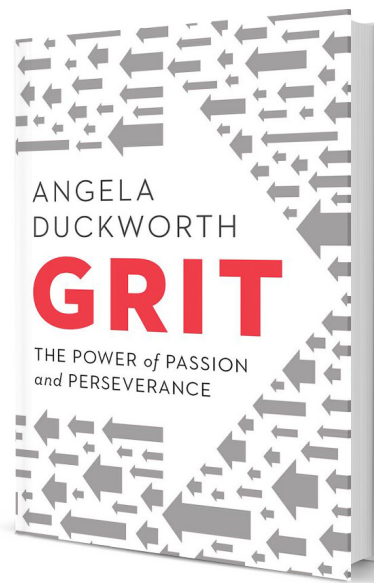




Grit

The power of passion and perseverance
By Angela Duckworth

https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_grit_the_power_of_passion_and_perseverance?language=en



THE BOOK IN A NUTSHELL

Grit is a key factor for success in life. Grit is a mindset of not giving up. It gives us the staying power to push on through the trials and tribulations and remain dedicated to the cause (that eventually leads to mastery and success).

Grit can be learned (but is often imprinted in us from our parents and culture). We need a belief that failures and setbacks are just learning lessons to catapult ourselves forward.

The driving engine of grit comes from having a compelling purpose that is deeply important for us (and in many ways defines us). It is further enhanced if what we are doing is also of value to other people. This helps galvanise and focus our efforts on the end goal without being distracted by the inevitable upsets and failures along the way.

A key to skill mastery is 'deliberate practice' as then we make incremental steps of improvement every time.

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THE BOOK

At Westpoint (The US Military Academy) 14,000 students apply. Only 1200 people meet the rigorous academic, physical and psychological standards to be admitted. Yet 20% of them will drop out before graduation. So after all the testing, why do 240 fail each year? Research has shown they lacked grit (i.e. a 'never give up' mentality). Grit is a key factor behind many successful people (in business, arts and sport). Grit is the mental toughness to keep on pushing through the tedium, the tough times and the failures. Most successful people failed before they succeeded. It was their tenacity and determination to not give up that led to their eventual success.

The reality is all people are unlucky some of the time (and lucky some of the time). Successful people accept the swings and roundabouts of life and do not give up. Indeed they tend to use the downers as a motivator to push on through.

The author developed a grit scale (here is a shortened version).

*To calculate your score, add your score and divide by 10. The higher the score the higher your grit.
The authors research showed a strong correlation between academic level (e.g. MBA, PhD etc) and grit.*

	Not at all like me	Not much like me	Some - what like me	Mostly like me	Very much like me
New ideas & projects sometimes distract me from previous ones	5	4	3	2	1
Setbacks don't discourage me. I don't give up easily	1	2	3	4	5
I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one	5	4	3	2	1
I am a hard worker	1	2	3	4	5
I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete	5	4	3	2	1
I finish whatever I begin	1	2	3	4	5
My interests change from year to year	5	4	3	2	1
I am diligent. I never give up	1	2	3	4	5
I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest	5	4	3	2	1
I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge	1	2	3	4	5



Talent versus Effort

Talent is over-rated. Everyone has some predisposition to be good at something. But it takes hard work to turn raw talent into achievement. Many people with talent have failed to capitalise on their innate abilities.

Harvard Psychologists William James asserts, *“Compared to where we ought to be, we are only half awake...We are making use of only a small part of our possible mental and physical resources...the human individual lives usually far within his limits”*

Conversely, many people with limited ability have developed talent by putting in the hard yards. Grit defines ‘staying power’. It’s about perseverance to a cause. So whilst it is not necessarily a guarantee of success, we know (to quote Woody Allen) *“80% of success is just showing up”*.

Darwin was a ‘plodder’ rather than being an intellect. But it was his love of his subject that kept him engaged longer than others.

The problem is we live in a culture that rewards ‘natural talent’ (especially intelligence) versus the hard worker. Our TV shows and sport stadiums celebrate innate, raw talent. Organizations likewise have focused on hiring the brightest (often from the best universities) and culling aggressively the less talented (‘up’ or ‘out’).

The trouble with focusing just on talent is that it rewards the 1% and dis-incentivises the 99%. Research suggests constant effort dedicated to one area is more influential on success than our genes.

Dedicated Focused effort

Excellence is achieved rarely in leaps, but small incremental steps, spread over a long period of time, and gained from endless practice. The reality is they acquired greatness through dedicated, long-term focus.

