

PERSISTENCE

by Ben Dean, Ph.D.

Persistence Defined:

Big shots are only little shots who keep shooting.—Christopher Morley

Persistence is defined as "voluntary continuation of a goal-directed action in spite of obstacles, difficulties, or discouragement" (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, p. 229).

Just as fear is a prerequisite for courage, challenge is a prerequisite for perseverance. Simply measuring how long someone sticks with a task does not adequately capture the essence of perseverance because continuing to perform something that is fun or easy does not involve the overcoming of obstacles or disappointment.

Persistence and Success:

It was tempting to begin this newsletter with a "little-engine-that-could" story about some famous person who began his or her career with nothing but achieved great success through dogged perseverance. By now we know that Thomas Edison did not invent the light bulb on his first try; rather, he put more than 6,000 substances to the test before he discovered that carbonized cotton thread makes a nice filament for the electric light bulb. "Genius is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration." Whether or not Edison actually said this is open to debate, but the message is undeniably attractive. Attractive, yes, but is it true?

To be more accurate, the 99% perspiration/1% inspiration formula needs to make room for the strength of wisdom/perspective. Persistence needs a partner. Some goals are truly impossible to reach, and some outcomes are simply unavoidable, and it takes wisdom to know when it is time to quit and move on to something else (Janoff-Bulman & Brickman; 1982). As Kenny Rogers says, "You got to know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em."

Persistence and Self-Esteem:

In general people with higher self-esteem are more likely to persist on a difficult task than people with lower self-esteem. This seems intuitive. If you believe you are a competent person with a good chance of succeeding at most things, you are less likely to quit.

What seems less intuitive is the following finding: People tend to persist longer at solving problems when they are told that what they are doing is difficult as opposed to easy. Why? Failing at a task that everyone else finds easy can be humiliating and damaging to self-esteem. In contrast, there is minimal shame when one fails a widely acknowledged difficult task (Starnes & Zinser, 1983; Frankel & Snyder, 1978)

A pernicious phenomenon called self-handicapping is a particular instance of failing to persist. Most often the term is used in the context of a failure to be persistent at practice or in preparation for a major task. Again, self-esteem comes into play. If one fails to persist in studying before a major exam, then failure can be explained (and self-esteem preserved) by blaming the failure on lack of practice rather than low ability.

Persistence and Rewards:

When individuals have been rewarded in the past for effort (sticking with a task), they are more likely to persist on a future task—even if that future task is not directly related to the first (Eisenberger, 1992; Eisenberger & Selbst, 1994).

Remember this if you are an employer or a parent! But also remember that some rewards are better than others.

Certain extrinsic rewards undermine persistence. People who perform tasks for money, prizes, or awards tend to lose interest in performing a task for its own sake (Deci, 1971; Harackiewicz, 1979; Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973). If the reward becomes unavailable, then persistence drops off sharply. In contrast, persistence is encouraged when a reward conveys positive feedback about competence and increases the intrinsic motivation for doing the task.

Developing Persistence:

The following exercises for building persistence were adapted from a list provided by psychologist Jonathan Haidt at the University of Virginia:

Finish a project ahead of time.

Notice your thoughts about stopping a task, and make a conscious effort to dismiss them. Focus on the task at hand.

Begin using a time management aid of some sort (a palm pilot, a daily planner, etc.). Find a system that works and actually use it.

Set a goal and create a plan for sticking to it.

When you wake up in the morning, make a list of things that you want to get done that day that could be put off until the next day. Make sure to get them done that day.

I hope you enjoyed this edition of the AHC Newsletter.

Ben Dean, P. (2009). Retrieved March 2, 2009, from Authentic Happiness, Penn University: <http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/newsletter.aspx?id=73>

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