

What Students Really Need to Hear

Posted by chasemielke on March 8, 2014

It's 4 a.m. I've struggled for the last hour to go to sleep. But, I can't. Yet again, I am tossing and turning, unable to shut down my brain. Why? Because I am stressed about my students. Really stressed. I'm so stressed that I can only think to write down what I really want to say — the real truth I've been needing to say — and vow to myself that I will let my students hear what I *really* think tomorrow. This is what students really need to hear:

First, you need to know right now that I care about you. In fact, I care about you more than you may care about yourself. And I care not just about your grades or your test scores, but about you as a person. And, because I care, I need to be honest with you. Do I have permission to be honest with you — both in what I say and how I say it?

Here's the thing: I lose sleep because of you. Every week.

Before I tell you why, you should understand the truth about school. You see, the main event of school is not academic learning. It never has been. It never will be. And, if you find someone who is passionate in claiming that it *is* about academics, that person is lying to himself or herself and may genuinely believe that lie. Yes, algebra, essay writing, Spanish, the judicial process — all are important and worth knowing. But they are not the MAIN event.

The main event is learning how to deal with the harshness of life when it gets difficult — how to overcome problems as simple as a forgotten locker combination, to obnoxious peers, to gossip, to people doubting you, to asking for help in the face of self-doubt, to pushing yourself to concentrate when a million other thoughts and temptations are fingertips away.

It is your resilience in conquering the main event — adversity — that truly prepares you for life after school. Because, mark my words, school is not the most challenging time you will have in life. You will face far greater challenges than these. Sure, you will have times more amazing than you can imagine, but you will also confront incomparable tragedy, frustration, and fear in the years to come. But, you shouldn't be worried about the fact that you will face great adversities. You should be worried because you're setting yourself up to fail at overcoming them. Here's the real reason I lose hours of sleep worrying about you: You are failing the main event of school. You are quitting. You may not think you are quitting, but you are because quitting wears many masks.

For some, you quit by throwing the day away and not even trying to write a sentence or a fraction because you think it doesn't matter or you can't or there's no

point. But it does. What you write is not the main event. The fact that you do take charge of your own fear and doubt *in order to* write when you are challenged — THAT is the main event.

Some of you quit by skipping class on your free education. Being punctual to fit the mold of the classroom is not the main event of showing up. The main event is delaying your temptation and investing in your own intelligence — understanding that sometimes short-term pain creates long-term gain and that great people make sacrifices for a greater good.

For others, you quit by being rude and disrespectful to adults in the hallway who ask you to come to class. Bowing to authority is not the main event. The main event is learning how to problem solve maturely, not letting your judgement be tainted by the stains of emotion.

I see some of you quit by choosing not to take opportunities to work harder and pass a class, no matter how far down you are. The main event is not getting a number to tell you you are worthy. The main event is pulling your crap together and making hard choices and sacrifices when things seem impossible. It is finding hope in the hopeless, courage in the chasm, guts in the grave.

What you need to see is that every time you take the easy way out, you are building a habit of quitting. And it will destroy your future and it will annihilate your happiness if you let it. (Our society cares nothing for quitters. Life will let you die alone, depressed, and poor if you can't man or woman up enough to deal with hardship. You are either the muscle or the dirt. You either take resistance and grow stronger or blow in the wind and erode.

As long as you are in my life, I am not going to let quitting be easy for you. I am going to challenge you, confront you, push you, and coach you. You can whine. You can throw a tantrum. You can shout and swear and stomp and cry. And the next day, guess what? I will be here waiting — smiling and patient — to give you a fresh start. Because you are worth it.

So, do yourself a favor: Step up. No more excuses. No more justifications. No blaming. No quitting. Just pick your head up. Rip the cords out of your ears. Grab the frickin' pencil and let's do this.

— C. Mielke

Grit Ladders: A Simple Strategy to Fuel Motivation

Posted by chasemielke on April 27, 2016

I celebrate D-minuses. I celebrate class averages that are just barely above passing. Sometimes I even celebrate a kid just turning in a paper. Not because I have low standards. D-minus is not my end goal. A group of kids barely scraping by in their education is far from my definition of satisfactory teaching. But I celebrate these things anyhow, because for many of my students, these “bare minimum” moments truly are feats of accomplishment. I celebrate them because they live in a world that seems only to acknowledge the Advanced Placements, the A-plusses, the accelerated track. And it is in this environment that many students simply give up because the end goals we set for them (and that they set for themselves) seem simply too far beyond their reach.

