

Practical Tips for Well-Being

Gotta Have GRIT!

We often talk about taking care of our mental health and practicing good stress management with the focus on self-care. We do not often talk about mental toughness or 'Grit'. One thing we have certainly learned over the past 18 months is we are much more resilient and mentally tough than we think we are.

Mental toughness means that we manage our emotions and thoughts and behave in positive ways in spite of the circumstances. Mental toughness is having the courage to live according to our values and being bold enough to create our own definition of success. Mental toughness or **Grit** is not just willpower – Grit requires work, focus, and commitment. It is about developing good habits, maintaining them and devoting time and energy to self-improvement.

We can define Grit as having passion and perseverance for long term goals. Grit is having and maintaining mental stamina so we can stick with our future vision of ourselves day in and day out over the long haul – not just day to day or week to week. Grit is living life like it is a marathon, not a sprint.

Research on Grit with West Point Cadets found that those Cadets who scored high on Grit were 60% more likely to succeed compared to peers regardless of physical or cognitive ability. Undergraduate students who had higher Grit also had higher GPA's – even if they were not as 'smart' on tests like the SAT.

Grit is especially important for leaders. Leaders with a healthy dose of Grit are consistent in style and strive to build up the people around

them. They have a vision or set of goals and do not let short-term setbacks, negative feedback, or busy schedules prevent them from keeping focused on those long-term goals.

How can we increase our Grit? Focus on these five areas in your life and long-term goals. When we think about these qualities, approach them with a growth mindset. A growth mindset is believing that these qualities can be cultivated through efforts and practice. It is the opposite of a fixed mindset – where we feel our qualities are carved in stone and can never be improved.

Courage. Your ability to manage fear of failure. Recognize the fear, but do not let it stop you from doing your best. You may fail at some task or some performance, but those with Grit recognize that there are valuable lessons in failure and persevere regardless of how successful they are.

Teddy Roosevelt understood this very well. He gave a speech in 1910 titled “Citizenship in a Republic” that included this section on his life philosophy, which is now famously known as “The Man in the Arena.”

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

Fear of failure leads to an unhealthy aversion to risk. Courage fuels Grit, but you have to practice having courage to strengthen that characteristic. Eleanor Roosevelt said “do something that scares you every day.”

Conscientiousness. We often think of someone who is conscientious as a person that is careful, meticulous, and thorough. The conscientious person follows the rules and is reliable. However, think of this characteristic in terms of being achievement-oriented – always doing our best, following through on tasks, and willing to do the hard work frequently. Conscientiousness fuels Grit by giving us the drive to achieve those long-term goals because we can see them as a vision of where we see our future selves. Striving for perfectionism is not the same thing and in fact can get in the way. Sometimes we have to step back and say to ourselves – that is good enough for today, I will try harder tomorrow.

Follow-Through. How long does it take to become an expert at something? Common wisdom states that if you practice something for 10,000 hours, then you are probably an expert at that task or skill. That is a lot of hours! Professional musicians and athletes spend at least 20 hours a week over 10 years to reach the elite level. Not too many of us have the time, resources, or the talent to fall into that category, but practice and follow-through are just as important for all of our goals. One of my mentors from graduate school would use the line “Cross the Finish Line” when talking about projects, goals, and tasks. What he meant here was to keep working on that task or that goal until it is complete – don’t give up because the finish line seems so far away, or the goal seems out of reach.

The difference between someone who achieves and someone who just spends a lot of time doing something is purpose. The practice, the

studying, and the effort we put in must have a purpose. That purpose provides a context or framework where we find meaning and value in all that hard work which then helps feed our drive, passion, and stamina – our grit. Keep at it until you cross the finish line!

Resilience. On the long road to achievement we often stumble, hit barriers, and lose motivation. This is where resilience comes in. Remember resilience? Resilience is how well we adapt and react to adversity. Do we give up with hardly a whimper when things get hard? Or do we get up, dust ourselves off, and get back on that proverbial horse and give it another go?? One way to think about how resilience feeds grit is to think of resilience as our ability to maintain focus on our goal in spite of unforeseen shocks, surprises, and setbacks. Be the man or woman in the arena!

“Do not judge me by my success, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.”

— Nelson Mandela

Excellence vs. Perfectionism. People with a healthy dose of grit do not seek perfect outcomes, but instead strive for excellence in performance. Perfectionism may seem like a lofty goal, but it is unforgiving and inflexible. While we certainly need some aspects of ‘perfectionism’ when setting standards (sports performance, academic grading). In general, perfectionism is someone else’s vision of an ideal, and chasing perfectionism can be self-defeating. The pursuit of perfectionism often leads to anxiety, distress, and low self-esteem which are all major barriers to success.

Excellence, on the other hand, is an attitude, not an outcome. Working towards our goals with excellence is much more forgiving than striving for that perfect outcome. An attitude of excellence allows for

vulnerability and failure in the ongoing quest for improving ourselves. Excellence makes progress a priority, perfection does not.

When we think about our long-term goals and where we see ourselves in the future (finishing that degree, starting that career, becoming an expert at something, earning that rank or certification), we may find ourselves hesitating at the work and time involved, doubting our abilities to be successful, or finding ourselves easily distracted by day-to-day obligations.

Gotta have GRIT! Just remember to practice having courage by doing hard and scary things in spite of the fear or anxiety. Be conscientious by keeping those big goals as a priority and vision. Be resilient by adapting to adversity while still keeping focused. Follow through by crossing the finish line with each step towards those goals, and always striving for excellence in attitude and application. Practicing these five characteristics on a regular basis builds our grit and keeps us focused on our goals. We may find that as we make progress, we get just as many rewards out of the journey as we do when we reach that goal.