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by Louisa Jewell

I have been studying positive psychology for almost eight years now and I have determined that the key to success is perseverance. Often times we only hear about highly successful people after they have become successful so we are unaware of their struggles to the top. For example, Donald Trump has filed for bankruptcy four times and it would take Shania Twain 18 years of singing in some pretty shady bars before releasing her first album. Researchers are starting to determine it is not talent or IQ or an Ivy-league school that guarantees success; it's grit.

Defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals, grit is the new black when it comes to achieving success. Angela Duckworth is an Assistant Professor and leading researcher in the field of grit at the University of Pennsylvania. I first met Duckworth while completing my Master of Applied Positive Psychology degree where she taught statistics with such humour we found ourselves laughing out loud at things like p-values and regression analysis. According to Duckworth and her colleagues, "Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her 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." Because she had been a teacher before, she knew that success was not only reliant on intellectual talent; character was just as important.

To test this hypothesis, Duckworth and her colleagues, including Chris Peterson, psychologist and a leading researcher on character strengths at the University of Michigan, conducted a ground-breaking study to determine the character strengths that predict success. They tested the importance of grit using their developed "Grit Scale" with a number of groups including a large sample of adults, Ivy League undergrads, West Point Cadets and participants in the National Spelling Bee. The findings showed that individual differences in grit were a better predictor of successful outcomes than IQ scores. Their conclusion: the sustained and focused application of talent over time is critical to success.

So how does one become grittier? Improve self-control. What is most ironic is that studies

conducted on large populations in the US show that when people are asked to state their greatest character strengths, they credit themselves with things like gratitude, kindness and bravery, while self-control is found dead last on the list. According to Roy Baumeister, in his book *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, when people were asked about their failings, a lack of self-control was often at the top of the list.

For those of you interested in how to improve self-control, here is one tip. Research shows that self-control is like a muscle, the more you practice it, the stronger your self-control becomes. For example, I have a friend who is very high in self-control. Every Lent he purposely gives up something for one month to exercise his self-control muscle. Research demonstrates that practicing self-control in one domain can improve your overall self-control across domains. Studies also show that when self-control is tested, your resolve gets weaker with every challenge. Hence, you might be able to say no to that chocolate cake the first time, but the third time your mother-in-law insists, you may find yourself giving in. In one study, people who were given a sugary drink actually did better at self-control, indicating that our energy stores are depleted when our self-control is challenged. Keeping energy up with proper nutrition throughout the day is one path to improving self-control on a daily basis.

These findings on grit are encouraging, reminding us that no matter what's our background, what school we went to or our IQ score, hard work and perseverance can make us successful.

Louisa Jewell, MAPP, is the founder and President of the Canadian Positive Psychology Association and an organizational consultant working with leaders and teams to create positive and productive workplaces. You can find out more about how positive psychology can be applied in your practice by registering for the series of webinars for counsellors and coaches being presented in conjunction with CERIC. To find out more, visit: <http://www.positivematters.com/workshops-and-events.html>