What many students need is a clear path—one on which the steps for progress are clear, and each small accomplishment is an opportunity to reflect, celebrate, and recalibrate.

Creating such a path is an embodiment of one of the greatest discoveries I made in working with at-risk students:

Celebrating progress fuels progress.

Students accelerate their academic progress when we teachers help them find accomplishment in the minor steps, too. When we place value on (and coach students through) their steps of progress, we fuel their self-concept and willingness to persevere. I’ve found this to be true again and again with my students; when I help them focus on their small victories, they increase their effort to achieve.

But, the end goal of every teacher is to help a student become his/her own teacher. So, how do we teach students to break up their large, gritty goals into more manageable steps?

A few years ago, I took what I did – what most every teacher does with students – and broke it down into a simple concept that students could habituate.

The strategy is simple in concept but powerful in action. It’s called a Grit Ladder.

GRIT LADDERS

Using a simple graphic organizer, students break down ambitious, long-term goals into smaller, more approachable steps on a ladder. These small steps have three major benefits:

1. Purposeful Paths

Having students link their short-term goals with their long-term goals helps that developing frontal lobe see the purpose of putting effort into challenging tasks. This sense of purpose is strengthened when they are distracted from the great distance between their long-term goal and their current status.

2. Dopamine Kicks

When we have a sense of accomplishment, even a minor one, we get a kick of “feel good” dopamine. Since we like feeling good (and since dopamine drives addiction), we are motivated to seek that burst again.

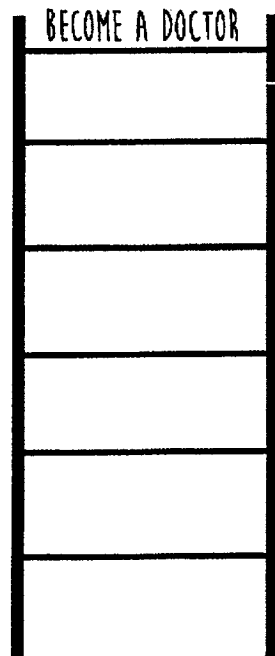
3. Frequent Feedback

Breaking down long-term goals provides more short-term opportunities to evaluate what is working and what isn’t. As teachers, if students don’t hit one of their immediate goals, we can connect and coach sooner rather than later.

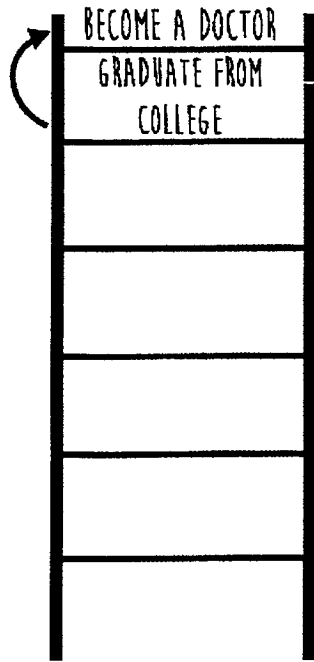
HOW TO SET UP GRIT LADDERS WITH YOUR STUDENTS

1. Students draw a ladder, with a long-term goal written at the top.

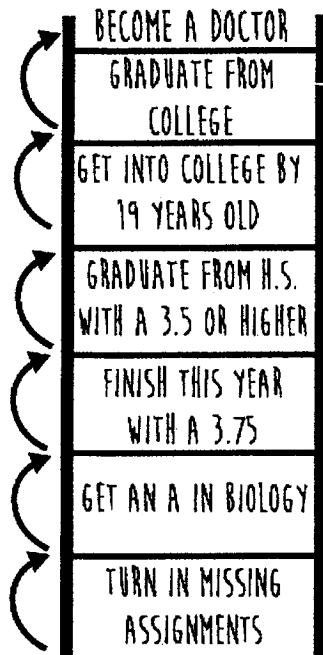
Example:



2. Under this “top goal,” students write the step or goal they would need to accomplish just before the “top goal.”



3. Working backwards, students will map out each successive step necessary. The ultimate goal is to find one small goal they can accomplish this week (or day) to make progress on their grand goal.