Nietzsche once wrote, *“Great things are accomplished by those people whose thinking is active in one direction”*. There is not enough time to do everything we want to do. If we want to excel, we need to focus (and thus let go/de-prioritise other things).

Letting go: Award winning chef, Marc Vetri was initially interested in music. At music college, he had to get a job to fund his education. After a while he fell in love with cooking, and focused his energies there.

Dedicated focus: Warren MacKenzie is a celebrated potter. When younger he experimented with many different art forms until eventually he fell in love with ceramics. His passion for pottery meant he was happier to give-up the other art forms and dedicate his time to perfecting the art of pottery. He knew success would not be found in dabbling but having a searing focus on one thing. He said, “The first 10,000 pots were difficult, and then it got a lot easier”.

Duckworth came up with a simple model:

1) Talent x Effort = Skill

2) Skill x Effort = Achievement

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Hard work really matters. Talent by itself will lead to nowhere. We need to work hard to turn talent into skill. When we have skill we then need to work even harder to rise above the many others who also have skill to attain mastery (that then leads to achievement).

Turn it around. If we lack talent in an area we need to make even more effort to reach the same level of skill as someone who has lots of natural talent.

Hard work: Will Smith, the Oscar winning actor once said, "I've never really viewed myself as particularly talented. Where I excel is a ridiculous, sickening work ethic...The only thing that I see that is distinctly different about me is: I'm not afraid to die on the treadmill. I will not be outworked. Period. You might have more talent than me. You might be smarter than me. You might be sexier than me...But if we get on that treadmill together there's two things: You're getting off first or I'm going to die. It's really that simple."

Deliberate Practice

Kaizen is the Japanese for CANI - Constant and Never Ending Improvement. It's a continuous drive to progress (and not become complacent).

People who practice more, generally do better in things. But it all depends on the quality of practice. Some people have 20 years of experience whilst others have one year of experience repeated 20 times. Thus practice is much deeper than just the hours spent - it's more about the *quality* of those hours. The key seems to be *deliberate practice*.

Deliberate practice means having a real focus, with deep awareness, and concentration during our training sessions (so that there is a very active 'feedback loop' in operation allowing us to improve every time). Each session is purposeful (leading up to our higher goals) often with specific objectives for each session. First we have a stretch goal (some high level ambition - e.g. winning Gold). Then we break it down into manageable training objectives/milestones (e.g. be at x speed by y). Then each session builds a particular area of expertise (e.g. working on leg lift, eye focus etc) zeroing-in on just one aspect of our overall performance. We need to be really focused on *feedback* so we know if we are achieving our objectives. Every session is an opportunity to learn and grow. Every session not learnt from is a wasted session.

Deliberate practice takes a lot of effort. It's easy not to push ourselves, but that's not how a muscle is built. It takes straining (not just training) to build the skills to perform at the highest levels. As one coach said, "*They need to learn to love the burn*".

Quantity of quality: Rowdy Gaines, the three-times Olympic gold medal swimmer swam 'around the world' in practice for a 49 second race! The reality is the people who also swam in that final had also swam a similar distance. It was won in the quality of those miles, not the quantity.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced *cheeks-sent-me-high*) focuses on the state of high performance where the individual is 'in flow'. It's a state of almost unconscious action, where the body (rather than the conscious brain) runs the show. Actions are effortless, more fluid and natural unlike the clumsy interventions of the under-evolved conscious part of our 'intellectual' brain (unconscious competence versus conscious competence).

"You feel as though you do not exist...my hand seems devoid of myself. I have nothing to do with what is happening....and the music just flows out of me" - Conductor



"It was just one of those programs that clicked...it's almost as if you don't have to think, everything goes automatically" - Ice skater.

These periods of 'flow' are intoxicating and addictive as we touch (briefly) a higher level of 'self'.

Thus there are two stages: A very conscious state of practice that then leads to an unconscious state of flow. It would appear that people who undertake deliberate practice experience more frequent periods of flow. It's through strained effort in practice they can perform in a very relaxed, almost effortless, fluid way in the heat of battle.

Passionate purpose drives perseverance

"Life is short. Follow your passion", said Will Shortz, Editor for New York Times. Jeff Bezos told Princeton Graduates, *"If you're not passionate about what it is you're working on, you won't be able to stick to it."* Successful people love what they do. They rarely do it for the money but for the intrinsic reward it brings them (and because they are excellent at it, they make money from it).

