

Lauren Clouser, Host:

Welcome to the LDA podcast, a series by the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents, and professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world. Hi, everyone. Welcome to the LDA podcast. I'm here today with Meghan Buchanan. She's an adventure athlete, rocket scientist, and dyslexia advocate. This is Meghan's second time on the podcast, so be sure to tune in to "From Injury to Everest, Dyslexia Gave Me GGRIT." It was a great episode.

Meghan is in the process of completing the Explorer's Grand Slam where adventurers reach the highest mountain peaks of each of the 7 continents and ski the North and South Poles. And Meghan was also most recently on season 2 of Netflix's show Outlast, a raw survival competition series where 16 lone wolf experts are dropped in the Alaskan wilderness and must outlast each other in a battle for a \$1,000,000 payout. There's only one rule in this cutthroat game, they must be a part of a team to win. Outlast is available now on Netflix. So, Meghan, thank you so much. Outlast, the first six episodes are just out, so we are so glad to have you back on the show again, even though I know you're super busy, but we love having you on the show.

Meghan Buchanan:

I'm so honored to be here. There's just a lot going on. And I still have besides all the adventuring, I've got an expedition coming up in 16 days, leaving the country, but I still have a full time job as an aerospace engineer.

Lauren Clouser

How do you do it? Oh my gosh.

Meghan Buchanan:

Not a lot of sleep.

Lauren Clouser:

Well, I'd love to dive into more of that. Just to start off, would you be able to tell us about your principles of GGRIT and how your dyslexia created your sense of perseverance?

Meghan Buchanan:

Yes. I would love to. So I do have 5 tools that it all started for me, I realized, as being dyslexic and the things I had to go through in life to overcome my challenges and obstacles. But GGRIT, which is gratitude, growth, resilience, integrity, and tenacity, those are the five things. And I do kinda think it's funny that, you know, there's 2 g's. So GGRIT is spelled wrong and, you know, it's a little play on words there. But, anyway, those are the 5 keys that can get you through any obstacle that's been thrown at you that you didn't choose or challenge or a goal that you've chosen for yourself. And, simply, gratitude is the foundation of anything we face in life.

If we can focus on what we are grateful for or find the tiny pleasure in that day, that helps us really create a foundation of positivity to keep taking another step forward. And then you step into growth, which is the second phase. That is the hardest part of this. That is where we are stretching. We are learning. We are vulnerable. We feel horrible about ourselves.

We might be new at something. We're being told we suck. We're not good enough, and other people could be telling us that or we're telling ourselves that. And being able to push yourself through that growth cycle is done through resilience. You build your resilience to be able to face that growth cycle again and again, get knocked down, and get back up with that resilience. Integrity is in there. It is so important to me because we have got to learn through this life not only to be honest with others, but we've gotta be honest with ourselves. And I think I spent the majority of my life, the first part of my life, wanting to be anyone but dyslexic.

And I wasn't being authentic and true to myself, so I felt misunderstood. It wasn't until I started being honest with myself and being grateful for the skills I did have that I truly started thriving. And so that integrity of learning your voice and to stand up for who you are, inherently, you just start doing that for others. And all of this is pulled through again and again with tenacity. To have that fire in your belly that makes you able to get back up and go through that growth cycle, and have the resilience, and make the hard choices, to be honest, is all done with this vivacious positivity of tenacity. And being able to repeat that cycle over and over again just keeps leveling you up in your life where you wanna go, who you wanna be, and reaching that summit.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. I love the core principle GGRIT. And, obviously, it has done a lot for you.

Meghan Buchanan:

It has. And, you know, how that ties back is, first of all, I went into aerospace engineering, which was not easy as a dyslexic or, it was also a lot of misogyny being a female. And so really just kind of powering through that, and then I suffered a horrific snowboarding accident in the back bowls of Vale. Woke up with a 14 inch titanium rod in my leg, told I'd have a wheelchair or cane the rest of my life. I think I was only 35. And right away, like, laying in the hospital, I was like, no. It's not gonna be my life. And I instantly started fighting and working towards recovery.

