



## AS A TEACHER

early in her career, Angela Duckworth started wondering why some students who weren't technically the smartest students did better in school than others. As a scientist—now a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania—she studied everyone from cadets at United States Military Academy West Point to National Spelling Bee competitors to kids and adults to try to find out.

She noticed that the people who attained what they set out to do didn't have more talent than those who dropped out. Instead, they had more of what she called grit. Grit, she says in her talks and writing, “is passion and perseverance for long-term goals.”

Since her 2016 book “Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance” became a bestseller, the concept of grit has captivated people who have a passion for something in life, be that in the kitchen, the warehouse, the office, the pool, or anywhere else.

People ranking high on Duckworth's Grit Scale tend to agree with statements including “I am a hard worker,” “Setbacks don't discourage me,” and “I am diligent. I never give up.” (You can find your own grit score with the quiz at [AngelaDuckworth.com/grit-scale](http://AngelaDuckworth.com/grit-scale).)

You don't have to be an Olympian to exhibit grit. It's as gritty to be consistent about getting to practice because you love and value swimming as it is to work toward getting a particular time at nationals.

As appealing as the idea is that it's grit and not talent or IQ that can get you where you're going, grit can be misinterpreted, mental performance consultants say. That can leave people

frustrated and disappointed and farther away from what they really want and love.

Here's what to know about grit and how to make it work for you.

### Grit Isn't About 'Trying Harder'

Thinking of grit as simply being about “pushing through” and “not accepting failure” can actually work against you. “Sheer will isn't enough to get you to success,” says Lisa Auld, a therapist in Pittsburgh who's certified in sports counseling. Grit isn't just about “trying” or “trying harder.” It's often about trying differently. A thousand flip turns won't help you if you're just going at them with determination. It's a myth that simply more hard work will result in perfection.

Duckworth explains that one of the early influences on her work was a famous paper by Daniel F. Chambliss of Hamilton College in 1989 called “The Mundanity of Excellence.” He followed swimmers at all levels of the sport for months, observing what they were doing and then how they performed (“It was designed with the explicit idea of seeing how the plant grew before the flower bloomed,” he wrote). One of his conclusions was that “doing more does not equal doing better.” Diligence and hard work are important. But try, try, try might leave you metaphorically hitting your head against a wall.

Instead, doing the “right work” over just “more work” can help you get somewhere, says Troy Moles, the director of counseling and sport psychology for Indiana University's athletics department, who has done research on sports and grit. “The concept of intentional or deliberate practice is very important. If ‘giving more effort’ to you means training 12 hours instead of 10, you're probably



not getting a lot of bang for your buck. Instead of working hard to put more time in, be more intentional with the time you have."

Break down what you need to improve and work on that specifically, rather than just swimming more while you're fatigued and your technique has broken down, or rather than just swimming more without a specific goal in mind in the hope it'll make you better. Maybe an hour of deliberate mental training outside the pool or 30 minutes doing rehab exercises or 15 minutes focusing on a specific technical aspect of swimming to improve will get you closer to what you need.

And although grit involves perseverance, it's not to be mistaken for pushing through at all costs. We celebrate the crawl to the finish line, the vault on the broken ankle, but that's a slippery slope if we start conflating that with the kind of grit that brings success in long-term goals. Chambliss's paper wasn't called "The Mundanity of Excellence" for nothing. It's not the heroics that exemplify grit; it's consistency in the daily steps toward that goal.

"Consistency is making the effort and showing up—that's perseverance," says Emily Nothnagle, a research associate at Ohio State University who has studied grit and sports participation. "I think the grittiest athletes are the ones who do things every day and reach for small, incremental goals to get progressively closer to their long-term goals. So these are people who are going to wake up and do their workouts at the same time, have consistent sleep schedules and good training practices, as well as a healthy meal plan, and they're going to follow it super consistently. It does take hard work to be consistent, but it's not like you're punishing yourself to make it happen."

Thinking you're not gritty unless you're being heroic can get you into a place you don't want to be. Forcing yourself to get up for practice when there's a ton going on at work and with your family isn't going to help you with the goal of having swimming enrich your life and well-being. Forcing yourself to do another 500 when your shoulder hurts isn't necessarily going to help you get a USMS Top 10 time. "Grit could be seen as rigid adherence to a training plan, and for some athletes, that could get them into trouble," Moles says.