Seems simple, right? Here's how you can take this idea and ramp up your students' motivation and accomplishment:

Continually check in with students each week to re-assess goals and support their moving onto the next step. The value of this process isn't just in students accomplishing their goals; students learn just as much, if not more, from debriefing a failure, learning what went wrong, and what to try next. On that note, Grit Ladders pair nicely with the [WOOP strategy](#) for goal-setting.

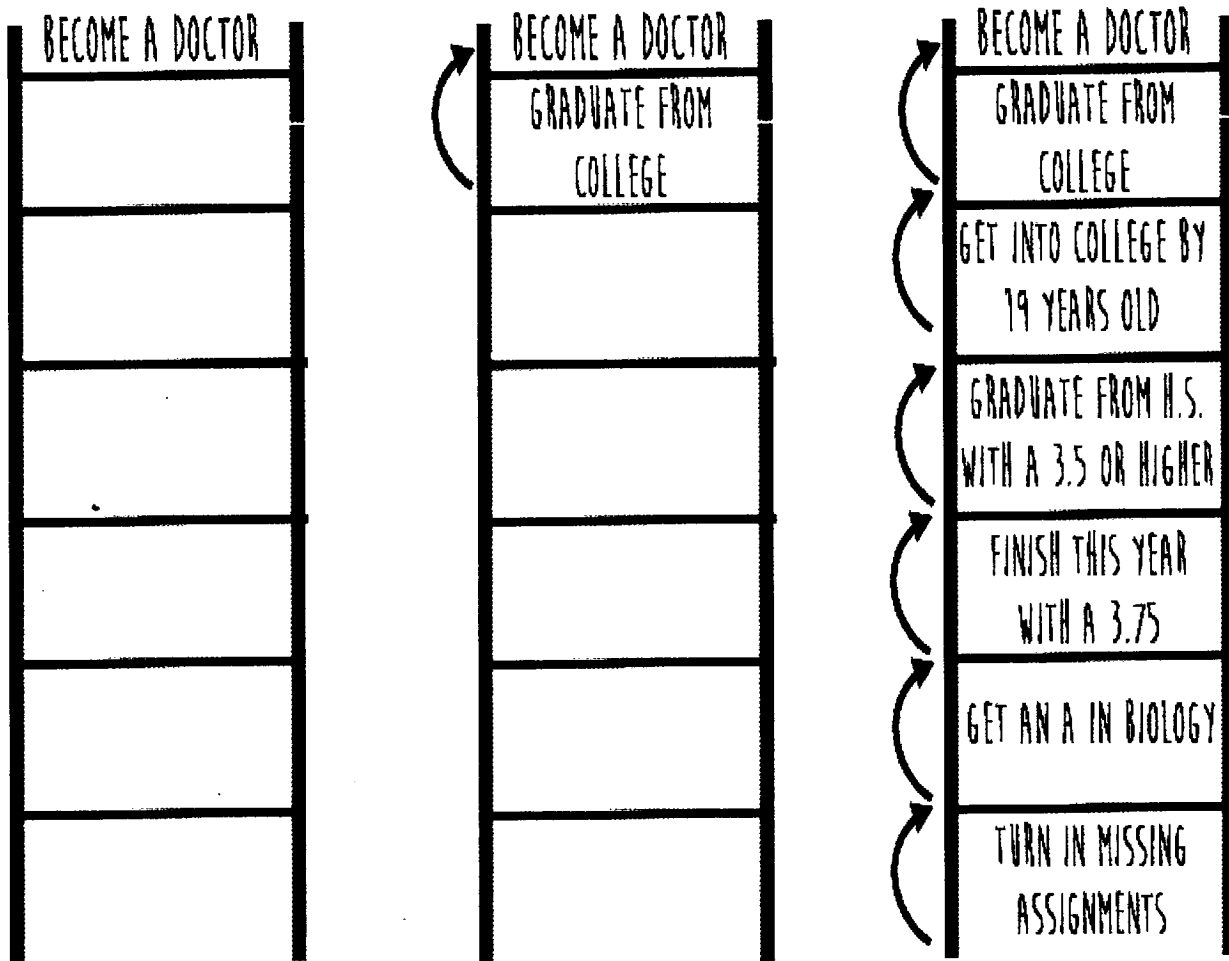
In addition to using Grit Ladders for their passionate goals, students can use them for academic goals too, such as "End the trimester with an 85% or higher in this class" or "Read a chapter book." Sub-steps can help students set goals for turning in assignments, studying, or asking questions. Teachers can help students create Grit Ladders for long-term projects like portfolios, essays, test prep, books, and projects.

