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COMMENTARY

We're Teaching Grit the Wrong Way



James Yang for The Chronicle

By David DeSteno | MARCH 18, 2018

Let's face it, for most students academic work isn't intrinsically enjoyable. Even for the highly motivated ones, studying certain subjects or going to certain classes can feel like pulling teeth, especially if it stands in the way of more pleasurable options like watching television or

checking updates on Facebook. But, of course, choosing short-term pleasures too frequently bodes ill for eventual success.

The way people usually solve such dilemmas — accepting sacrifices in the present in order to reach future goals — is with self-control. Beginning with Walter Mischel's marshmallow studies, decades of research have confirmed that those who can delay gratification have better life outcomes. Good self-control has also been shown to be a key component of grit — perseverance in the face of educational challenges. It's no wonder, then, that colleges have placed great emphasis on teaching students better self-control.

But the strategies that educators are recommending to build that self-control — a reliance on willpower and executive function to suppress emotions and desires for immediate pleasures — are precisely the wrong ones. Besides having a poor long-term success rate in general, the effectiveness of willpower drops precipitously when people are feeling tired, anxious, or stressed. And, unfortunately, that is exactly how many of today's students often find themselves.

Research conducted by the American College Health Association shows that almost 54 percent of students report feeling high levels of stress, 60 percent report feeling very lonely, and more than 90 percent report feeling exhausted and overwhelmed at times.

Anxiety and depression levels are also on the rise and, as documented in *The Chronicle*, are taking a toll on students' well-being.

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Efforts to emphasize willpower and executive function to achieve self-control are largely ineffective in helping those students. And evidence shows that those strategies might actually be contributing to the stress, anxiety, and loneliness students feel. For example, efforts to suppress emotions in order to achieve a goal have been linked not only to poorer memory but also to increased physiological stress and, over time, less satisfying social relationships. Among adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds, the use of willpower to instill self-control has been linked to premature aging of the immune system. These and similar findings paint a picture of adolescents struggling to be gritty by suppressing desires for pleasure — which, precisely because of that struggle, leads to decreased learning and memory capacities, which subsequently engender more failure.

As a result, trying to teach "noncognitive" skills like self-control and grit via inherently cognitive mechanisms can set up a vicious cycle of increasing stress, failure, and social isolation.

Fortunately, there is a solution. For millennia, what ensured long-term success was cooperation. Strong interpersonal relationships were necessary to thrive. But to be identified as a good partner, a person had to be trustworthy, generous, fair, and diligent. She had to be willing to sacrifice immediate self-interest in order to share with and invest in others. In short, she had to have good character. And what drives such behaviors, emerging research shows, are feelings like gratitude, compassion, and a sense of pride in one's ability, all of which nudge the mind to accept sacrifices to cooperate with and, thereby, build relationships with others.

When a person feels grateful, he'll work harder and longer to pay others back as well as pay favors forward. When a person feels compassion, she'll give time, money, effort, even a shoulder to cry on to another in need. When a person feels proud, she'll devote more effort to developing skills that others value, and will be admired for it. Although these sacrifices often cost one pleasure or resources in the moment, they enhance long-term success via the greater rewards that come through continued reciprocal interactions with others.

But it's the mechanism by which these emotions exert their effects that offers the most promise for solving the problem of self-control. These emotions enhance a willingness to sacrifice for others because they increase the value that people place on future rewards relative to present ones. For example, in adaptations of the marshmallow test for college students — in which differing amounts of cash were used instead of sweets — we found that leading people to feel grateful doubled the value they placed on future gains, and thereby doubled their willingness to wait for larger amounts of money in the future rather than take smaller amounts of money in the moment. Feelings of pride and compassion work in a similar way.

The upshot is that by increasing the value the mind places on future rewards, these emotions enable people to cooperate more with their own future selves as well as with others. These emotions build self-control from the bottom up. Working toward long-term goals is no longer a struggle to overcome desires for pleasures in the moment. Rather, future goals, because of the increased value attached to them, simply become more attractive to pursue in their own right. Accordingly, these emotions have been associated not only with increased perseverance and decreased procrastination, but also with reduced stress, reduced loneliness, and enhanced well-being.

And so grit alone simply isn't enough. It matters what path people use. As one example, grit combined with gratitude is a strong predictor of resilience with respect to lowered suicidal thoughts among college students. On its own, however, grit isn't associated with this buffering effect.

Educators, therefore, should focus emotional learning curricula not solely on how to suppress troubling or distracting feelings but also on how to encourage useful ones. We need to teach students how to use their emotions as tools to achieve their goals.

Focusing on feelings like gratitude, compassion, and pride offer something of a double shot when it comes to fostering success. They ease the way to perseverance toward long-term goals, and they simultaneously make people act in ways that strengthen social relationships — something that benefits the health of body and mind and, indirectly, raises educational attainment itself.

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