

authentic
GRIT

Passion & Perseverance
for Hard Goals

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CHAPTER ONE

Grit rises

At West Point, the United States Military Academy, there is a premium on picking the right men and women. Spaces are limited, and admission is rigorous; only 15 percent of the applicants are accepted. Avoiding attrition is essential. Over the years, much study has gone into identifying the candidates who are most likely to quit during the first summer of training, known as “Beast Barracks.” Until recently, applicants had been judged on what’s called the Whole Candidate Score (WCS), which is a weighted evaluation of grades, test scores, personal recommendations and leadership analyses. What was puzzling to West Point administrators was, that as comprehensive as it seems to be, the WCS hadn’t been able to detect who has the fortitude to withstand the physical, emotional and mental challenges of surviving West Point.

Enter a newcomer – the Grit Scale – to predict accurately where other measures have failed.

In the summer of 2006, Professor Angela Duckworth of the University of Pennsylvania, and her colleagues administered the Grit Scale to 976 incoming West Point freshmen, in addition to a battery of other tests. After teasing out factors like self-control, IQ and other measures of excellence, the Grit Scale did what Duckworth and her colleagues hoped it would do. At the end of the summer, grit trumped every

other measure of predicting who would quit the brutal months of Beast Barracks training.

Those results kicked off a bevy of other findings that further elevated grit from just a descriptive term for toughness to a personality trait that has relevance in other competitive settings. Starting in 2005, Duckworth oversaw the administration of the survey to the 273 pre-teen finalists of the Scripps National Spelling Bee, focusing on two things: whether or not the students reached the final round of the tournament and how often they'd participated before.

Again, the Grit Scale wound up being a key barometer of whether or not a young boy or girl advanced to the final round, above and beyond the IQ tests they'd also taken. Why? It boiled down to how much time and effort the students had put into studying words over many years, often alone and without the benefit of adults quizzing them, which translated into grit. Instead of giving up when they didn't advance or win a previous year, the grittier kids went home and did even more work than they'd done before, upping their likelihood of getting farther, or even winning, the following year.

No matter where you turn now, grit has become the quality *du jour*. President Barack Obama focused on its importance in his 2015 State of the Union address and made its cultivation among students the Education Department's top priority in 2013. It has become such an important topic that schools are spending millions on

fostering it, university research departments are investigating it, and awards are being rethought to align with what it means. Commencement speeches are liberally peppered with the word as an ideal to strive for, while anyone who overcomes injury or setbacks in any arena of life is lifted up as a paragon of grit in the international, national or sporting news, almost to a ridiculous extent. One school went so far as to celebrate the “grit” of kindergarteners who showed up at school on a regular basis!

Angela Duckworth, who has now spent more than a decade puzzling over, studying, and talking about the importance of grit, defines the modern day variety as “passion and perseverance in pursuit of long-term goals.” As a young teacher in inner-city schools, Duckworth noticed that the smartest and most able children weren’t always the ones who did the best in tests, and she was curious about why that was. She joined forces at the University of Pennsylvania with Dr. Martin Seligman in 2003 to devote herself to isolating the secret sauce of success that was independent of talent, and that was instrumental in getting someone to the finish line of difficult goals, something that they eventually coined as “grit.”

After studying legions of successful men and women across multiple domains including investment banking, swimming and chess, in addition to those West Point candidates and Spelling Bee hopefuls, they drilled down to the components that were common to all of them, determining that the people who had distinguished

themselves in overcoming multiple challenges to sustain the pursuit of a goal that was important to them over many years had several critical qualities:

- **Passion** – they were lit up from within by a cause or activity that electrified and energized them, sometimes from a young age. They weren't guided by what others wanted; 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 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 and Olympic fame, but for others, the result was quieter and less celebrated: regaining the ability to walk after a crippling injury, maintaining hope of being exonerated after being wrongfully incarcerated, or just remaining clean and sober in the hardest of circumstances, for example.

The Grit Scale

In attempt to quantify grit and figure out what factors would make the needle move one way or the other, Duckworth and Seligman came up with a simple set of statements that measure one's grit score from 1 to 5. Called The Grit Scale, it asks users to say "Very much like me" or "Not like me at all" to phrases like, "My interests

change from year to year,” and “I have achieved a goal that took years of work.” It teases out a variety of motivations and personality traits that are either related or unrelated to the qualities associated with being gritty. For example, one can be tenacious and hardworking, but not have a passion that translates into a deeply valued goal. By the same token, a person can have passion, but be unable to sustain focus on it through multi-year setbacks. Alternatively, someone might be hardworking and passionate, but need to be externally validated for achievement, and thus be unable to be resilient in the absence of trophies and renown.

