

Next Curriculum Experience Day:

HOPE EXPRESS

CHECKED OUT

How to motivate a teenager who has checked out.

THE ESSAY

They didn't run out of motivation

Watch a checked-out teenager long enough and you notice something strange: switching off takes effort. The slouch, the flat stare, the phone under the desk are not the absence of trying. That's where the trying went: into staying invisible.

When a student stops trying, adults reach for the word lazy. Researchers reach for a better one. The sociologist Corey Keyes named it in 2002, and the psychologist Adam Grant made it famous in a 2021 essay: **languishing**. It isn't depression and it isn't burnout. It's the flat grey middle, where you're not sinking but you're not swimming either. A 15-year-old can languish in the third row of a classroom, and from the outside it looks identical to not caring.

So if you're working out how to motivate a teenager who has checked out, throw away your first assumption. They haven't run out of motivation. They've lost the conditions that produce it. Rebuild the conditions and the motivation comes back, because that is how motivation works.



They didn't lose the drive. **REBUILD THE CONDITIONS.**

Motivation runs on 3 needs.

Autonomy. Competence. Relatedness.

THE DIAGNOSIS

Lazy is a diagnosis, and it's usually the wrong one

Call a checked-out kid lazy and you've made two mistakes. You've mistaken a bad patch for a personality trait, and you've closed the only door worth opening. When a student has lost motivation, the instinct is to supply more of it. The instinct is wrong.

Here's a distinction most students have never been taught. Turning up is the body in the seat. Showing up is the mind leaning in. You can do the first for 6 hours and skip the second entirely, and a lot of teenagers have quietly worked out that no one checks.

The most useful map I know for what's gone missing comes from Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, who have spent 40 years studying what actually drives people. Their answer, [self-determination theory](#), is that motivation runs on 3 needs: autonomy (I get a say), competence (I'm good at something), and relatedness (I belong to someone). Feed all 3 and people move on their own. Starve one and the research is blunt. Motivation doesn't fade politely, it defects, into compliance, into avoidance, or into nothing at all.

That reframes the whole problem. The question adults ask is always some version of how do I make this kid try harder, and it keeps failing, because effort was never the thing that broke. Here is what to do when a student loses motivation for school: stop trying to top up the feeling, and work out which of the 3 needs has run dry. Is it competence, because the work keeps landing in the gap between what they can do and what they're being asked to do? Is it autonomy, because nothing on their timetable was ever theirs to choose? Is it relatedness, because no adult in the building is visibly in their corner? Once you know which of the 3 needs is empty, you know exactly what to rebuild.

Do that and the whole dynamic flips. Push a demotivated teenager and you're the one supplying the energy, so they lean back against it and stall the second you let up. Refill the missing need and the energy comes from inside them. You stop pushing and start pulling, and a teenager who is pulled keeps moving whether or not anyone is watching.



COMPETENCE

Start with what they can already do

Most disengaged teenagers are running a single broken script: find what's wrong with me and fix it. They've had 5 years of red pen on the 3 answers they got wrong and silence on the 20 they got right. Checking out is a rational response to that.

Adam Grant's book *Hidden Potential* makes a point worth taping to a wall. Potential isn't the height you start at, it's the distance you travel. Carol Dweck spent decades proving the same thing from another angle: students who believe ability can grow take on hard work that students who believe it's fixed avoid. The belief comes first, and the effort follows.

Here's a picture I come back to. Buy a goldfish, drop it in a small bowl on the kitchen bench, and it stays small. An inch or two, year after year, and you assume that's just how big a goldfish gets. Take that same fish and move it to a pond, and it doesn't stop at 2 inches. It grows to 6, then 8, sometimes past 12. Same fish. Same DNA. The only thing that changed was the size of the water around it.

The fish never decided to stay small. The bowl decided for it.

That's what I'm looking at with a lot of checked-out kids. They aren't broken and they aren't lazy. They've spent years in a container that's too small for them: a set of low expectations, a label that stuck since Year 8, a story about themselves they didn't write. They've mistaken the walls of the bowl for the edges of who they are. Nobody has told them the tank is temporary, and nobody has told them they were built for the pond.

Give them a concrete step this week: the free VIA character strengths survey at viacharacter.org. 20 minutes, and it hands back their top 5 strengths. Then help them aim a goal at those strengths instead of their gaps. Competence is the need you can feed fastest, and motivation tends to follow competence, not the other way round.





AUTONOMY

A goal they chose beats a goal you assigned

Autonomy is the hardest of the 3 to hand a teenager, and not because anyone is doing it wrong. The school day runs on bells, a timetable, and a curriculum nobody in the room chose, and a student can travel from 8:40am to 3:10pm without making a single decision that's genuinely theirs. Self-determination theory predicts exactly what that produces: effort that switches off the moment the supervision does.

On stage I put it in 6 words: you don't have a motivation problem, **you have a vision problem.** A borrowed goal buys compliance. A chosen goal generates drive. So stop handing teenagers your reasons and go find theirs.

