
Excel

Harnessing our innate growth mindset by activating both grit and grace

by DR ANNIE TALBOT

How can psychology help people grow and learn, no matter what stage of life they are in?

It's complicated but, in essence, it's all in how we build a mindset that can be flexible and adaptive to our needs as we grow and develop. The science and psychology of learning and growth suggest that we learn best not when life is all sunshine and roses but through the combination of "grit" (Dr Angela Duckworth) and "grace". As the amazing Nelson Mandela once said, "The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling but in rising every time we fall." However, as always, it's much easier said than done, especially when life gets messy and complicated, as only life can.

Just like the concept of digital layering in IT professional development, growth is not rigid or one-dimensional. It's about building on what you have and having the courage to fail, whilst feeling safe enough to learn from it, to build that success that you need and want in life, whilst also celebrating the unique and different ways we all travel down this road of growth.

WHAT ARE YOUR BELIEFS ABOUT STRESS?

Before we focus more on grit and grace, a first step to harnessing the power of a growth mindset is to change or redefine our relationship with stress and emotions, seeing them as informative and useful to our grit and grace, not something to avoid or fear.

The research states that we shouldn't be talking about minimising stress – or the emotions that go along with it – but instead optimising them and harnessing them. We also need to start to respect what they tell us about ourselves and our needs at that time by caring for ourselves. This mindset supports psychological flexibility and effective behaviour – and strengthens the likelihood of success.

The saying goes, "If you're not stressed, you're not human." Stress in itself is not bad or abnormal – it is a normal evolutionary response. After all, we are the sons and daughters of the angry, anxious apes and would not have got this far without this evolutionary (fight-flight-freeze) threat response and our own innate "negativity bias" (that is, the ability to predict the negative outcomes that might happen if we don't run away from that tiger right now...). However, it can, if left unchecked, trip us up in life. Dr Alia Crum at Stanford University has focused her research on understanding mindsets and the core beliefs we hold around stress. It's not just the stress, but the beliefs we hold and the judgments we make about ourselves when we feel stressed, that can cause us problems.

GO THROUGH FEELINGS, INSTEAD OF TRYING TO AVOID THEM

There are no "good" or "bad" emotions, even if some feelings are not always pleasant. Especially in the short term, stress is adaptive and normal. If we can learn to name and own our feelings, and then have the courage to listen to what they might be telling us, it can actually propel us forward in life and help us really connect with joy and purpose in life, especially at times when we struggle.

The only way forward is through the emotions or problems and by following these steps we can start to tame and harness these tricky emotions:

- Name the feeling.
- Acknowledge it – sit with it – notice it with compassion and curiosity.
- Put it in perspective.
- Make a plan that links with your values and combines the ingredients of both grit and grace.

GROWING YOUR GRIT AND GRACE

So, what exactly is “grit”? It’s a concept first described by Dr Angela Duckworth, an educator and psychologist who coined the term after researching what helped children succeed, where others failed. Angela found that grit – a combination of passion and perseverance for a singularly important goal – is a hallmark of high achievers in every domain.

- Grit is saying, for example, “I want this, this is important to me and I also have multiple plans to get there and the willingness to fail trying but to keep trying.”

Grit is about what goes through your head when you fall and how it’s that, not talent or luck, that makes all the difference.

To keep our mindsets flexible and adaptive, however, takes practice as it’s not easy; we’re more used to getting stuck in the negative or threat-focused hard-wiring of our evolutionary brain.

So, we also require qualities linked to the concept of “grace” – that is, compassion, kindness, respect, reflection, perspective and human connection, which all foster a sense of safety which ultimately encourages growth.

The word “grit” is often linked to the concept of being hard, inflexible and thus stronger, but as research suggests, the strongest things and people are flexible and open to being vulnerable, with grace. They may at times need scaffolding to strengthen them (consider a young tree with a stake to support it until it is strong enough to flex with the wind) but, at the core, having grit means being able to move with changes and adapt with grace.

PRACTISE SELF-COMPASSION AND GRATITUDE

To underpin our grit and grace, we need to consider our self-talk. We often find it easier to be kinder and more respectful to others than we are to ourselves. Positive growth needs connection, respect and kindness, not bullying, judgments and disconnection. Our internal voice matters. How we talk to ourselves matters, but it’s hard to shift that self-talk without acknowledging it first. To cue in a growth mindset, it’s important to show self-compassion and acknowledge that critical voice, alongside growing your internal grit.

- Make gratitude a habit. One way to cue into your growth mindset every day is by cueing your brain into things you’re grateful for and piggy-backing that onto your daily habits so you practise consistently and it becomes just part of your routine and not a chore. There is lots of research backing up the practice of gratitude as a consistent factor in supporting happiness, contentment and wellbeing. It just counteracts that negativity threat bias that we’re wired for and helps us take perspective.

- Three blessings. When you’re brushing your teeth in the morning, plant your feet firmly on the floor, take a deep breath and think of three blessings. Three things that you have been grateful for in the last 24 hours. It might be something your partner did, gratitude for a child’s smile, or a good laugh you had about something. Try the three blessings daily challenge in your morning routine and see how it affects your mindset.

We thrive as humans in times of challenge and change. Even if it’s not what we always want at that time or you find yourself struggling, if harnessed with both grit and grace, it’s at these times that we have true opportunities for growth. It’s important to remember that owning our mindset and leaning into our emotions, rather than avoiding them or shaming ourselves for having them, actually promotes growth and choice but it is not an easy or simple path to take.

- The brilliant psychologist Abraham Maslow sums it up like this: “One can choose to go back toward comfort or forward toward growth. But growth must be chosen again and again; fear must be overcome again and again.”

GRIT RESOURCES:

Dr Angela Duckworth <https://angeladuckworth.com/>

Book by Dr Duckworth, Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance

Character Lab resources including podcasts and webinars <http://angeladuckworth.com/about-angela/about-character-lab/>

Ted Talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H14bBuluwB8>

Dr Alia Crum on mindsets: <https://mbl.stanford.edu/people>

GRACE RESOURCES:

Self-Compassion resources: <https://self-compassion.org/>

Workbooks and resources: <https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/For-Clinicians/Self-Compassion>

Ted Talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvTZBUSplr4>

Acceptance resources: <https://thehappinesstrap.com/free-resources/>

Book: The Happiness Trap by Dr Russ Harris

Gratitude and wellbeing: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mindful-anger/201807/science-proves-gratitude-is-key-well-being>

Author: [Dr Annie Talbot](#)