

GETTING



the **EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH**
to **CULTIVATING PASSION,**
PERSEVERANCE,
and **PURPOSE**

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Can You Spell G-R-I-T?

every spring in Washington, DC, there are two occurrences we look forward to: the cherry blossoms that explode in frothy white beauty around the National Mall, and the Scripps National Spelling Bee. Founded in 1925, the Bee is a popular nationwide contest open to students as young as six and as old as fourteen, hundreds of whom descend on the city after winning regional bees in their state. Contestants are winnowed down through preliminary rounds, and the final rounds are televised live.

A sports channel, ESPN covers the nerve-wracking competition with as much diligence and thoroughness as they bring to other athletic contests. It's easy to understand why they do so after watching the Bee for just a few minutes. The same kinds of stresses and mental demands that mature athletes face in competition are on display here, but among boys and girls, most of whom haven't hit puberty yet. One at a time, kids in braces, kids with acne, and girls with jaunty bows on top of their heads come silently to the front of the stage, some needing to stand on a chair to reach the microphone, and they're asked to spell some of the most arcane words on the planet. They have to do all of this under hot lights and the pressure of time, one letter at a time, while millions of viewers watch them and the children's parents gulp, perspire, and pray from the audience. Because of the contestants' excellent preparation, this can go on for hours and hours, round after round, sometimes late into the night, as it has for the last several years. Starting in 2014, the Bee has had to name co-champions because they couldn't stump some relentless finalists, who hung on through fourteen rounds until the Bee ran out of words to quiz them on.

Time magazine did a story on some of the Bee's former winners in a "Where Are They Now?" feature, in May 2016, and found that many had gone on to be successful professionals, often blazing pathways in the fields of education, investment, journalism, medicine, and economics. They credited their years of spelling competition with lifelong benefits, especially their preparation for and participation in the nerve-wracking National Spelling Bee. Wendy Guey Lai said that studying for the Bee taught her how to be "resilient, detail-oriented, and exhibit grace under pressure." Pratyush Buddiga said that he'd become good at "pattern recognition" and "trusting my gut instincts." Balu Natarajan, who won the Bee on his third try, noted that the competition is more like "a marathon and not a sprint," and said that his professional career in sports medicine had been impacted by the Bee: "It takes years for most of the kids to hold up that trophy or make it to the national competition. That's what allowed me to have an appreciation for endurance athletes and enjoy taking care of them."¹

When Angela Duckworth was beginning to refine her study of the personality trait she called "grit" at the University of Pennsylvania in 2005, she wondered if the resilient and determined kids she and everyone else saw on television possessed the quality she was defining as "passion and perseverance in pursuit of long-term goals." So she was permitted access to the 273 participants in the 2005 Bee, over half of whom agreed to fill out forms and submit to questions about their work habits, intelligence, and number of years competing in spelling contests. She also administered her newly developed Grit Scale, which contained statements such as "I often choose a goal but later decide to pursue a different one," and "I have overcome setbacks to accomplish an important challenge." After the results were crunched, self-control was an important success factor, but when the age of the participants was factored out, the Grit Scale was the leading predictor of who reached the finals of the Bee. Later parsing of the data showed that much of what nurtured the grit was failing to advance one year, which meant that those students went home and studied even harder, doing much of it on weekends in solitary study.

One year later, Duckworth and her colleagues administered the Grit Scale, as well as a battery of other tests, to 976 incoming West Point freshmen. After teasing out factors like self-control, IQ, and other measures of excellence, the Grit Scale more accurately predicted the cadets who dropped out of Beast Barracks—the hellish first summer of training—than previously used measures, such as the Whole Candidate Score, composed of things like academic honors, leadership recommendations, and grade-point averages. Although the difference was small, it was noteworthy, and when added to the National Spelling Bee findings, people suddenly wanted to know more about what was going on in Angela's lab at Penn.