It would be an understatement to say that the Grit Scale’s findings have been noteworthy. Headlines and magazine cover stories have breathlessly covered what a person’s grit score can determine, winning Duckworth international acclaim and even the coveted MacArthur Genius Grant in 2013. Her TED and TEDx videos get hundreds of thousands of views because she can articulate, and scientifically back up, the importance of grit in success now, showing how the Grit Scale is predicting excellence in areas as diverse as marriage and the military.

Most recently, the results of the Grit Scale have extended into previously uncharted waters with fascinating results that have important implications in many areas of life that suffer from drop-out and lack of commitment. Duckworth’s Grit Lab has found that the scale predicts a man’s commitment to remaining married, the likelihood of Chicago inner-city juniors to graduate from high school, whether or not

a salesperson will persist in their job, and even who completes Special Forces training.

Why does grit matter so much in the 21st century?

A chorus of voices has gotten louder in the United States in recent years lamenting the character and work ethic of a generation known as the “New Millennials,” the men and women born between the ages of 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 who were rewarded often and amply for little effort in classrooms, sporting events and life. Overtrophied, overpraised and overparented, psychologists have called them narcissistic, entitled and easily wounded by feedback or criticism. They are thought to value fame and money over meaning and purpose, to seek shortcuts over hard work, and to fold in the face of setbacks. Awash in creature comforts and quick fixes, they aren’t likely to understand how to read maps, write properly without spell-check, or even know how to write in cursive. Adults aren’t guides; they are seen as equals to whom one shouldn’t need to defer.

Anecdotal and evidence-based stories about the impact of this behavior are everywhere, and cause for grave concern in some quarters. 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 take risks. The emphasis on nothing but high praise and perfect GPAs has led to grade inflation in

the high school, university and graduate level settings, to the point that companies say they can't rely on GPAs and graduation from elite schools to guarantee hard-working employees. The United States military has issued a report noting that American youth are "Too Fat to Fight," and even coaches of professional sports teams have found that if they don't "befriend" their players and take away their smart phones during meetings, they won't get their attention long enough to do the job they're paid millions to do.

"What will you regret not doing?"

I have been working as a credentialed coach for high-performing individuals around the world for several decades, with a specialty in goal accomplishment. In 2005, I returned to school to study with Dr. Martin Seligman, the "father of Positive Psychology," at the University of Pennsylvania where I became one of the first 34 people in the world to earn a Master's degree in Applied Positive Psychology, also known as the science of happiness.

While there, I was introduced to Duckworth's fledgling research on grit, and I wove it into a book that emerged from my Capstone project that year, called "Creating Your Best Life" (Sterling 2009). The book was pioneering in its approach to goal accomplishment, and was the first to articulate the science behind goal setting and success, and to match it to the science of emotional flourishing. For the first time, instead of simply having the "Law of Attraction" to lean on for goal-setting, I presented the world with proven ways to define and pursue meaningful paths to success and happiness that were grounded in research and academic theories - a

feat that Seligman praised in “Flourish,” noting that I’d added a “major missing piece” to the literature on success and goal accomplishment.

As part of my work, I came across a great deal of evidence that pointed towards the imperative of doing hard things in order to live a satisfying, high quality life filled with optimal achievement. For starters, Goal Setting Theory (Edwin Locke and Gary Latham) notes that “challenging and specific” goals are required if someone wants to attain the highest levels of performance. Easy or “low goals” don’t just result in mediocrity, they said, they also leave people feeling mediocre.

Self-Determination Theory and related findings also posit that people aren’t happy doing nothing; we are driven to master our environments to feel independent and competent, and when given the choice to do nothing over something, we overwhelmingly choose to be busy. Newer research has found that we all scan our days at night for its highlights, especially noting the things of which we are proudest. As one 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 hard, 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. And the two qualities that have been found that most reliably predict goal success? Grit and curiosity.

When people come to me for help, they are often at a crossroads in life. Young or old, I usually see that they are 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 that they have to be thoughtful and prepared about the plunge they are about 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.

