

# Feeling “Stuck”

by Kelly Onanian



L-o-n-g d-i-v-i-s-i-o-n - typing those two words makes me flinch (thank goodness for the calculator on my smartphone). I vividly remember the exact time in my life when I first realized my relationship with long division (and math, in general) was not going to be pretty. In fact, it was going to be ugly. *Really* ugly.

I was the only one staying in from recess struggling to finish a test in Mrs. Lehman's 4th grade math class. I couldn't understand how, just one year before, I was the “Around the World” multiplication game champion - you know, the one where you stand next to your classmate, the teacher turns over a flash card and whoever answers first moves on? Well it turns out I had a great memory with multiplication facts (single digits only), but long division was a whole new ball game.

The two-digit divisor problems were the worst (like  $450 \div 25$ ). I remember hearing laughter from my friends outside at recess and could see a glimpse of them playing on the hot, black, sticky swings through a small window



next to the empty fish tank. It was a typical, sweltering Florida day and even though we had AC, I remember sitting at that desk in my shorts and just sweating. The back of my thighs stuck to the metal chair and my light pink framed glasses kept slipping down my nose. I

hated those little desks

because I was unusually tall, 5'7 at 9-years-old to be exact - so much taller than my peers that I was taunted as the Jolly Green Giant, Big Bird, Too Tall Jones (I didn't even know Jones was a real person until recently. Sorry, Ed!). OK. I know. I'm off topic. I'm avoiding...

I'm avoiding writing about feeling stuck with long division because I don't like it and we naturally avoid what we don't like, right? It's not that Mrs. Lehman was a bad teacher. I actually liked her. I just needed more help than she could give. My father, an engineer and math genius, tried to help, as most parents do. However, I just couldn't get it. He would get frustrated with me because for him, it was so easy. (I still drive him crazy when we play card games, the ones with numbers, but it's OK. I still love you, Dad). The bottom line is that no matter how positive my attitude and how hard I tried, it never got any easier.



Looking back as an educator, I definitely had severe math anxiety and most likely some form of Dyscalculia (a math learning disability). I was never formally diagnosed, nor was I given accommodations, or a math tutor. My math struggles followed me throughout my entire school career. I was always in low-level math classes, had difficulty with numbers and equations in other subjects like chemistry, and was even put in a “remedial” algebra class my first year of college. (As you might imagine, that was a bit of a blow to my freshman confidence).

My point is not to voice my dissatisfaction with teachers or parents. It's rather that I know I would have benefited from someone sitting with me one-on-one, patiently practicing and practicing regularly, and giving me strategies and confidence to solve the problems I was having. I needed to tackle long division and build on it in order to be successful in other areas of math.

When you fear mistakes or feel stuck all of the time it's a horrible place to be. If I had a math coach who understood me and really helped me - helped me feel excitement about numbers instead of dread - helped me to get “un-stuck,” I can only imagine what other interests I would have explored or opportunities may have come my way. I can only imagine how it would've changed my confidence and love for school.

When students come to me with anxiety and need that kind of extra help, I GET IT. When they feel stuck and can't get the words from their head to their paper, I GET IT. When they feel stuck evaluating a reading comp question on the SAT, I GET IT. When they don't know how to put together a presentation, let alone calm fears about presenting it, I GET IT. The bottom line is, I GET IT because I have been there myself. Feeling stuck is simply the first step on the road to getting “un-stuck.” Don't be discouraged, and above all else, don't give up the journey - you never know the places you may get to!