Took me 2 years and we found out I was allergic to titanium. But at that point, I had decided I had hyped. The outdoors was my therapy as a kid, something I felt good at. I did not feel good at school. And so I just wanted to go hike Kilimanjaro again or Everest Base Camp, and that's all I focused on. And when I got there, I was so much stronger mentally. And then that's when I settled or decided on the 7 Summits and then the Explorer's Grand Slam. But going back now and trying to think of where did I get...because people kept asking me, where did you get this grit? Where did you get this grit? And I finally traced it back.

It's because I was a 7 year old little kid that was emotionally abused and verbally abused by my teacher calling me retarded and idiot, stupid, sitting me in the corner and abusing me and my

decision and the help from my parents to rise. And that is where that fire came from, and it has absolutely contributed to everything I've accomplished today.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. Well, you're always looking for the next challenge too, which I love. So what made you wanna try the show Outlast? Can you tell us a little bit about the process to get on and what your thought process was?

Meghan Buchanan:

Yeah. It actually is that they reached out to me. They had a casting agency. And now that I know all the 15 other contestants, they did a really phenomenal job. I think they really went out. Some people applied because they'd seen the 1st season. I think about half of us, they sought out or said, hey, would you be interested, sort of with everyone having a little bit different expertise. And then a lot of it is you don't know what group you're gonna end up in.

You could end up in like, we got 3 hunters and one complete survivalist. But you could end up in a group like mine where we had some certain skills, but, I mean, I'm not a survivalist, and I'm not a hunter. I'm really good in long endurance, uncomfortable, cold, environments and pushing forward. I have that positivity and that mental attitude. But, yeah, I was like, it's so funny on the show that I can't believe that it wasn't in there, but I kept saying it. I'm like, I am not a survivalist. I have no idea what to do with this.

But, you know, it was a challenge I definitely wanted to take on. I am not afraid to put myself in a brand new environment and totally suck at something. But it was so exciting, and it was so thrilling. It was so amazing to watch other people and their skill sets. And I wanted to push myself, and I definitely pushed myself.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. Well and more about pushing yourself too. You were in some pretty extreme conditions. I mean, middle of nowhere, Alaska, freezing cold. How did the principles of GGRIT serve you? Do you have any specific stories that come to mind?

Meghan Buchanan:

Yeah. You know, it was also your body going through a lot. I mean, it was very difficult. That area of Alaska is a national rainforest. So, sure, here in Colorado where everything is so dry, so easy for me, with, like, a ferro rod to start a fire. No brainer. When everything in your environment is wet, it's very difficult. And the 4 of us on my team, we were all like, we were a struggle bus.

And so, really, those principles of GGRIT always come in. And it's all of us, you can be in an environment and those negative voices come in like, what are you doing here? You shouldn't be here. I told you shouldn't do that. And by this point, my GGRIT voice is really, really strong. Like, well, we're here now. We're gonna just deal with it. Let's see how it goes. And so it is being able

to stay calm in a difficult situation, giving yourself some grace and some space to be able to go into solution mode instead of spending your energy on self hate talk or doubt.

Just put all the energy into mode. So being grateful for the opportunity to be there, and it was beautiful. It was savage and brutal, but it was beautiful. It was so amazing. And then being you know, allowing myself that area to grow. I knew that I was not an expert and everything was gonna be growth for me. So I kinda got my mindset already ready for that. Like, this is going to hurt, And you are gonna feel horrible about not being able to do this or that, but you're gonna keep trying.

And so that resilience is you're gonna get up the next day and you're gonna try again and you're gonna keep trying. And in this show, for anyone, oh my gosh, watch it. I have to tell you, like, actually they have so much footage to go through. What actually gets condensed in, all of us are like, oh, man. I wish they had shown this part or this part. But really for us, our struggle was really keeping fire going, but it was every day, 3 times a day. Let's try it again. Let's reevaluate that resilience to keep moving forward.

The integrity portion is, and a lot of people on the show talk about integrity. I think, this is a game. It is a game and there's a huge prize at the end and you have to think about your strategy going into it. How do I wanna play this? And everyone has the right to play it the way they want. And if you went into it like I'm gonna do anything to win this, that's a whole different level. I knew for me, I wanted to go in really keeping my principles of grit, keeping integrity, and see how far that could take me because that's what's most important to me and how I sleep at night. So being honest, having some hard conversations with people.