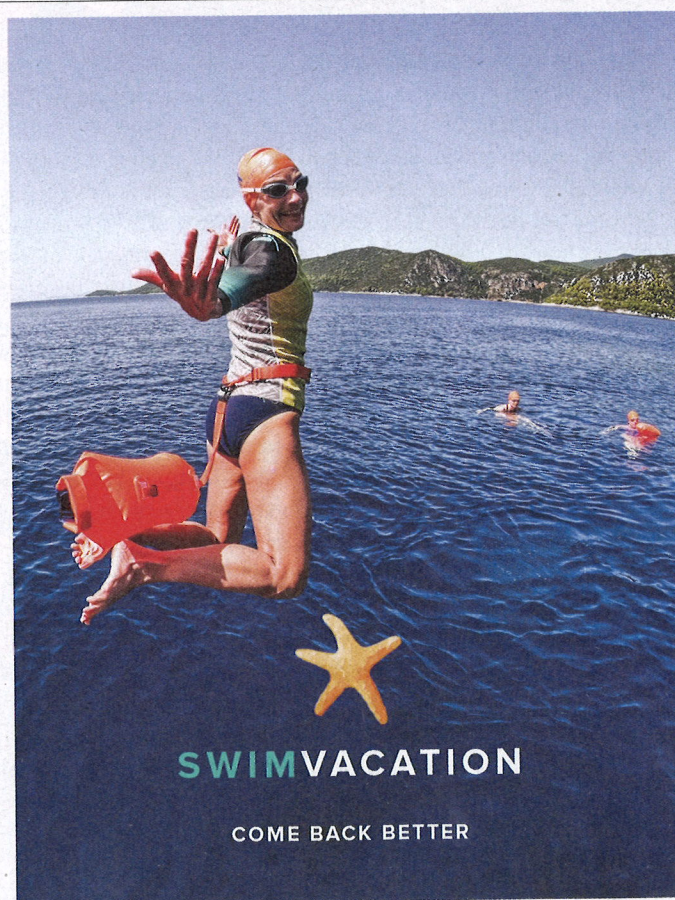
Instead, being gritty can mean changing what you're doing to be in alignment with your long-term goals, Nothnagle says. "Being flexible with your short-term goals is gritty because you're working hard in a way that's healthy for you mentally and physically." That might mean strategically scrapping practice for a few days or getting out of the pool early. "Burnout," she points out, "does not help you progress."

## Grit Is About Resilience

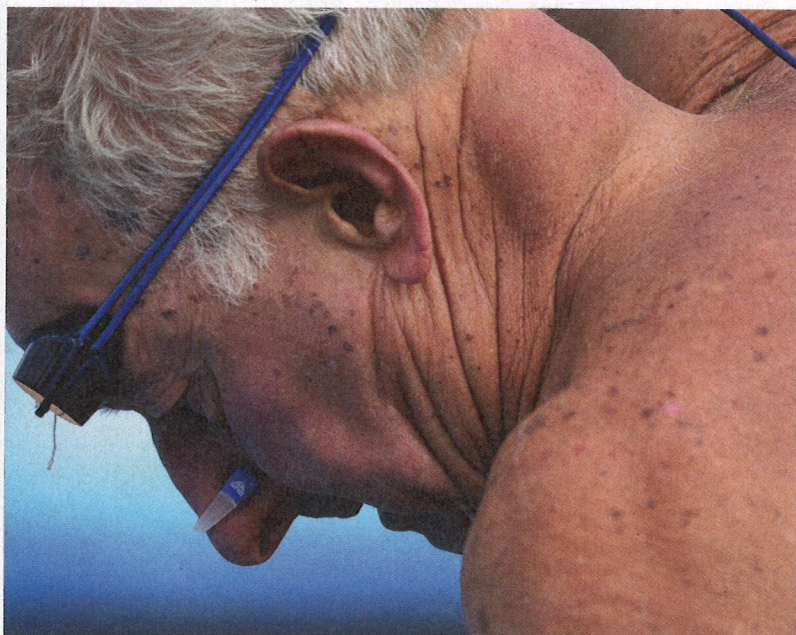
"I've heard it put that resilience is the oil in the engine of grit," says Auld, the therapist in Pittsburgh. It's not exactly the same as grit, but gritty people tend to be adept at resilience, meaning adept at bouncing back and trying other things when the original solutions didn't have the desired result. People who act in a resilient way tend to use what they learned from missing the mark to help them hit it next time. "People think that grit and mental toughness are about just pushing through and fighting to get to a goal. But it's about growth and learning, and that's a big difference," Nothnagle says.

## Grit Doesn't Mean Pushing Emotions Aside

Disappointed that you got crushed in the 400 IM by your archrival? Really down because of the argument you had with







your partner this morning? Brushing away those feelings isn't gritty, Auld says.