Sometimes I get calls and pleas for help from people who aren't 100% sure what they want to do, but they know something is missing from their lives and 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, "If you are looking back on your life at the moment of death, what will be your regrets 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 never been easy goals, they've always been hard ones that will inevitably often involve upheavals, discomfort and change. And in order to pursue or get to the finish line of those goals, it's been obvious that they would need the elixir that Duckworth has determined to be the sign of elite excellence in punishing conditions: grit.

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

The content of your character is your choice. Day by day, what you choose, what you think, and what you do is who you become."

-- Marcus Aurelius (April 26, 121-March 21, 180)

The burning question in the psychology world right now is about this question: Can you 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 Psychology of Success," whom Duckworth counts as a mentor. Dweck has found that when children grow up with too much praise ("You're so smart!" "You are awesome!" "You deserve it!"), they develop a "fixed mindset" and believe that their strengths and talents are innate and "fixed" at birth. This leads them to avoid situations where they might fail because they need to maintain the image and belief that they are special. Without that, it's hard for them to feel worthwhile.

On the other hand, children who grow up in situations where they are praised for effort, irrespective of outcome, develop a "growth mindset." This means they believe that even if they don't know something yet, with enough effort and persistence, they can learn to do something that doesn't come easily to them at first. These children develop more of a gritty approach to life and don't give up, even relishing the challenges put in front of them. They are also the ones who don't fold at the sign of discouragement or failure, and who believe that outcomes are mostly under their control if they have enough grit to keep going.

Duckworth has also found that grit is contagious, like many other behaviors such as quitting smoking, getting fat and being happy. In fact, she says, West Point has found that cadets with lower grit scores have been found to benefit from being roomed with cadets with higher grit scores, possibly because seeing someone work through frustration, find clever ways to delay gratification, or be resilient when frustrated can rub off in positive ways. Most promisingly, Duckworth and others have noted that grit has been found to increase over the lifespan, suggesting that it is a quality that benefits from specific interventions.

My own story

One of the reasons why I feel so compelled to work in the fields of motivation, goals, happiness and grit is because I had the formula for finding success all wrong in the earlier part of my life, and suffered greatly as a result. Through failure and an early adulthood reboot, however, I learned how to do what was necessary to find the right goals and summon up the perseverance to achieve them, thus developing grit in the process. My experience taught me that grit is definitely not a quality that is reserved for the select few; it is available to anyone who wants something so badly that he or she won't let anyone stop them until they've exhausted their opportunities.

As a young girl in a privileged setting in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., I was smart and talented, according to IQ and other outward measures of success. That got me into the right schools with the right bumper stickers, but between the emphasis on appearing perfect in my family and the increasing pressures to perform in a variety

of academic and extracurricular areas, I tried to protect myself from failure or the appearance of imperfection at all costs. As a result, I took shortcuts, most notably with food. Instead of being disciplined in my habits and training, I became bulimic, which was running rampant in my private school and my chosen sport of swimming.

Bulimia is an eating disorder characterized by gorging on huge amounts of food, followed by behavior ranging from self-induced vomiting to laxative overdoses. For seven years I lived a life of overeating, lying, hiding and never really paying the full price for my binges while maintaining a passable exterior. If I was persistent, it was only in making sure that my behavior was secret and ongoing. Attempts to stop or seek help were half-hearted, partly because no one knew how to get better and it felt like a hopeless situation with no end, anyway.

I graduated from Harvard in 1983, and one week later plunged right into marriage. It was only when I realized that attaining *magna cum laude* from an Ivy League school and marrying the handsome man of my dreams wasn't going to make me happy enough to overcome bulimia, that I hit my last bottom. But in the depth of that misery in early 1984, I found the ingredients I needed to become a "paragon of grit," as Duckworth has kindly noted about my journey, chronicled in my September 2014 TEDx talk entitled, "The Moments That Make Champions."

I decided I wanted to live more than I wanted to self-destruct, that I'd do whatever it took to get better, and that I wasn't going to stop until I found the right formula. Grit

starts with passion, and I embraced a passion for living, finding happiness outside of trying to have a perfect body, and giving back to others instead of trying to figure out how I could come out the sole winner. “You can’t keep what you don’t give away” was the phrase I embraced at my 12-step group for compulsive eaters. If I had even one day of maintaining my abstinence from compulsive eating, I had something of value that could help someone else, which gave me purpose and humility.