Yet a recent Gallup poll revealed that more than two thirds of people were not engaged in their work. The same was found across 141 different nations to varying levels. Indeed, when questioned, few people could tell them what they were truly passionate about.

Grit has two components: passion and perseverance. Without the passion, we will not have the perseverance to keep on pushing through all the monotony and downturns. Passion needs to be enduring and not fleeting. It's something we need to care about deeply. It's important to us. Indeed its purpose starts to define us. Achieving this goal is not just a 'nice to have' - it's a real 'imperative'

Looking back at the grit questionnaire, add up all the odd numbers (and divide by 5) to get a 'passion' score and all the even numbers (and divide by 5) to get a perseverance score.

Evidence: A Stanford Psychologist, Catharine Cox analysed 301 exceptional achievers from their biographies. She coded their reported traits (from intelligence though to extroversion). From there she drew correlations to try to work out the difference that made the difference. Cox found a leading trait: Persistence of motive (i.e. persistence driven by passion).

Passion and perseverance need direction to make them purposeful. That is why we need a goal to aim for. Without a target the passion will be wasted. Having a goal not only helps drive action but it further strengthens the passion and resolve.

Defined by your passion: Hall of fame pitcher, Tom Seaver, had 311 wins to his name with 3,640 strikeouts. During his 20 year baseball career he aimed to "pitch the best I possibly could day after day, year after year...Pitching is what makes me happy. I've devoted my life to it". Often by focusing on the small things the big things come.

The trouble with goals is they can feel too lofty - too big, too distant to either believe or achieve. We therefore need to set interim, stepping stone objectives along the way - ones



that stretch yet are still achievable (but ultimately lead to our goals). We need to analyse what are the obstacles, and then work out our strategies to get past them. That said the goal should be immovable but the strategies need to flex (as with any long journey, detours are inevitable) - so we should write the goal in pen and the strategies in pencil.

The ability to adapt to win: Roz Chast, the celebrated cartoonist contributed 571 cartoons over his career to the New Yorker. From an early age he wanted to be one of the best cartoonists in the world. But it did not happen over night. He had enough rejection letters from the New Yorker to paper his bathroom. So he changed his strategy. He analysed all the cartoons in the new Yorker going back to 1925 to work out what was the missing ingredient. He found all the cartoons had a personal style. Also they made people 're-think'. With these new insights, he upped his game and after another 2,000 rejections, eventually got published. His advice to budding cartoonists is to draw in batches of ten because, "In cartooning, as in life, nine out of ten things never work out."

Out of interest grows purpose

There seems to be a classic path to purpose: First comes *Interest*. Many people have an unconscious interest in an area (what the author calls an 'enduring devotion'). Because they enjoy the area they spend more time doing it than other things, leading to stage 2: *Practice*. Practice means they slowly get better and better at it. After a while they move into the third phase: *Purpose*. Their interest has moved beyond the average and they now see it to be something of great importance to them. Something that in many ways defines who they are and what they see to be important. This helps turn up the flames of both interest and practice as it becomes more purposeful. Finally there needs *Hope*. Hope is the unwavering belief that they *will* get better and they *will* hit their ambition (in spite of all the setbacks along the way).

Not only was it about themselves but they all talked about how what they were doing benefitted others as well (i.e. not as selfish as we may think of a person dedicated to a sport). It appears a person first starts with a purely selfish interest but at some point has an epiphany about its connection to a bigger external benefit for society/others. Then purpose and passion gets leveraged. Purpose appears to have greater gravitational pull if linked to a higher calling outside of just themselves. If they see what they are doing helps others, it galvanises effort and resilience to the cause.

Dealing with failure

Failure is a key part of any person's success (progress rarely runs a straight course). We tend to learn more from when we fail than when we succeed. It makes us re-evaluate our strategies and commitments. But some people give up, allowing their internal negative talk to kill their ambition.

Sadly our culture trains people from an early age to have a negative experience of failure. When a baby falls over when learning to walk it giggles. When at Kindergarten, mistakes start to get 'pointed out'. We instil them with embarrassment, shame, sadness and fear - and that carries on for the rest of their lives. No wonder people do not want to risk failing.

Hope

*'Fall seven, rise eight' - Japanese proverb
Hope dies last*

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Hope is a critical factor in perseverance. It's about a belief that things will get better. Hope makes us not give up, to not accept the status quo, to push on and dare to try new ways to achieve our outcome.