Yes, sometimes people—such as first responders or people in the military when faced with a grim task—might need to momentarily disengage. But in the rest of life, “it’s gritty to experience and sit with the uncomfortable emotion rather than stuff it down,” she says.

Your ability to sit with the emotion rather than sweep it under the rug allows you to acknowledge it and move on, and likely live better for it.

“We can’t selectively numb our emotions,” Auld says. “The little asterisk underneath staying away from feelings like disappointment and sadness is that you’re not going to feel joy and happiness either. How do we still enjoy a sport and have passion for it if we’re shutting down all emotion and all thought and just trying to push through?”

It’s not like you have to wallow in whatever you’re feeling. “There’s a notion that when we truly allow ourselves to feel emotion, the intensity only lasts nine seconds. It dissipates much faster if we just feel it,” Auld says. Otherwise, we’re just adding the suffering by trying not to feel something we’d rather not experience on top of whatever it is we’re feeling. To understand and move through it (rather than batting it away), Auld recommends going through the classic mindfulness acronym of RAIN:

- **R: Recognize.** Know what emotion you’re actually experiencing. It sounds obvious, but it’s often anything but. Many people come up with mad, sad, and glad as emotional options. But understanding the shades of those is important in getting through them. Are you dismayed, disillusioned, hesitant? (Some people find it helpful to search online for “emotion wheel” or “feelings wheel” and check out some options.)
- **A: Allow.** Auld recommends asking yourself, “What would it look like if you gave yourself permission to feel the feeling and allow yourself a healthy response to it?”
- **I: Investigate.** Be curious about what brought on that feeling and take a minute to fact-check yourself. Ask yourself whether the story you’re creating around that feeling and around what’s happening is just a story you’re creating or whether it is connected to the facts of the situation. (A fact might be “I

was one second slower than I was aiming for.” The story is “I’m just not the kind of swimmer who can hit that time consistently. It’s just luck when it happens.”)

- **N: Nonattachment.** This doesn’t mean that you don’t care. Nonattachment means that you can let a feeling go. If you’re having a hard time with that, Auld says, you can try using imagery to let it drift away. “Some people use the image of the feeling coming in and being carried away like waves on the beach. Others use clouds passing in the sky.”

## Grit Is About Loving What You Do

Keep in mind that passion is right there in the definition of grit. Passion isn’t only PRs and other lofty swimming goals. It’s likely, if you’re swimming, that there’s some degree of passion involved in the pursuit no matter what you get out of going to the pool. Passion for you might be passion for a challenge. That might be passion for the feeling you get when you’re in the water or the passion for being around like-minded people or loving enriching your life with a health-giving activity.

With any of those, grit is organizing your priorities around that—so it’s getting coffee or drinks with other folks after a swim, not instead of the swim. It’s organizing your kids’ rides to school so they can carpool with friends on swim days and with you on nonswim days.

Don’t expect to be gritty in all areas of your life. You can’t pursue every single thing with passion and perseverance, nor do you need to.

If you’re feeling low on grit, be aware that Nothnagle’s research, published last year in the journal *Leisure Sciences*, found that for adults, participating in a sport regularly over the last year actually increased their amount of grit.

“There are aspects of grit we can always work on,” says Moles, the director of counseling and sport psychology at Indiana. It’s not like an outcome goal of winning, which you can’t control.

“Only things we are able to do every single time are in our control,” he says. “Things you can control include things like, are you responding in a way that’s resilient; are you preparing with deliberate practice; what is your effort level; and what’s your attitude/self-talk?”

And if you’re feeling low on grit when you’re usually pretty high, be aware that that’s a good sign to check in with yourself. If there are more “I don’t want to do this today” days than there are those where you show up and are engaged, ask yourself if something else is going on, Auld says. Seek insight from friends, counselors, or mental health professionals if you’re having a hard time figuring it out or knowing what to do about it once you do know what’s going on.

Remember that grit isn’t just about getting through the hard parts of swimming. It’s about pursuing your passion.

“I think that as adults, we don’t always place as much emphasis and priority on making time for fun in our lives,” Nothnagle says. “That’s such an important component of grit. What you’re doing might not be fun every day. But ultimately, you need to love what you’re doing and remember why it is that you swim.” 🐬

*Marty Munson is a USMS Level 2 coach and has swum around Key West, Florida, and Manhattan, New York, and has completed numerous other solo marathon swims. She’s edited and written about health and wellness for numerous publications, including Men’s Health, Triathlete, Marie Claire, and Real Simple.*