Coach students on how to make their goals as SMART as possible (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, time-stamped) Ensure even the sub-goals are SMART.

Some goals may have multiple "ladders" of sub-steps. For example, attending a college may have a series of steps solely focused on finding a major, as well as a series of steps focused on improving g.p.a. or ACT/SAT scores, joining clubs, etc. An academic goal of getting a B in English may require separate ladders for completing assignments and studying for tests.

Students can create graphics as visual reminders. Or, you can post grit ladders in the classroom with "checklists" for each step. Got even more ideas on how this concept can boost accomplishment in your classroom? **Post below!**

Grit Ladder



WOOP

How it Works

WOOP enables you to identify an important wish, imagine both the outcome and obstacle, then make a plan to overcome the barriers preventing you from accomplishing your desires. Here is the process:

Wish

Something you really want to accomplish. A wish is exciting, challenging, and realistic.

i.e. "I wish I turned my homework in on time more."

Outcome

The best outcome that would result from accomplishing your goal. How would the outcome make you feel? Let your mind imagine this outcome.

i.e. "I would feel good about myself."

Obstacle

The personal obstacles that prevent you from accomplishing your goal. Let your mind go and imagine this obstacle.

i.e. "When doing homework, I get distracted by my phone."

Plan

What can you do to overcome your obstacle? Name one action you can take or thought you can have. Make an if/then statement and imagine it.

If / When _____ (obstacle), then I will _____ (action to overcome obstacle).

i.e. "When I am distracted by my phone, I will put it in the drawer."

WOOP

Wish

Outcome

Obstacle

Plan

The ABCs of Fostering Optimism

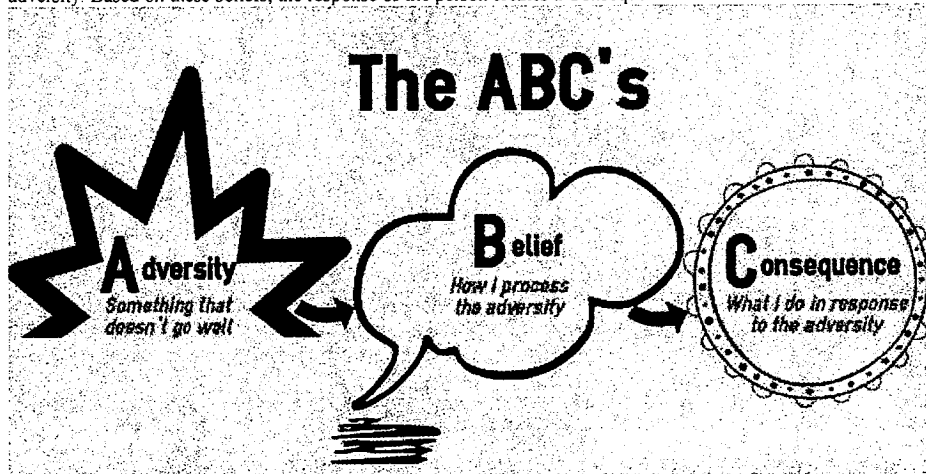
Posted by chasemielke on May 4, 2016

This post originally appeared on WeAreTeachers.com. File this one under "Accomplishment" concepts.

We've all seen it. A high achieving student shutting down after a few minor mistakes. A kid who doesn't even try, even when the task at hand is easy. A student who wails, "I suck at math." Each of these scenes represents one of the most frustrating issues in a classroom – learned helplessness, when a person thinks his or her actions are useless in creating effective change. How do we influence these students so that we break the pattern of avoidance and quitting?

To curb learned helplessness, we first have to understand that it is a cognitive influence, meaning that it is dependent on a person's thoughts. Why does this matter? Because thoughts can be influenced and changed.