Seligman ran a whole series of experiments in the 1960's to show that when we give up hope we move into a state called *learned helplessness* (in one famous experiment, dogs just laid on the ground and learned to accept the mild current that flowed through their kennel floor). In many ways people accept the same. Seligman has also suggested that we can develop *learned optimism*.

Newer research has shown that optimists have as many bad events in their life as pessimists but choose to react differently. In a test, pessimists were asked what reasons they give when they fail to complete a task. Pessimists tend to jump to permanent things that cannot be solved (e.g. "*I always screw things up*"). Optimists instead blame transitory things that can be addressed (e.g. "*I mismanaged my time*"). They see setbacks as points of learning. Further research has shown how pessimists are more depressed, anxious and less gritty. They also tend to be less successful in career, life, relationships and health.

Optimism drives repeated performance: Coaches invited Olympic swimmers to swim their best. Afterwards they told them they had performed less well than was actually the case. When offered the chance to swim it again, Optimists performed as well as the first time, whilst the pessimists performed significantly less well.

Fixed versus Growth mindset

Carol Dweck, a psychologist defined two different mindsets that can lead to a grittier predisposition.

Some people have a 'fixed' mindset. This means they believe that their talent/ability is primarily defined by their innate, genetic make up. Since we cannot affect our DNA it means they see there is a limit to their growth. Thus they do not see the point of expending too much energy. Dweck found that people with a 'fixed' mindset gave up on hard tests (and tended to cheat more). They are also unlikely to take on difficult challenges for fear of being 'found out'

Other people have a 'growth' mindset. These people believed their ability could be enhanced through hard work. The critical issue is they saw failure as a learning opportunity (they don't over-react to them). They tend to work harder, do better at school, enjoy better physical and mental health, and have stronger and more positive relationships. And of course they are grittier.

One of the keys to a growth mindset is knowing what to do next. We need to have the ability to diagnose the cause of the failure and then work out our strategy to address the issue. Too many people do nothing because they do not know what to do. We need to take responsibility for our actions and seize control of our destinies.

Grit can be grown

The key question is how much is grit nature or nurture? The short answer is it's a bit of both (this has been investigated through 2000 pairs of identical twins).



The reality is we tend to learn/model such mindsets at a very early age and they can stay with us a lifetime. It's not about a protected and mollycoddled life away from stress but more how we react and deal with the stresses and downturns early on. If early-on we failed in some way, but were guided with healthy strategies to cope and push on, then we are more likely to adopt those strategies later-on in life. It's often about the perceived locus of control. If we see ourselves to be a 'victim' and believe we have little or no control of the situation we move into a place of helpless and hopeless. However, if we see the situation as transitory and that we do have some degree of control, then it gives us the strength to keep on pushing.

Conversely if when young we did not cope with such situations, it is likely to become a default setting for future events in our lives. Many kids raised in deprived backgrounds are getting far too many early lessons in helplessness which sadly sets many of them up for failure in life.

Likewise, the children of the wealthy who have had highly protected, 'gifted' lives have never experienced failure so have not yet learned how to cope with setbacks and failure. These 'fragile perfects' know how to succeed in life but have not yet learned how to fail.

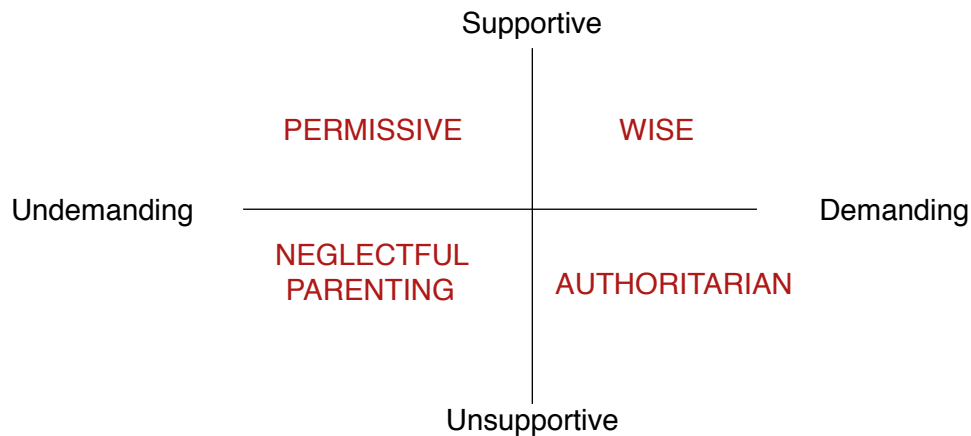
We often see two ends of a continuum in parenting from the nurturing, loving support at one end and the more authoritarian, demanding and tough style of parenting at the other. So which is best to breed a mindset of gritty children? Is grit forged in the crucible of unrelenting high standards or nurtured in the warm embrace of loving support?