The quality du jour

No matter where you turn now, grit has become the quality du jour. Grit is the “X” factor that people long to understand and nurture in themselves and others. Honored with a 2013 MacArthur “Genius” Grant, Duckworth and her presentations about grit are staples at education, leadership, and psychology conferences, and one of her speeches, “The Power of Passion and Perseverance,” is one of the most popular TED talks ever posted online. Her book, *Grit*, published in 2016, rocketed to the top of the bestseller lists the week it came out, and President Obama mentioned it in two State of the Union addresses; he also made the cultivation of grit in the classroom his Department of Education’s top priority in 2013.

As promising as her work is, Duckworth has concerns about how some have rushed ahead to use grit in ways that she doesn’t think are ready to be implemented. For example, some schools are eagerly rolling out tests for grit, saying that students and teachers will be evaluated on their grit, even though it’s not clear how to do that in schools or if it’s even the right measure for every student in every setting. Low-income students who have to overcome daily obstacles just to go to school may not benefit from having their grit evaluated, and instead may get more value from building up their self-efficacy and hope. Paul Tough, who has studied grit and written *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and*

the Hidden Power of Character, finds that it might be more rewarding for these students to have family interventions that help parents learn how to manage frustration and anger, which could spawn cultures of love, acceptance, and warmth at home.²

Still, there's no question that Duckworth is on to something. Her study of legions of successful men and women across multiple domains, including investment banking, swimming, football, and chess, has found that there are common denominators in all of these people that are worth unpacking so that we can learn how to emulate their approach to their goals. She found that the people who had distinguished themselves in overcoming multiple challenges over many years to sustain the pursuit of something that was important to them had several critical qualities in common, namely:

- **Passion.** They were lit up from within by a cause or an activity that electrified and energized them, sometimes from a young age. They weren't guided by what others wanted; instead, they were single-mindedly focused on something that crowded out other interests, gave their lives meaning, and filled them with a sense of purpose.
- **Perseverance.** They weren't just resilient in the short run. They had a bounce-back quality that existed throughout years of emotional droughts, physical and financial setbacks, and discouragements that would cause many people to give up.
- **Long-term goals.** They attached a goal to their passion that might have seemed unrealistic to some, but that became their immovable North Star. In some cases, this led to world-renown or Olympic fame, but for others, the results were quieter, from regaining the ability to walk after a crippling injury, to maintaining the hope of being exonerated after wrongful incarceration, to remaining clean and sober in the hardest of circumstances.

Old wine in a new bottle?

Duckworth, who worked with her mentor, Marty Seligman—widely referred to as “the father of positive psychology”—to create the Grit Scale, believes that she has found a way to measure a unique, coveted quality that separates those who want to succeed at difficult goals from those who actually do it. The test teases out a variety of motivations and personality traits that are either related or unrelated to the qualities associated with being gritty. For example, someone can be tenacious and hardworking but not have a passion that translates into a deeply valued goal. By the same token, a person can be the epitome of passion but be unable to sustain focus on a hard goal through years of setbacks. Alternatively, someone might be hardworking and passionate but need external validation for achievement, and thus be unable to be resilient in the absence of trophies and renown.

Although similar to the quality called conscientiousness, which also predicts diligence, grit speaks to the type of behavior needed to be dutiful and disciplined in pursuit of a goal. Some of the criticism of the concept of grit has claimed that it is simply a restatement of conscientiousness—“old wine in a new bottle”—which Duckworth has ably defended as a very different construct with different outcomes. Among other points, she notes that conscientiousness isn’t infused with the emotional fire that is so central to grit.

As a credentialed performance coach who works daily with people to help them understand and cultivate the type of energy and dedication needed to stick with and accomplish very difficult, life-changing goals, I agree wholeheartedly that conscientiousness simply doesn’t cut it when you’re talking about what it takes to set, pursue, and accomplish challenging and meaningful goals that profoundly change people’s lives. Conscientiousness isn’t the thing that keeps dreams alive when hope is fading, nor is it what is needed when you have to suddenly change course to adapt to new circumstances. In fact, I’ve seen conscientiousness overused to a person’s detriment, which I call “stubborn grit.”

How does the research help you and me?

