

What's so great about true grit?

By Oliver Burkeman

'To be happy and successful, you'll need to stick with some unpleasant tasks, but it doesn't follow that every unpleasant task leads to happiness or success'

Contrary to popular belief, and various supposedly motivational Facebook posts, Winston Churchill never said the words, "Never, never, never give up!" The chubby war hero and amateur watercolourist had his faults, but he was no idiot. Of course one should sometimes yield, he explained, "to convictions of honour and good sense". So he'd probably have agreed with a recent study, in the *Journal of Research in Personality*, on the downsides of the currently much celebrated character trait known as grit. According to grit's advocates, persistence and resilience are far better predictors of success, especially at school, than talent or IQ. But researchers led by Gale Lucas at the University of Southern California found that grittier people were likelier to keep grappling with hard, or even unsolvable puzzles, even when it led to lower overall scores and chances of cash reward. They lost the ability to distinguish between worthwhile struggles and the kind it's wiser to avoid. To be happy and successful in life, you'll need to stick with some unpleasant tasks, but it doesn't follow that every unpleasant task leads to happiness or success. The Charge of the Light Brigade showed plenty of grit, too.

None of this should come as a surprise, except that these days the "best personality trait to have" – and to teach our children – seems to change like fashions in clothing. One season, empathy's the answer to everything; next it's mindfulness; now it's grit. Yet empathy, the cognitive scientist Paul Bloom has argued, is an unreliable guide to doing good: it focuses the mind on individuals, and people close to us, at the expense of systemic change, or feeding hungry people faraway. Meanwhile, mindlessness has proven benefits for mastering certain skills: you really don't want to try getting too mindful about how you drive your car. Curiosity, taken too far, will make you a scatterbrained dilettante. And so on. Besides, the insistence on one trait as a cure-all is asking for other kinds of trouble. The unrestrained celebration of grit, critics point out, risks implying that poor kids just need to buck up and work their way out of disadvantage, when frankly what they really need is not to start out poor.

The flipside of all this is that "bad" traits and dispositions might not be uniformly bad, either. Depression is an intriguing case in point. You'd wish it on no one, and the revolution in how we view it – as brain chemistry, not moral failing – was long overdue. But as the Jungian therapist James Hollis writes in his book *Swamplands Of The Soul*, that doesn't mean some forms of depression aren't best interpreted as signals that something's wrong, that your life might need re-evaluating. Psychological symptoms can be catalysts for change. While asking how to get rid of them, Hollis advises, don't neglect to ask, "Why have they come?"

Anyway, how odd would it be if only one narrow characteristic were the answer to all-round success? Or if phenomena like depression never served any purpose at all? When it comes to the quest to find the one best kind of personality, perhaps it's time to take Churchill's advice, submit to good sense, and give up.

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