




GRIT: PERSEVERANCE AND PASSION FOR LONG-TERM GOALS
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"Compared with what we ought to be, we are only half awake. Our fires are damped, our drafts are checked...men the world over possess amounts of resource, which only exceptional individuals push to their extremes of use."

–William James (1907), *The Energies of Men*, pp. 322-323

In 1907, psychologist and philosopher William James suggested that talents were different from the strengths of character required to fully exploit those talents. For his entire distinguished career, James was fascinated with why only a handful of individuals realize the limits of their potential while the rest of us fall far short of what we could be.

A silhouette of a person standing on the tallest bar of a bar chart with four bars of increasing height. The background is a gradient from orange to yellow.

As a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, I have taken up James's question of why some individuals accomplish more than others of equal talent. My research suggests that one personal quality is shared by the most prominent leaders in every field: grit. What is grit?

Grit is perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining both effort and interest over years and years—despite failure, adversity, and even just stalls in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his advantage is stamina. Whereas disappointment or boredom signals to others that it is time to change trajectory and cut losses, the gritty individual stays the course.

The idea that grit might be essential to high achievement evolved during interviews with professionals in a variety of fields unrelated to sports, including investment banking, painting, journalism, academia, medicine, and law. Asked what quality distinguishes star performers in their respective fields, these individuals cited grit or a close synonym as often as they mentioned raw talent. In fact, many were awed by the achievements of peers who did not at first seem as gifted as

others but whose sustained commitment to their ambitions was exceptional. Likewise, many noted with surprise that prodigiously gifted peers did not end up at the top of their field.

Encouraged by these interviews, my colleagues and I developed a self-report questionnaire to measure grit. A version of this questionnaire is available at www.gritstudy.com, and includes questions about how consistent an individual's interests tend to be over the long-term, and how the person reacts to disappointment and

failure. (The questionnaire can be faked in the sense that a person can easily “pretend” to be grittier than he or she really is, but in the context of academic research, there is no serious incentive to do so.)

Research Findings:

Here is a summary of our findings. In our first study, we found that grittier adults complete more years of education. Completing an advanced degree is a challenge for many individuals – the drop out rate from community colleges, for example, is by some estimates far higher than 50%. Grittier individuals also make fewer career changes over the course of their lifetime. One unexpected finding was that older individuals tend to be higher in grit than younger individuals. It is possible that we get grittier as grow older and mature – this is true of several personality traits such as conscientiousness.

In a second study, grittier college undergraduates earned higher GPAs than their peers, despite having slightly *lower* SAT scores. More generally, we find in all of our research that grit is either inversely related to measures of talent or not related at all. In other words, we do *not* find that the most able individuals are always the ones who stick with their commitments over the long haul. This implies that talent and grit are not tightly yoked--it is quite possible to be talented and not gritty enough to succeed, just as it is possible to be gritty but not adequately gifted. Probably it takes very high levels of talent *and* grit, and since these qualities are independent of each other, we should expect only a few individuals to have the highest level of both.

School is challenging in some respects, but these initial findings encouraged us to seek more demanding contexts for testing the importance of grit. At West Point, we found grit to be a better predictor of which cadets make it through the first summer of training (aka Beast Barracks) than a summary measure of cadet quality used by the West Point admissions committee. At the Scripps National Spelling Bee, grittier competitors outranked less gritty competitors, at least in part because they studied longer and for more years than did their same-aged counterparts. Finally, in a study of novice school teachers, grittier teachers raised their students’ standardized test scores more dramatically than did their less gritty counterparts.

Implications for Elite Performance

In my view, achievement is the product of talent and effort. This may seem obvious, but what may not be so clear is that effort is not just not intensity, but also consistency and duration. It’s fairly easy to observe that some individuals work harder than others at a moment in time. As an example, consider two children learning to swim. Assume that both children are equally talented in sports and, therefore, improve in skill at the same rate per unit effort. Assume further that these children are matched in the intensity of effort they expend towards their training. Duration and direction of effort, on the other hand, are described by the number of accumulated hours devoted to training and, crucially, the decision to deepen expertise in swimming rather than to explore alternative pursuits. Our findings suggest that children matched on talent and capacity for hard work may nevertheless differ in grit. Thus, a prodigy who practices intensively yet moves from swimming to the track to yet another sport will likely be surpassed by an equally gifted but grittier child.

How does grit relate to other psychological variables known to predict achievement, such as self-efficacy, optimism, and intrinsic motivation? One possibility is that the propensity to pursue long-term goals with perseverance and passion may be determined in part by these other traits. More research is needed to tease out these relationships.

In a study of the childhoods and training of world-class pianists, neurologists, swimmers, chess players, mathematicians, and sculptors, Ben Bloom noted that “only a few of [the 120 talented individuals in the sample] were regarded as prodigies by teachers, parents, or experts.” (p. 533). Rather, accomplished individuals worked day after day, for at least ten or fifteen years, to reach the top of their fields. Later, work by Florida State University professor Anders Ericsson confirmed that indeed at least ten or twenty years of deliberate practice could not be circumvented for those who aim to be the best at what they do.

My conclusion is that in every field, grit may be as essential as talent to high accomplishment. If

substantiated, this conclusion has at least two implications: First, young athletes who demonstrate *exceptional commitment* to their goals should be supported with as many resources as those identified as gifted with prodigious ability. Second, we should encourage athletes not only to work with intensity, but also with *stamina*. In particular, we should prepare our young people to anticipate failures, misfortunes, and even occasional boredom. We might point out that excellence in any discipline requires years and years of time on task. There is simply no substitute.