I constantly sift through reams of research to figure out what I can do with it so that my clients have the right tools for change and success. Research is just research until someone like me comes along and extracts practical applications from it that people can readily understand and use in positive ways. To do what I do, and make a living at it, I have had to learn how to make an immediate difference in people's lives with whatever tools, motivation, and knowledge they need to get where they want to go. And when people state their most desired outcome for our work together, the development of more resilience and grit is often at the top of their list.

As a result, I have had to go far beyond the research on what people who are already gritty think and do in order to come up with a game plan for people who aren't there yet. I have to know what is *missing* in my clients' lives and why. I need to understand what happened in their family of origin that impacted their outlook, who currently supports their goals, what occurs around them now in their work and personal environments, and much more. If I don't know those variables, I can't diagnose the situation correctly and bring the right research and tools to our work.

So, while practitioners like me don't usually do academic research, we are accelerating the breakthroughs on grit as we work one on one with real people in many varied scenarios—from athletic fields to corporate offices—to see what works and what doesn't when it comes to changing for the better. And I believe that our results are as important to the study of grit as are the findings coming from academia, because without feedback from people like us, it's hard for the average person to take advantage of the statistic-laden research coming from universities and research labs all over the world.

For that reason, I pore through the research on grit, as well as the findings on such areas as passion, risk-taking, willpower, kindness, humility, savoring, goal-setting, and positive relationships, so that I can use the information effectively and efficiently with men and women, young and old, wherever they are in the change process. That's how I came up with my own definition of "authentic grit"—"the passionate

pursuit of hard goals that awes and inspires others to become better people, flourish emotionally, take positive risks, and live their best lives.” For me, grit isn’t a positive unless it is a force for good. I think my definition captures the quality that I’ve seen produce excellent results and leave behind a worthwhile legacy. I’ll say more about the elements that make up authentic grit in upcoming chapters to make it easier to understand how to cultivate it in new and unexpected ways.

Why does grit matter so much in the twenty-first century?

In recent years, a chorus of voices has gotten louder in the United States, lamenting the character and work ethic of many in the generation known as the Millennials, those born between the years 1980 and 2000. Dubbed the “Me Me Me Generation” by *Time* magazine, they have been roundly excoriated as the products of the misguided self-esteem movement, which encouraged parents to be friendly with their children and warmly praise them whenever possible.³ Although this movement was well intended and meant to result in personal initiative and higher self-esteem, it has been a bust by every measure.

Exceptions are everywhere (I have raised three Millennials whom I admire very much), but psychologists say that by and large this generation is entitled and easily wounded by feedback or criticism, and that instead of having higher self-esteem and a sense of responsibility, they are fragile and narcissistic. Many value fame and money over meaning and purpose, seek shortcuts over hard work, and fold in the face of setbacks. Awash in creature comforts and quick fixes, they aren’t likely to understand how to read maps or write properly without spell-check. And adults aren’t viewed as guides but as equals, to whom they need not defer, partly because it’s become acceptable to call teachers by their first name in many schools.

Anecdotal and evidence-based stories about the impact of this behavior are everywhere, and cause for grave concern in some quarters. Some psychologists note that the “dumbing down” of playgrounds into plastic contraptions surrounded by pillows of wood chips, so that

children can avoid injuries and skinned knees, has created a generation of anxious adults who grew up afraid to climb trees or to take risks.⁴ Some have even traced a drop in entrepreneurial activity in recent years to this phenomenon, noting that the age group that used to create new businesses and spark innovation has played it safer than previous generations, even after factoring in recessionary factors and a smaller middle class.⁵

The emphasis on nothing but high praise and perfect GPAs has also led to grade inflation in high school, university, and graduate-level settings, to the point that many companies say they can't rely on GPAs and degrees from elite schools to guarantee hardworking employees. Self-control has gone AWOL with dire consequences—a factor in American obesity rates that continue to skyrocket to all-time highs. The U.S. military has actually issued a report noting that American youth are “Too Fat to Fight.” Sports coaches of professional teams lament that it’s hard to get their well-paid athletes to pay attention at team meetings without taking away their smartphones, and some coaches have even quit their profession altogether, noting that the lack of a work ethic and willingness to sacrifice for the team have made many of the new players “uncoachable.”⁶