The reality is it's a mix of loving supportive high standards (i.e. *tough love*). Parents need to set standards that become the accepted norm. The key then is to not tolerate a drop in those standards. It's also a lot to do with perceived expectation. If a parent/teacher/coach truly believes we can perform at a certain level (that is often above our own belief), then we will rise to it. It's about developing in our children the self belief, self-worth and confidence that they *can* succeed. Finally, more often than not it's less what parents say and more what they do (as we learn from modelling those significant others around us).

Expectations derive performance: Psychologists David Yeager and Geoff Cohen ran an experiment where they asked Seventh grade teachers to provide feedback on a student essay. After wards, the researchers assigned them into random piles. Onto the first pile they added a Post-it that said, "I'm giving you these comments so that you'll have feedback on your paper". On the second pile they wrote, "I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them." Students were then given the opportunity to resubmit. 80% of those with the high expectations remark resubmitted, whilst only 40% of the first pile did. The high expectations group also made twice as many amendments to their essay.



Longitudinal research (i.e over a decade or more) has demonstrated that children raised by 'wise parenting' fare better than those raised in any other type of household:



The playing fields of grit

Partaking in some kind of extra curricular activities has also been shown to help improve grittiness as they are about mastering a skill (be it ballet, drama, football, violin etc). There are countless studies that show that children involved in extra-curricular activities fare better on every metric (grades, self-esteem, behaviour, future employment, financial health etc).

It would seem that the trials and tribulations of developing an extra curricular skill (supported by good teachers and peers) help train our children in the mindset of persevering and not giving up in the face of failure. The sad reality is many schools are now so cash strapped and overburdened with admin and there is little extra-curricula activities that the teachers can support.

Trained-in effort lasts: Psychologist Robert Eisenberger trained rats to press a lever for food. In one group he made them work hard for their food (twenty presses) versus the other group where they got a pellet after just two pushes. When they were then set other activities, the hard working rats demonstrated more vigour and endurance than the 'easy' rats.

Evidence: The Personal Qualities Project in Princeton University developed a predictor test for future achievement. They followed several thousand students for five years starting in high school. From their studies they isolated over 100 different traits that could influence performance (inc personal background, socioeconomic status, IQ etc). One factor stood out as the principal predictor of success: Follow-through.

Using grit as a key criteria for job selection: At Microsoft, they used to give potential software programmers a task that would be tedious and take ages to complete. This was a test of their follow-through to the end line and not give up.



A culture of grit

The culture we live in (and most identify with) powerfully shapes our beliefs, values and hence behaviour.

A culture is an invisible psychological boundary that connects *us*. It is the shared norms, values and behaviours of a group i.e. '*How we do things around here*'. When we adopt a culture, we take on its values and behaviours. At its highest level we identify with that culture - it defines us. Eventually we become the embodiment of that culture. Thus if we want to be like a certain group of people, then we should join that culture. If we want to become a great swimmer, we need to join a great team. Likewise, if we want to increase our grit, we must join a culture that has grittiness at its core. Then their 'norms' of performance and standards become ours (for example when everyone else is getting up at four in the morning to go swimming it seems normal to us as well).

If we want to create a strong culture we need to define (and hold to) some key values. These then need to be constantly and continually communicated.

Creating a culture: An interview with the head coach of the Seahawks (the Seattle based American Football team) revealed how attention to detail was critical to embed the culture. For example, use of specific language is key along with regular use of rituals.

CRITIQUE

Whilst it is an easy book to read (having been written in a conversational style) I found the book to be quite light with limited robust data. It was also very repetitive (frankly I did get a bit bored towards the end).

A lot of the evidence is based on correlations (and we know that correlations does not mean causation). For example, we do not know for sure that it was the grit component that led to the success (as success is multi factorial). As often is the case the researchers/author find the answer they want in the data presented.

The book seems to be more focused on hard work than the mental toughness of grit. I had expected more in the area of mental toughness along with a range of techniques to build grit. Indeed she only offers one strategy (in our grasp) to develop our grit and that is to have a purpose. I still sense we need more than this to build mental fortitude.

The logo consists of the letters 'PAC' in a white, sans-serif font. The letter 'A' is stylized with a red dot above it. The logo is set against a black square background.

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