Martin Seligman, whose research helped establish our understanding of the concept "learned helplessness" in psychology, talks about it in terms of ABC's. A person experiences an Adversity. Following the adversity, the person processes the impact and cause of the adversity, forming Beliefs about the adversity. Based on these beliefs, the response of the person creates a Consequence.



Let's look at an example:

Sierra raises her hand to answer a question. Her answer is wrong, so she feels embarrassed. At this point, she has experienced an adversity. Adversities can be short-term or long-term; they can cause deep emotional anguish, or mild displeasure. Stubbing your toe on that stupid coffee table? Adversity. Failing a test? Adversity. Losing a loved one? Adversity. Adversities are also subjective. Spilling coffee might be a minor annoyance for one person, but ruin another person's entire day. More on that soon.

Two important caveats: Some people experience more adversity than others. Second, teachers can't always influence how deeply or frequently their students experience adversity.

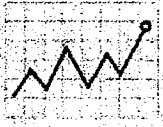
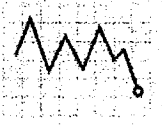
Interestingly, experiencing a lot of adversity does not automatically mean a person will develop learned helplessness. We've all known students who face *extreme* adversity and yet remain resilient. The deciding factor is the "B" in our ABC's, a person's Belief about the adversity.

After Sierra gets the wrong answer, she will begin processing the adversity. Why did it happen? How is it affecting her now? How will it affect her in the future? She may say to herself, "Crap, I should have thought more carefully." Or, she may say to herself, "I'm an idiot." Despite how these statements are both negative, they have critical differences that can tell us a lot about Sierra's thought patterns – and whether she will develop learned helplessness or not. A person's style of belief, what Seligman calls "explanatory style," can be categorized as optimistic or pessimistic.

Optimism vs. Pessimism

Let's stay away from the whole "glass half full/empty" analogy. That analogy leads us to think an optimist is always a chipper Pollyanna, whereas a pessimist is a brooding curmudgeon. Optimists still experience negative thoughts. What makes them optimistic is their belief that adversity is 1) temporary, 2) specific and 3) a result of various factors. Pessimists, on the other hand, are more likely to see adversities as 1) permanent, 2) universal, and 3) entirely

their fault.

Optimists	Pessimists
	
Temporary <i>Negative experience won't last forever</i>	Permanent <i>Negative experience will last indefinitely</i>
Specific <i>Adversity pertains to narrow aspect</i>	Universal <i>Adversity pertains to wide aspects</i>
Externalizes <i>Recognizes factors beyond self</i>	Internalizes <i>Blames self heavily</i>

As teachers, we can access a student's explanatory style, asking them to describe their responses when something goes wrong – in person or in writing. Or, we can take note of the "Consequence," the C in our ABC acronym. A consequence is how the person responds after the adversity – their actions, decisions, and comments.

For example, if Sierra continues to raise her hand in the future, there is a chance she saw her failed answer as a temporary and specific event. If we notice her withdraw and not show effort again, this is a signal that she may see her mistake as permanent and universal.

By noticing students' language and/or their responses to common classroom adversities, we can also coach students on re-working or "thought challenging" their pessimistic responses. Seligman calls this "Disputation," adding the "D" to the ABC model. I use the acronym HELP with my students to dispute their pessimistic beliefs:

First, ask if your thinking is

Helpful?
"Will my beliefs help me persevere and grow?"

If the answer is no, then try one of these:

Evidence
"What are the FACTS of the situation?"

Lesson Learned
"What can I do differently in the future? What can I gain from overcoming this adversity?"

Perspective
"In what ways is this adversity TEMPORARY?"
"In what ways is this adversity SPECIFIC?"
"What else was a factor?"

So, how does one begin fostering optimism in students? Start by helping students explore their own thoughts in relation to controlled or simulated adversities. Click the link below for a couple of free mini-lessons to help students examine their beliefs about adversity:

[Optimism Intro Lessons](#)

Once students better understand how their thoughts influence their outcomes, we can help coach them to be more optimistic. Help them recognize their own pessimistic and optimistic thoughts when they arise in class. Model your own ability to recognize and rethink a pessimistic belief. Analyze quotations from literature or history.

As with any cognitive or behavioral habit, creating optimistic beliefs will take time and intentional effort. But, helping students become more resilient and hopeful is worth the investment.