For the first time, I learned how to persevere through temptation, emotional swings, setbacks, relapses, interpersonal challenges and life’s unending curveballs. I didn’t resort to anything mood-altering during hard times, including food, and found ways to just sit with the uncomfortable feelings that I’d always buried. I shielded myself from people and places that weren’t aligned with my goal of full health, and although I had no specific end date in mind, I just got up every day, week after week, month after month, year after year, and finally decade after decade, and did whatever I needed to do to get better.

In that process, I wrote two books about my path to complete recovery, “My Name is Caroline” (Doubleday 1988) and “Positively Caroline,” (Cogent 2013) which were the first autobiographies by anyone who had overcome bulimia, and who had gotten to thirty years of recovery, respectively. Although I didn’t have grit when I started on that life-changing journey, there’s no question that I have it now. And because I know that life is sweeter and richer because I chose a hard road and didn’t quit until

I reached a goal that mattered so much to me, I have a commitment to work with people on selecting and pursuing the goals that will light up their lives, and help them cultivate grit, too. I believe that if I could develop grit, others can, too, and even that if I don't help others and "give it away," I won't be able to "keep" it and fully enjoy it.

Gritty Stories

A few years ago, a woman called me up at the suggestion of her internist. She'd seen therapists and knew that she didn't need to contemplate her childhood, her divorce or whether or not she'd been a good mother. She needed to feel that her life was purposeful and meaningful, and her doctor suggested me as a person who would help her be accountable to make the necessary changes for greater happiness and peace, and that my approach would be different from anything she had encountered before.

"What will you regret not doing if you're looking back on your life one day?" I asked her one languid August afternoon when she asked if I would work with her.

Instantly she had her answer. "I want to create the world's first musical about breast cancer." I have been coaching for long enough to know that everyone has an unerring sense of what they lack or desire, and that my role is to simply challenge them in a variety of ways to unearth those facts and help them bring their aspirations to life if they aren't immediately obvious. And it would be ridiculous to implant dreams or hopes in others because it's impossible to be lit up by something that isn't intrinsically motivating. In fact, my clients' goals are so unique and

personally galvanizing to them that I know I'd never be able to cook up anything more rewarding or satisfying than what I've been privileged to hear for so many years.

Two years later, that same client - Eileen Mitchard - debuted "Breast in Show," which has garnered numerous awards, standing ovations, and raised thousands of dollars for cancer research. As she enters her sixties, she credits her latest completed hard goals, including finishing a half-marathon, to the confidence earned from overcoming the endless nuisances and problems of financing and mounting her first major show.

"There were so many times I didn't think I would actually pull it off, but life has sparkled brighter since I took my chances and went for the brass ring. And even if the show had never opened, I still would have been better off than if I'd just sat around and played golf for the rest of my life," she notes now. "I really know now that it's the hardest things that produce the most satisfying outcomes."

Over the years I've had clients tell me they wanted to ride bareback in Mongolia along the Great Wall of China, ditch lucrative computer careers to create a delivery service for home-cooked meals, go from couch potato to Ironman finisher, transform a life of suburban motherhood into urban entrepreneurialism, leave a stable accounting job to nurse the ailing in overseas tent villages, and much more.

The goals haven't just been about checking off bucket list items; they've been about

staking a claim on becoming someone bolder and more authentic, whether it was in the boardroom, the Olympics, their community or in their own lives.

The number-one regret of those in hospice care is that they lived someone else's life and not the one they felt they should have lived. We know from research that the main reason why people don't pursue their most valued goals is fear – fear of everything from success, to change to failure – and from where I sit and coach, the happiest people are those who take risks to be uncomfortable in the face of fear, but who find the grit to hang in there until they've given their goals every possible effort. Recent research backs that up; of the ten personality variables examined for impact on goal accomplishment, grit was one of the top two factors that made the difference between success and failure.

Building the Muscle of Grit

Since grit is contagious, grows throughout one's lifetime, and can be developed in the process of pursuing a big dream, it makes sense that its components can be isolated and then nurtured into flourishing abilities. The definition of grit gives us clues about what we will need to cultivate, including passion, resilience and determined focus. But I believe we also need to take a look at the quality of a person's relationship skills, the prevalence of positive emotions in their lives, and one's storehouse of willpower, for example. In my study of gritty people, I've also noticed that many have humility, something that might attract the support and enthusiasm of others who become the team that sustains them over many years.