And, you know, there's at some point, there are no spoilers, but I will tell you for me in my journey, I think I had one of the absolute hardest decisions I've had to make as far as an expedition goes because I had to be honest with myself about what was happening with my body. And you will get to see me go through it. They really don't go into the extent, but I knew there was something very wrong with my body, but I didn't know what. And I had to make some really hard decisions, and I'm so glad I did. All I'll say is that by the time I got back to civilization, I had a shower and a normal night's sleep. I woke up the next day, fever, so sick. I had given myself shingles and I thought they were spider bites. I'm like, I have these weird spider bites and I feel like my kidneys are failing. I had shingles for probably 3 or 4 days.

And I didn't know. And the doctor was like, if you had even like, they're they're just like, I can't believe, like, you walked in here. It was bad. So anyway, it was, you know, it's so interesting this journey and what your human body can do to get you through survival situations is just phenomenal to me. So with all this wrapping it up then, see how excited I am that I had shingles? Like, that tenacity. Like, I was so sick, but I was so excited to be there with that spirit. And you don't always get the summit. Right? You don't always get the summit.

You've got to love that journey and everything you learned. And from it now, I cannot wait to

actually...this is it's made me a better mountaineer. It's made me a better explorer. I now have sought out a couple really great, like, survival university here in Colorado. Oh my gosh. It's like my new passion. There's nothing better than actually learning how to make fire and take care of yourself. And, like, it's just a whole other level to my mountaineering that I am so happy to take on.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. Well and I wanted to ask too, is there, you said that there's a lot of footage and not all of it makes it in. So what's something that you want people who are watching the show to know?

Meghan Buchanan:

Yeah. I love that. There's so much. And, you know, of course, like, it is a great show and the 16 of us chat. We're like, oh, hey. The thing they had me say about you, I didn't say that about you. But it's all fun and games. Like, we are all, by the way, all of us are on this text chain together and just so supportive and happy for each other.

It's really like, I have so many great friends from this too, but one of the things I really want people to know, I actually talked about my neurodivergence and dyslexia a lot. I mean, every interview because I was so solid in my gratitude of knowing that I was sitting there in this incredible place in Alaska in front of this camera because of my dyslexia, because it had made me so strong, and it had given me the GGRIT to be able to push through any challenge and, more importantly, be willing to take on any challenge. Because I think and we all know this, growing up with dyslexia, with ADHD, you know, I love how people say, well, I didn't have a choice. But you know what? Give yourself credit. You had a choice. You had a choice growing up to either let it make you better or have it take you down and use it as an excuse. It made me strong. It made me so much better.

It was tough and it hurt, but it allowed me to become the kind of person that's like, oh, hell. I have no idea how to survive in the wilderness, but I'm gonna go throw myself out there. Let's go do it. Knowing that no matter what happened in the end, I would be okay and I would keep moving forward. And all of that is really the strength that dyslexia, neurodivergence, ADHD has given me, and I would not, like I said before, I spent the first half part of my life wanting to be anyone but dyslexic. And the second part of my life, I would not wanna be anyone else but who I am as neurodivergent. And I really especially want kids to hear this, that it sucks growing up with it. It is hard.

It is going to hurt, but you can keep choosing to take another step forward. You can become an engineer. You can get to the top of Everest. You can be on an amazing Netflix reality show by learning to be who you are and really just developing those skills and learning to love yourself.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. And just also finding what you're passionate about and what your strengths are and

what you love, like you did, how the outdoors was like this, refuge for you.

Meghan Buchanan:

It really was. And, you know, I think we talked about this the first time too, and I didn't realize how much it was. It was twofold for me. You know, my father was a brilliant roots scholar at MIT. Like, physicists, just brilliant. I have a brother and sister. They don't have dyslexia. I had such a supportive family.

They were wonderful to me. My mother made my home environment normal. But I still felt so much shame and embarrassment and guilt. And my dad, though, also loved the outdoors. And my brother and sister weren't as into it, so that was our thing together. And I would see the light in his eyes as starting to hype with him when I was really young, and then I remember the day I could go faster than him. And I remember the light in his eyes, like, holy crap. Like, look at you go, girl.

And that just filled my heart with self esteem. And I think I used that to put into school. And then I did very well in school because, again, it has nothing to do with my IQ or my intellect. I paid attention in school. I got great grades. I mean, it was fine. I I did great. It caught up with me in college.

