actually want
- You have to actually give yourself the reward (don’t cheat yourself)
- The task has to be specific and achievable

My bargain right now:

If I _____, then I get _____.

Strategy 5: Change the Environment

Sometimes you’re stuck because the environment itself is triggering you.

How it works:

- Change something about where you are
- Move to a different location
- Alter the sensory experience
- Reset your physical state

Things to try:

Change your location

- Move to a different room
- Go outside (porch, yard, park)
- Go to the library
- Sit in your car
- Move to a different corner of the room

Change your sensory input

- Put on music or white noise
- Put in headphones for silence
- Open a window for fresh air
- Turn on more lights (or dim them)
- Light a candle or incense if you have it

Change your physical state

- Stand up and stretch
- Do 10 of whatever movement feels good (stretch, shake out your hands, walk in place)
- Splash cold water on your face
- Drink some water
- Take 5 deep breaths

Why this works:

Your brain associates certain spaces/states with certain feelings. Changing the environment can break the stuck pattern.

Strategy 6: The Permission Slip

Sometimes you're stuck because you need permission—from yourself—to not be perfect.

How it works:

- Write yourself a permission slip
- Read it out loud
- Actually give yourself permission to do it imperfectly

Examples:

- “I give myself permission to clean for only 5 minutes today instead of doing a deep clean. Something is better than nothing.”
- “I give myself permission to do a mediocre job on this task. It doesn't have to be perfect.”
- “I give myself permission to ask for help instead of doing it all myself.”
- “I give myself permission to stop if this gets too overwhelming. My mental health matters more than finishing.”
- “I give myself permission to take a break. Resting is not failing.”

Write your permission slip here:

I give myself permission to:

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Why this works:

Often we're stuck because we're afraid of not doing it well enough. Permission to be imperfect removes that barrier.

Strategy 7: The Opposite Action

When you feel like doing nothing, do something. When you feel like doing everything, do one thing.

How it works:

- Notice what your stuck pattern is
- Do the opposite of what your brain is telling you

If your stuck pattern is **AVOIDANCE** (hiding from the task):

- Do the opposite: March directly toward it
- Don't think, just move
- Count down 5-4-3-2-1 and GO
- Physical momentum can override mental resistance

If your stuck pattern is **OVERWHELM** (trying to do too much):

- Do the opposite: Narrow your focus drastically
- Pick **ONLY** one thing
- Ignore everything else
- Give yourself permission to do less

Why this works:

Sometimes our instinct is wrong for the moment. Doing the opposite can break the pattern.

Strategy 8: Externalize the Problem

Talk to the “stuck” like it’s separate from you.

How it works:

- Name your stuck feeling (“The Freeze,” “The Heavy,” “The Wall”)
- Talk to it or about it like it’s not YOU
- This creates distance between you and the feeling

Example:

- “Okay, The Freeze is here again. The Freeze wants me to stay in bed and do nothing. But I’m not The Freeze. I’m me. And I get to decide what I do, not The Freeze.”
- “The Heavy is sitting on me right now, making everything feel impossible. But The Heavy is temporary. It won’t be this heavy in an hour.”

Why this works:

When you externalize the stuck feeling, it’s easier to work around it. You’re not “I’m stuck” (identity), you’re “I’m experiencing stuck” (temporary state).

Strategy 9: The Accountability Text

Tell someone what you're about to do. Make it real by saying it out loud.

How it works:

- Text a friend, trusted adult, or even yourself
- Say: "I'm about to [do the task]"
- Set a time you'll report back: "I'll text you in 20 minutes when I'm done"
- Follow through and report back

Example:

- "Hey, I'm about to clean my desk for 15 minutes. I'll text you at 4pm when I'm done."

Why this works:

- Makes the intention concrete
- Creates external accountability
- Harder to bail when someone else knows
- Gives you someone to celebrate with when you're done

Who could you text?

Strategy 10: The Future Self Check-In

Ask yourself what your future self will wish you had done.

How it works:

- Imagine yourself two hours from now, or tonight before bed, or tomorrow morning
- Ask: "Will Future Me be glad I did this? Or glad I rested?"
- Let that guide your decision

Examples:

Scenario: You're stuck deciding whether to clean or rest.

- Future You tonight: Will they be glad you cleaned? Or glad you rested because you were exhausted?
- Your answer guides your choice

Scenario: You're avoiding homework.

- Future You tomorrow morning: Will they be relieved it's done? Or stressed it's not?
- Your answer guides your choice

Why this works:

Sometimes we need distance to see what actually matters. Future You has perspective Present You doesn't.

What will Future Me (tonight/tomorrow) wish I had done right now?

Creating Your Personal Unstuck Plan

Not all strategies work for all people or all situations. Build your personalized plan.

Answer these questions:

1. Which strategies have worked for me before (even outside this situation)?
2. Which strategies sound like they'd work for my personality?
3. Which strategies could I try RIGHT NOW with what I have available?
4. What's my go-to strategy when I'm stuck? (Pick one to try first every time)
5. If that doesn't work, what's my backup strategy?

When Nothing Works

Sometimes you're too stuck to unstick. That's okay.

Signs you need to just REST instead of push:

- You've tried multiple strategies and can't make yourself start
- You're at a 1-2 on the energy check-in
- You're emotionally at capacity
- Your body is screaming for rest
- The task can genuinely wait

What to do instead:

- Give yourself permission to rest WITHOUT guilt
- Do basic self-care (eat, hydrate, sleep)
- Do something that brings you comfort (not productivity)
- Try again tomorrow when you have more capacity
- Remember: Rest is not failure

Sometimes the most productive thing you can do is nothing.

Accessibility Considerations

This exercise offers multiple strategies, some of which assume physical ability (like “do jumping jacks”). Adapt these to your needs: if physical movement suggestions don't work for you, try other sensory input changes (temperature change, different position, hand movements you CAN do). If you have ADHD, autism, or other neurodivergence, being “stuck” may happen more frequently and intensely than for neurotypical people; this is a brain difference, not a personal failing. Choose strategies that work with your brain and body. If executive function makes decisions hard, having someone help you pick a strategy can be useful. The goal is finding SOMETHING that helps you move forward, adapted to your abilities.

Important Reminders

- **Getting stuck is not a character flaw.** It's a response to overwhelm, exhaustion, or stress. You're not broken. You're human.
- **Different situations need different strategies.** What works when you're avoiding homework might not work when you're avoiding cleaning your room. Experiment.
- **"Stuck" is temporary.** You won't feel this way forever. Even if you don't unstick right this second, you will eventually.
- **Small progress counts.** If you only managed the tiny first step and then got stuck again, that's still progress. Don't discount it.
- **You don't have to do this alone.** Asking for help (body doubling, accountability, or just support) is a strategy, not a failure.

Real Talk

Living in a chaotic environment makes everything harder, including getting unstuck. You're dealing with:

- Physical obstacles (clutter making tasks harder)
- Emotional exhaustion (constant stress draining your motivation)
- Lack of support (maybe no one is helping you)
- Learned helplessness (feeling like nothing you do matters anyway)

No wonder you get stuck.

These strategies won't fix the root problem (the hoarding situation). But they can help you move forward anyway, even in small ways, even when it's hard.

You're not stuck because you're lazy or weak. You're stuck because your situation is genuinely difficult and your brain is trying to protect you from more overwhelm.

These strategies help you work WITH your brain, not against it.

Try them. Experiment. Find what works for you.

And remember: Even small movement is movement.

Even when you feel stuck, you're not as stuck as you think.