



Life's a Puzzle

By Dr. Linda Hancock

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Published

July 30th, 2021

Since I was a child, I have enjoyed challenges. When people gave on untangling knotted string, I enthusiastically took on the task. Answering riddles, doing word games and figuring out mysteries were always fun for me. In fact, I believe that this way of approaching the world has helped me to do my work as a psychologist.

Every spring our family would buy a 1,000-piece puzzle to work on during rainy days at the summer cottage. My uncle taught us that doing a puzzle was more than just randomly grabbing a piece and hoping you could find a match. In fact, he and my dad taught us specific steps to take that would be followed year after year and puzzle after puzzle.

This week I was thinking about the similarities between these lessons and life:

1. Set the environment – We had a card table at the cottage that was set so that it didn't interfere with traffic flow and could be left in place until the project was done. Having a good environment that is safe, comfortable and wisely chosen is also important in life. We all need organized and adequate places to live and work so that we can focus on projects without chaos and distractions.
2. Know the goal – One of the first things that we did was to stand the box top in a position where everyone could see the photo of the finished puzzle. When you know the goal and what it should look like, it is much easier to stay on track no matter what you are doing.
3. Turn all the pieces upright – You can't deal with things that you cannot see. Always look for hidden information that will help you with your projects. This requires time and effort through research but will always pay off in the end.
4. Sort and group pieces – This is easy with puzzles as it is all done by just putting similarly coloured pieces together on separate parts of the table. Life is easier if you can do the same thing. For example, having your tools together in one place saves searching for them. Doing all your mending at once saves time.
5. Begin with the border – Once you have all the outside pieces in place, you can see how big the puzzle will be and have a general idea of where to start inserting pieces according to their colour. Boundaries in life also set limits and give you an idea of where you stop, and other people begin.
6. Choose one area of focus – Rather than jumping all over the place, it is best to choose a smaller area and become familiar with the pieces. Better to break life into sections that can be finished than to have many starts and few completions.
7. Take breaks – Remember how I said that we would work on the puzzle all summer? That meant that there wasn't any pressure to finish and allowed us opportunities to move from one section to another throughout the holidays, so we had variety.
8. Have patience – Funny how you can work on a puzzle for what seems like long periods of time without fitting in any pieces and then, all of a sudden, the next five or six that you touch fit together perfectly. Be tenacious and you will experience success.
9. Work as a team – Conversations can bring inspiration. One person might casually make a remark like "I think the bird's head will fit in here" or "Does anyone have the sail for this boat?" and others at the table see how their section fits in. Teamwork speeds progress.

10. Celebrate – At the end of the summer we would glue the puzzle and hang it on the cabin wall to remind us of the fun. Accomplishments whether big or small should always be recognized.

Life can be puzzling at times, but if you have a plan and stick to it, I believe you will learn patterns that can be used over and over again with success!