I had to work much harder, but, but it helped build my confidence for me. And my dad and I, we went on to climb Kilimanjaro together, which was really, really cool. But that's another thing for anyone that is challenged anywhere in life. It doesn't have to be neurodivergence either, is really look for that thing, that gratitude. Look for that thing that fills your soul and gives you joy. Tap back into that. Anytime you're feeling low, let it recharge you, and then go use your energy to keep moving forward in the goal that you're trying to achieve. And for me, it was always the outdoors.

And so when I had my shattered leg, that is the carrot I thought of. I'm like, I wanna return. I had a group of friends going to hike to just Everest Base Camp, and I was like, I wanna be on that hike. I wanna be on that hike. And that was my goal, and I made it. And then, yeah, then you discover how much stronger you are emotionally and mentally. And then I was like, oh, I'll go to Kilimanjaro again. And then that was a piece of cake.

And then I was like, well, hell. What's the highest peak in South America? Let's go do that.

Lauren Clouser:

Well and I know you mentioned that you talked a lot about neurodiversity, but it didn't necessarily didn't get into the show. But even so, what does it mean to you to be an advocate for neurodiversity and to have this visibility that comes from something as large as being on a Netflix show?

Meghan Buchanan:

I am tearing up because my heart is beaming. It means so much to me to be able to tell a little me at 7 years old: You are going to get through this, and you are going to thrive, and you are gonna love yourself. And you will no longer be embarrassed of who you are. And that's so important to me to be able to tell kids because I just think anyone you talk to, any adult that we think back to our childhood, our hearts just hurt because it was so painful. And I'm almost done with, I've been talking about writing this book forever. And I have to tell you, that's another thing is that I am writing this book. I am not using a ghostwriter.

I am not using AI. This is a bigger challenge to me than Everest or anything else, but I wanted to do it because it does hurt. It's horrible. But I wanted to get through to prove to myself I could. But going back and talking about my childhood, you realize how much you compartmentalize. Yeah. Dyslexia, I can never say the word <compartmentalize>. Anyway, how you store things away.

You store pain away to convince yourself you're fine and move on. I have to tell you, I'm writing this book and going through the experience I had with this horrible teacher, and I'd have to take a break. And I'm just bawling, like, in my office. And I was like, oh my god. I can't believe how much pain I covered up as a kid. And I do realize everyone has that. Every person has something in their life, but that is such a survival mode that we go into as humans. And I'm lucky I'm having an opportunity to go back.

And some people are like, well, I don't wanna relive things. I'm like, no. I get to actually release who I was then and let them heal, like, really at a deeper level. So it's been this amazing experience. And it also gives me the insight to now go back to kids that age and really be like, man, I know. I remember. I know how it felt, and I'm encouraging you so much to not try to be someone else. Walk through the fire right now as who you are and try to be that person.

Build the love for that person because you're gonna end up coming back to that person anyway when you're an adult.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. Well and could you tell us too just a little bit about dealing with disappointments and, you know, things not always working out. Could you tell us about your progress on the Explorer's Grand Slam and what was the latest update? You were so close to completing it. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Meghan Buchanan:

Yeah. That's another thing, I mean, GGRIT is, I like to say a lot of times, GGRIT isn't just reaching the summit, and GGRIT isn't pushing through absolutely any pain to get what you want. GGRIT is also about patience and grace and giving yourself time and understanding and forgiveness. And it's funny. I think about my journey through the 7 summits, and I was really lucky. I mean, I did a lot of work to be skilled, but also a lot of luck with the weather, amazing teams. I was a first attempt summiter on a lot of these. And finally, when it came to Everest, you

know, I was 2 weeks out from going in 2021 and this little thing called COVID happened.

I had trained so hard for an entire year and then done. And they're like, nope. No one's going. You have to wait a whole another year to train. And training for Everest or some of these bigger mountains, like, it's a different level of training. They say don't be in the best shape of your life. Be in the Everest shape of your life. You wanna be able to move fast at high altitude.

So I trained another year. Went back in 2022 on the mountain for, like, 6 and a half, 7 weeks. We were ready for the summit bid, and then our climbing Sherpa got the delta variant of COVID. Everyone off the mountain, we're done. Season's over. Go home. I was like, but the top's right there. No.