Make it visible. Not a note buried in an app, an actual board they build by hand and hang where it's the first thing they see in the morning. Cut-out pictures, a course, a team, a city. Then ask one question this week and mean it: what would make the next 12 months worth the effort? Then stop talking. The answer is the fuel, and it has to be theirs.



PROGRESS

Motion comes before motivation

We treat motivation like a mood we have to wait for. The evidence runs the other way. In behavioural science, action reliably comes first and the feeling catches up. Waiting to feel motivated before you start is like waiting to feel like brushing your teeth. You'll be waiting a while.

Teresa Amabile spent years reading the daily work diaries of hundreds of people and found the single biggest lift to motivation on any given day was a small, visible piece of progress. She called it **the progress principle**. It works on 15-year-olds too.

So shrink the first step until it's almost too small to refuse. When a student wants to get fit, I don't say run 5km. I say run for 60 seconds, then walk home, 3 times a week. And when they feel good enough to push to 2 minutes in week one, hold the line at 60 seconds. Most teenagers never build a habit because they try to upgrade it before they've built it. Spend the first 30 days building, not improving.

Structure beats willpower, because willpower depends on how they feel that morning, and a habit doesn't ask. Give them a floor, not just a ceiling. Good day, aim high. Normal day, stay consistent. Bad day, do the one thing you never skip. Consistency beats intensity, every term.

Hope is not a mood you inherit.
**HOPE IS
A SKILL.**

You can rebuild it in a teenager,
one small rescue at a time.



RELATEDNESS

The need we forget

The third need is the one adults skip, and it holds the other two up. No teenager rebuilds motivation alone. They do it in front of someone whose belief in them outruns their belief in themselves.

There's an experiment from 1957 I can't shake. Curt Richter dropped rats into tall cylinders of water to see how long they'd swim. Left alone, some gave up and drowned within 15 minutes. Then he changed one thing. Just before a rat went under, he lifted it out, let it breathe, and put it back. Those rats swam for 60 hours. Nothing changed in their bodies. What changed was the expectation that rescue was possible. Hope kept them going long after exhaustion said stop.

That's the part the motivation posters miss. Hope isn't a mood you're born with or without. **It's a skill**, and you can rebuild it in a teenager one small rescue at a time.



RELATEDNESS

I know this from the inside

I know this from the inside. I live with ulcerative colitis. Incurable. Some days it hands me a fight before breakfast. And the hope I teach was built the hard way: at 22 I was on a disability pension, shut in the house, going nowhere, until a friend handed me a book about Nelson Mandela and I wrote down a dream. With \$2 in my pocket I set out to build a youth centre, sent 114 letters asking for sponsorship, and collected 114 knock-backs. The centre got built anyway, and the food programme it grew into gave out more than 20,000 food parcels.

I don't teach hope from a textbook. I teach it from a body that has learned to keep walking on the hard days. Hope isn't a slogan. It's forged in experience. That's why this work lands with the kid in the back row who's quietly carrying something heavy. They can smell pretending. They respond to the real thing.

Tell the kid who's given up the line I give every hall: **if there's hope in your future, there's power in your present.** Then hand them one small proof that things can change, and another next week.





THE SEMINAR

How Hope Express does this in a morning

This is the exact work of Hope Express, The HopeFULL Institute's seminar for high school students. In one session I feed all 3 needs in the order that moves them: a story that restores belonging, the strengths that rebuild competence, and a chosen first step that returns autonomy. Story first, tools second, action before they leave the room.

It's practical on purpose. Students walk out with a plan, not just a feeling, and teachers get a shared language to keep it alive on Monday. If your year level has quietly checked out, this is the reset that gets them looking up. You can bring Hope Express to your school.

Motivation was never the deficit. The conditions were. Feed a teenager's need to belong, to be capable, and to choose, and the effort you were trying to force shows up on its own.

Download the free [Hope Mindset classroom pack](#) and run the first conversation with your students this week: thehopefullinstitute.com/classroom-pack

Find the need that's run dry

Motivation doesn't fade politely. It defects, into compliance, into avoidance, or into nothing at all. Usually one of 3 needs has run dry. Work out which, and you know exactly what to rebuild.

Pick one student you're worried about. Answer honestly, in pen.

Competence: is the work sitting too far above what they can already do?

Autonomy: what on their week did they actually choose?

Relatedness: which adult in the building is visibly in their corner?

The one small rescue you'll hand them this week

THE CONDITIONS. NOT THE KID.

Feed the need to belong, to be capable, and to choose. The effort shows up on its own.

Bring Hope Express to your school

A morning seminar for high school students that feeds all 3 needs in the order that moves them: a story that restores belonging, the strengths that rebuild competence, and a chosen first step that returns autonomy. Students leave with a plan, not just a feeling.

Request a brochure: hello@thehopefullinstitute.com



START THIS WEEK

Free Hope Mindset classroom pack • thehopefullinstitute.com/classroom-pack