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Anatomy of a Breakthrough

How to Get Unstuck When It Matters Most

Adam Alter • From ANATOMY OF A BREAKTHROUGH: How to Get Unstuck When It Matters Most by Adam Alter. Copyright © 2023 by Adam Alter. Reprinted by permission of Simon & Schuster, LLC. • 320 pages

Workplace Skills / Become More Productive

Life Advice / Psychology

Take-Aways

- If you feel stuck, you're not alone. Everyone gets stuck at some point.
- People usually get stuck either in the middle of a project or when they reach a plateau.
- Success often takes a long time to materialize; don't give up too quickly.
- Identify and solve problems now. You don't want them to trap you later.
- Focus on reducing anxiety, so you can move beyond paralysis.
- Challenge yourself in the right increments – not too much too fast.
- Simplify complex problems by conducting a “friction audit.”
- Reduce your chances of getting stuck by remaining curious and questioning your views.
- Regain momentum by becoming active and boosting your motivation.

Recommendation

Everyone gets stuck. It happened to *Captain Marvel* actress Brie Larson, Airbnb co-founder Brian Chesky and – for seven years – Amazon mogul Jeff Bezos. Social psychologist Adam Alter explains why everyone flounders sooner or later and how to move past the blockage. Offering a compelling mix of psychological research, anecdotes and practical tips, Alter gives you clear steps you can follow to get unstuck – and manage frustration until you're able to break free. Whether you're struggling professionally or personally, Alter's road map to getting energized for the long term might just inspire your next breakthrough.

Summary

If you feel stuck, you're not alone. Everyone gets stuck at some point.

Everyone will probably get stuck sooner or later, in one way or another – in a job, hobby or relationship, creatively or personally. Even people, including athletes and actors, who seem to embody success have often suffered long periods of being stuck. Oscar winner Brie Larson endured 20 years of struggle and thousands of failed auditions before she became an A-list star.

Airbnb Founders Brian Chesky, Joe Gebbia and Nathan Blecharczyk struggled for years to obtain funding for their company, and even Amazon founder Jeff Bezos endured seven years of disappointment before the company hit its stride. And *Game of Thrones* fans have been waiting since 2011 for George R.R. Martin – the author of the wildly popular book series behind the TV show – to publish a promised new entry in the series.

“To be alive is to battle stuckness.”

People who get stuck often feel isolated and might believe they're victims of terrible luck, not realizing how universal the experience really is. Psychological phenomena underpin this skewed perception. People naturally tend to pay more attention to their own difficulties while overlooking those facing other people. They also overestimate their hardships and underestimate their good fortune – a phenomenon called headwinds/tailwinds asymmetry. Getting stuck happens to practically everyone, causing discomfort and frustration that can last for years. If it happens to you, some targeted tools can help you get moving again.

People usually get stuck either in the middle of a project or when they reach a plateau.

Typically, people move through a “quick-slow-quick” pattern as they pursue a goal: They make initial rapid progress, followed by a slowdown in the middle, and they pick up the pace again just before reaching their objective. To avoid finding yourself in a midcourse slump, eliminate the middle as much as you can. Reduce the length of your mid-range slowdown by bracketing the overall goal into smaller subgoals – a technique called narrow bracketing. During difficult stretches in a marathon, many runners focus their thoughts on taking one step at a time – an extremely narrow bracket that almost entirely eliminates the middle.

“You can't get stuck in the middle if you eradicate the middle completely.”

Beware of relying on this technique for too long. Strategies that produce good results at first can lose their power over time. For example, a study by the high-intensity training company Fit20 showed that people who performed a 20-minute session once a week saw strength gains in the first year. But after that, their progress slowed or stopped. Plateaus happen once you've adapted to a new activity. Counteract this natural tendency by trying out new techniques.

Success often takes a long time to materialize; don't give up too quickly.

Success takes a lot of time and effort. If you don't achieve a quick breakthrough, it doesn't necessarily mean you're stuck. Success will probably take longer than you expect, so persevere. Don't expect luck, youth or a first-mover advantage to offer quick wins. Luck is impossible to predict, and people tend to overemphasize the importance of youth and being the first person to come up with an idea. The average age of a successful entrepreneur is 42, and Google was the 22nd search engine to enter the market, not the first.