Okay. Train another year. And so this really at this point, I knew for myself, I was like, this is what expedition is about. Not just hitting the summit the first time. I'm like, this is what this is about. Embrace this. Learn this journey. Be okay with it.

So I really got really patient with things, and after I summited Everest in 2022, you know, then I finished the 7 Summits with Kazianzcu. There, I'm also trying to do Carstensz Pyramid, which is the other version, the Mezner version, Indonesia. I've been on a waiting list for that since 2019, and it's been closed down. So I'm like, that one's back burner. But now the North Pole. Right? So we're supposed to go to the North Pole in 2022, 2 weeks before, got canceled. I was like, I've been down this road before. So, honestly, I was like, chill.

I'm just like, I know how to deal with this. A lifetime of learning from disappointment and how to deal with it. In my forties, I'm like, I think I finally have got this down. And so then I went last year. It was so hairy, the logistics. We actually had to go through Siberia. I was more nervous about that than anything else. Any more nervous than polar bears or crevasses.

I was like, wow. It's a heated geopolitical situation. I'm nervous, but I gotta give this a shot. So a small team of us went. We were there for 2 weeks, and then the ice did not, it wouldn't hold. The global warming is just more rapidly happening than we thought. So after 2 weeks being there, go home. We gotta try again next year.

And so it was just and and and I'll see at that point. I'm like, alright. Well, that's what we gotta do. So I'm in the pause, waiting for that year to come back around. I think we'll pull it back a few weeks so hopefully the ice will be firmer. So I will be going, probably in March, this coming year. But in between, Carstensz Pyramid has opened up after 5 years. Fifty permits are there.

I've got one. And so I leave in 16 days now on September 22nd to complete the other version of the 7 summits. And, it's hard with stats of how many, but approximately maybe, like, 25 women have ever done that, both versions. So I'm so excited to go and get back on the mountain, get into some technical stuff again, and then I'll come back, finish my book, and then I'm off to the North Pole to finish the Explorer's Grand Slam, becoming the 5th US woman to ever complete

that.

Lauren Clouser:

That's so exciting. Well, we'll be keeping our fingers crossed for you in March and also for your upcoming expedition too. That's so exciting.

Meghan Buchanan:

I know, and I will always bring my little sign.

Lauren Clouser:

I love it. Dyslexia gave me GGRIT.

Meghan Buchanan:

It did. I held this at the summit of Everest, and, you know, it's so important for me to do that. And I love, like and and for anyone who is watching this with if you yourself are neurodivergent or has a child who is blessed to be neurodivergent, please have them follow me to the adventure. Look for the sign. It's just a great way for our community to unite and celebrate each other.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. Well and, Megan, how can people follow you? Would you mind giving us your Instagram, your website just so people who are listening can follow you?

Meghan Buchanan:

We'll do it right here. So there's GGRIT. Perfect. I would love it. That is my website. That's my Instagram. On Facebook, I'm GGRIT Team, but luckily, all of that is, connected together.

And, yeah, and I tell you what, I've got so many great opportunities coming up too. I'm gonna be speaking at a couple universities for their dyslexia symposiums coming up. Please contact me too. I'm so happy to send messages to schools or just really to inspire kids and help them feel good about themselves where they're at and encourage them to keep taking steps through the difficult portions. And, also, I love speaking to companies about GGRIT, the principles in general. Again, it doesn't have to be about neurodivergence. It is about anything, women in tech, just companies reaching you as an individual and or a team reaching your full potential, learning to knock down those negative voices and step into just, you know, all possibilities.

Lauren Clouser:

Absolutely. Well, I love keeping up with what you're doing. I'm sure we'll have you on the show here before too long again. But, Meghan, thank you so much for being on the show. Like I said, it's always a pleasure, and we can't wait to see what you do next.

Meghan Buchanan:

I love it. And I have my banner. I've got an LDA banner, and so that would be going to the top of, the other 7 summits, Carstensz Pyramid with me, and then, of course, to the North Pole

because I always love climbing to help spread awareness for you guys. I love what you have been doing, and you keep it up too.

Lauren Clouser:

Thank you so much. Such a pleasure. Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast. To learn more about LDA and to get valuable resources and support, visit Idaamerica.org.