Creating your best life requires grit

I have been working as a credentialed coach with high-performing individuals throughout the world for several decades, with a specialty in goal accomplishment. When I studied with Marty Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania in 2005, I was one of the first thirty-four people in the world to earn a master’s in applied positive psychology (a MAPP degree, as you might recall from the introduction), also known as the science of happiness. As I noted earlier, that’s when I was introduced to Angela Duckworth’s fledgling research on grit, which I wove into my capstone project that year and which then became my book *Creating Your Best Life*. That book was the first to give readers ways to define and pursue meaningful paths to success and happiness that were grounded in research and academic theories—a feat Marty

praised in his book *Flourish*, saying I'd added a "major missing piece" to the literature on success and goal accomplishment.⁷

I've come across a great deal of evidence that points toward the imperative of doing difficult things in order to live a satisfying, high-quality life filled with optimal achievement. For starters, I learned from Edwin Locke and Gary Latham, whose research has led to Goal Setting Theory, which holds that "challenging and specific" goals are required if someone wants to attain the highest levels of performance. (Easy goals, or "low goals," don't just result in mediocrity, they say, but also leave people feeling mediocre.⁸) From a theory of self-determination, proposed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, I discovered that people aren't happy doing nothing. We are driven to master our environments in order to feel related, autonomous, and competent, and when given the choice to do nothing over something, people overwhelmingly choose to be busy and productive.⁹

Newer research has found that at night we all scan our day for its highlights, especially noting what we are most proud of. As you might expect, the things that give us authentic self-esteem are never the activities or behaviors that are easy and inside our comfort zone. It's the difficult, challenging, and sometimes painful moments that leave us flush with a sense of pride and that make us more confident and hopeful about our capabilities and future.¹⁰ And which two qualities have been found to most reliably predict success with our goals? Grit and curiosity.¹¹

What will you regret?

When people come to me for help, they are often at a crossroads in life. Young or old, they are, in my observation, usually facing an important choice and want to proceed with support, accountability, and the guidance of a grounded professional. They aren't hesitating because they are contemplating doing something easy; it's always because there is something they want to do that is so far outside their comfort zone they have to be thoughtful and prepared about the plunge they're poised to take. And although they understand how hard the path will

be, they also know that they won't ever be truly happy unless they give that goal a shot.

I can say without hesitation, after thousands of sessions with all kinds of men and women all over the world, that the people who are most satisfied with our coaching outcomes, and with themselves, are the ones who picked difficult goals and grew their grit to make a run for the brass ring. They leave our coaching as different people. I often tell friends that I feel like I work on the labor and delivery floor of a hospital because everyone is happy after they see the fruits of their labor. They are not just more confident after they cultivate grit and use it in a purposeful way—they are also more fulfilled.

Sometimes I get calls and pleas for help from people who, though they aren't 100 percent sure what they want to do, know that something is missing from their lives and that they can't continue on contentedly without exploring what else might be out there for them. At times like this, my go-to question is always, "When you are looking back on your life at the moment of death, what will you regret if you don't make any changes starting now?" The answers to that question have always borne fruit, and the goals that have emerged from those conversations have always been big ones that often involve inevitable upheavals, discomfort, and change. And in order to pursue and get to the finish line of those goals, it's been obvious that my clients need the elixir that Duckworth has now determined to be the unquestioned sign of elite excellence in punishing conditions: grit!

What if you don't have grit? Can you develop it?

The burning question in the psychology world right now is this very question: Can we cultivate grit? And if so, how? Early results and studies are pointing in some promising directions, not the least of which is the work by Stanford University social psychology researcher Carol Dweck, the author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Dweck has found that when children grow up with praise for their innate intelligence—when things like solving a puzzle, drawing a picture, winning a race, or getting a good report card are met with