Success takes a long time because people's best ideas usually come late in the process, after they've tested multiple other ideas, challenged their default assumptions and thrown out what doesn't work. Thomas Edison, the inventor of the light bulb, tested 1,600 filaments before settling on the best material. Rather than indicating failure, your challenges and struggles suggest that you're learning and refining, which takes time.

"Getting unstuck almost always takes longer than we expect – and too often we surrender just a few steps short of the finish line."

To make sensible decisions about whether to persevere or to quit during a long, challenging process, gauge your progress by using audit markers. These check-ins are designated points in time – a day, week, month, year or however long seems appropriate – when you examine the progress you've made, note the sticking points you face, and decide whether to continue or bow out. But if you do feel like folding, give the effort 50% longer than your intuition suggests before you call it quits. That might be all it takes.

Identify and solve problems now. You don't want them to trap you later.

Three common traps can impede problem-solving and keep you stuck.

- **Failing to see a problem even exists** – If you believe there's no problem, you'll have very little chance of solving it. To sharpen your awareness, slow down. Give yourself time to notice snags and sticking points and to challenge your assumptions. Communication problems often go unnoticed, so take a closer look at how well you're communicating, especially in interactions where you don't actually see the other person, like over email.
- **Assuming a problem is too small to need attention** – When you presume a problem is too minor to warrant action, you risk having it grow too large to overcome. Instead of ignoring small problems, perform frequent reviews. Like an engineer checking a commercial aircraft, conduct regular check-ins to prevent small problems from turning into big ones that sabotage your goals. Develop checklists for your objectives, and review them on a monthly, quarterly and annual basis.
- **Believing the problem is too remote to matter** – Neglecting a problem because it seems far away can result in damaging long-term plans. Instead, consider how the issue could become a trap

in five, 10 or 20 years. To guide your present decision-making in a way that accounts for long-term consequences, create a vivid, detailed mental picture of the future you want.

Focus on reducing anxiety, so you can move beyond paralysis.

Feeling stuck induces anxiety, which can cause you to freeze, further hindering your progress. Anxiety can also induce reactive, rather than proactive, behaviors that hinder rather than help. To regain control, take steps to alleviate the pressure you feel. Often, pressure stems from perfectionism. Instead of aiming for perfection's unattainable standards, strive for excellence. Pursuing perfection keeps you stuck, but seeking excellence keeps you moving forward. Start by setting achievable standards and then, over time, gradually raise them.

“Perfectionism is stifling, whereas excellence is mobilizing.”

Anxiety can also spring from an internal drive to be totally original. But complete originality doesn't exist and never has, and insisting on it can paralyze you. For example, music legend and Nobel-winning writer Bob Dylan drew heavily on the folk tradition, even lifting the melodies and structures he used for entire songs from existing material. So let go of the expectation of unmitigated originality. Rather than trying to come up with radically new ideas, strive to find optimally distinct ones – impulses that have sufficient uniqueness. Recombine, tweak or improve existing ideas in new ways. Tech entrepreneur Arlene Harris did this when she modified the design of existing technologies, such as cell phones, to increase their appeal to older consumers. Harris sold her company to Best Buy for nearly \$1 billion.

Challenge yourself in the right increments – not too much too fast.

People can get stuck when they attempt to avoid failure. But progress never happens without challenges, and facing them means you'll inevitably fail at times. Researchers found there's a sweet spot in the ratio of success to failure, where you avoid the exhaustion and demoralization of too much failure but also the boredom of not being challenged enough. The optimal rate of failure seems to be one failure out of every five or six attempts. To maintain this rate, learn to accept failure as a natural part of progress. View it as a signal that you're stepping out of your comfort zone and engaging with challenges that foster learning.

“Not only is failing OK, but it's necessary.”

Challenges can also come with hardship. Sometimes difficulties produce discomfort, like when you experience a setback; it also could materialize as fear, such as times when you need to rise to the occasion.