Some of the classroom research is finding that simply telling children that they haven't learned something "yet" results in more creativity and diligence. Research on personality traits shows that some of our top strengths can be used to pursue goals in better and more strategic ways, maximizing chances of getting past the tedium of learning new things to develop "harmonious passion" for something like swimming or solving math problems. And self-regulation research is finding a myriad of new ways to cultivate willpower, from mindfulness practices to working with virtual avatars.

There is also a wealth of data about how the brain works that wasn't available until recently, as well as batteries of tests that can "unpack" resilience. For example, research on mirror neurons is finding that it's easier to learn something new when we watch others do it. We also know from endurance tests that the body gives up only after the brain tells it to do so, opening the door to creative solutions that can help people "change the channel" in their brains when tempted to throw in the towel. We also know that strategically located primes – like pictures or inspirational words – can make people either more disciplined or lax in their efforts, and that agreeing to an "if then" contract with yourself triples your chances of accomplishing hard goals.

Grit Across the Lifespan

It's clear that grit has been established as an important strength in education, the pursuit of excellence in rigorous settings like the military and elite athletic endeavors, and in law firms where gritty women are more likely to become law

partners. It's also believed to be a quality that has several determining factors like passion, resilience and optimism that can be cultivated with "positive interventions" plus the determination to change one's personality strengths and life outcomes.

In short, grit isn't just an approach to life that can spell the difference between quitting and succeeding, it's also the quality that we should cultivate if we want to play bigger in life, live without regrets, and inspire others to like with more passion and fortitude, too.

From where I sit at the intersection of coaching, research and Positive Psychology, the problem isn't that people don't know this or want it. They just don't know how to do it or where to start. They don't know how to fight the tide of permissive parenting or societal influences that lead to poor boundaries and low standards. They don't know how to summon up enough willpower in a quick-fix, remote-controlled world where everything is a quick click away. They don't know that there is real science that can assist them in changing their brains, their emotions and their behaviors for the better.

And we need grit no matter where we live, who we are, or what we want to do. We need to be more resilient in overcoming addictive behaviors so that we can have sober, happy lives. We need to be more resilient if we have children or loved ones with special needs, who require constant care and vigilance for many years. We need to be more resilient to thrive in the face of spreading terrorism, economic

uncertainties and pervasive unhappiness. We need to be more resilient if we are going to thrive while alive, reinvent ourselves after midlife, and role model courage for generations to come. If we are to leave death nothing but a “burned-out castle” at the close of our lives, as Nikos Kazantzakis wrote in “Zorba the Greek,” we will have to take risks, embrace fear, refuse to quit and keep our eyes on the horizon.

Admiral William McRaven movingly described in his commencement speech at the University of Texas in 2014 the lessons he had learned from his years of being, and leading, the Navy SEALs. Exhorting the audience, he told all of them that they had the ability to change the world, and that if they started with themselves, they would impact those around them, and then the next circle, and so on, until the world was a different place. It started, he said, by having the courage of a young woman named Malala, who believed in education for girls, and the ability to endure the “circuses” of extra physical training on top of punishing days of exertion and exhaustion.

His last lesson was the most important, though, because he ended with the observation that everyone in SEAL training wants to quit at some point because they don’t believe they have what it takes to persevere when you’re “up to your neck in mud,” or you have to keep “punching the sharks in the snout.” Above all else, he said, you must “never, ever ring the bell” that signals you are dropping out, because there is no greater regret than not finding a way to be a finisher.

If you want to learn how to not “ring the bell,” and you yearn to have a bit more of the secret sauce of grit to summon up the will to change your surroundings, live larger and end each day with the satisfaction that you “punched the sharks in the snout,” then this is the book for you. Through stories of change and growth throughout the lifespan, in settings from schools to seminaries, I will teach you what I’ve learned in my work, my life and from the reams of research that are pointing us all in the direction of becoming emotionally stronger, physically smarter, and more resourceful.

To sign up for the Authentic Grit Challenge, designed to help you understand, cultivate and amplify the behaviors associated with grit, go to www.authenticgrit.com.

To be notified about opportunities to download other sample chapters and be among the first to be notified about the book’s release in early 2016, go to www.carolinemiller.com and sign up for her newsletter and other announcements.