To increase your capacity to undertake challenges, apply an approach called “hardship inoculation.” This term derives from the treatment of infectious diseases, where a patient receives a small dose of a virus prior to full exposure to the disease. You can inoculate yourself against the hardships of fear, disappointment and other discomforts by applying the same principle. For example, brand strategist Michelle Poler conquered her fears in 100 days, by tackling a new one each day, starting with the smallest anxiety and working her way up. On day one, she ate oysters; by day 100, she delivered a TEDx talk in front of a live audience.

Simplify complex problems by conducting a “friction audit.”

If you’ve ever been lost in a maze and doubted you’d find your way out, that happened because the maze was too complex. The same principle applies to other problems: Complexity makes it more difficult to identify and move toward solutions. So when you’re stuck, try to simplify. Strip the problem to its essentials, organize its elements and focus on the most crucial factors. Later, you can gradually reintroduce complexity if necessary.

“One of the greatest unsticking skills isn’t recognizing what’s most important, but recognizing what isn’t important.”

A “friction audit” analyzes a complex problem to identify friction points – the places that cause bottlenecks, struggles, waste or failure. When you’ve identified these sticking points, you can start to remove or simplify them. For example, IKEA customers often left its stores before making a purchase. The company realized this happened when parents brought small children with them, and the kids had reached the end of their patience. IKEA addressed this friction point by investing in play areas and employing workers to provide free child care. Since being stuck boils down to friction, an audit can reveal its cause and help you move toward a solution.

Reduce your chances of getting stuck by remaining curious and questioning your views.

When you’re stuck, finding a better way to pursue your goal can help you get you moving again. Experiment to reveal new techniques and strategies that can lead to a breakthrough. Take an experimental, curious approach to life to reduce your chances of getting stuck. As a result, you’ll constantly be observing, asking questions and looking for solutions.

“Acting...is the best way to learn, and learning is the greatest unsticker.”

But curiosity tends to wane over time: The average five-year-old asks 200 to 300 questions per day; adults average only 20 to 30. Rejuvenate your curiosity by developing habits of questioning and wondering. For example, create a list of puzzling facts, ideas and experiences, and keep adding to it. Give yourself permission to browse instead of search, so that you explore different ideas rather than seeking one specific answer. Question the views you take for granted.

Regain momentum by becoming active and boosting your motivation.

Taking action moves you out of “stuckness.” Even if the action is small and the progress is minimal, switching from “off” to “on” helps you uncover what works and move forward. To reduce friction and form productive habits, focus on taking actions where you excel. Fighter pilot John Boyd, an innovator who developed the American military’s first manual for air-to-air combat, applied a four-step method, the “OODA loop,” for taking action.

1. **Observe** – Assess the situation accurately, identify problems and collect data.

2. **Orient** – Analyze the data and formulate alternatives.
3. **Decide** – Select an alternative.
4. **Act** – Create a specific plan and put it into action.

Use this strategy to understand a situation more completely. Then apply it to take action. You'll need to apply the loop over and over as your situation changes, and you gather new information.

To build your motivation and make it easier to take action, consider the following helpful tactics:

- **Move your body** – Studies show that movement – particularly fluid movements, such as walking, dancing and even drawing smooth shapes – aids in mental “unsticking,” leading to more incisive decisions, creative solutions and team collaboration.
- **Produce more** – Quantity and quality complement each other: Generating more ideas increases the chances you'll come up with good ones. Don't be afraid to empty yourself of bad ideas to create space for better ones.
- **Use micro scheduling** – Reduce necessary actions to small, doable “kernels,” such as writing a single sentence or working for 60 seconds; then connect them in a schedule. Micro scheduling can help you get moving by eliminating the need to make decisions while you're working – a form of mental unloading that helps you focus on the task itself. Remember, tackling small tasks, one by one, can keep you from feeling overwhelmed.

About the Author

Social psychologist **Adam Alter** is a professor at NYU's Stern School of Business. His books include *Drunk Tank Pink: And Other Unexpected Forces That Shape How We Think, Feel and Behave* and *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*.



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