

## COMMENTARY

# Transforming Fragile Perfects into Dynamic Perfects to tide over the 2020 Pandemic Crises

Shivali Shamsheer<sup>1</sup>, Thiagarajan Praba<sup>1</sup>, KR Sethuraman<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Anaesthesia Unit, Faculty of Medicine, Asian Institute of Medicine, Science and Technology (AIMST) University, 08100 Bedong, Kedah, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup> Medical Education Unit, Faculty of Medicine, Asian Institute of Medicine, Science and Technology (AIMST) University, 08100 Bedong, Kedah, Malaysia

Corresponding author's email: shivalibernard@gmail.com; Tel: +60126987687

## ABSTRACT

Today the world is facing challenges because of the pandemic crises and the medical students are not exempted. It is time to build the paragons of grit in our students which is one of the character strengths that is vital to keep the students in the game. In addition to academic excellence we need to inculcate these other capabilities like grit to produce resilient doctors. Our future doctors need to be “dynamic perfects” as opposed to “fragile perfects”.

**Keywords:** Grit, Fragile perfects, Medical education, Adaptive coping, Resilient doctors

## INTRODUCTION

As the pandemic hit the globe, what is it that keeps the medical students going? This is the question we wanted to answer.

The research of Dr Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania and the late Dr Chris Peterson at the University of Michigan found that the set of 24 character strengths in their different combinations help people flourish. (1) Besides all the things that divide people across the globe, these character strengths are common. The 24 character strengths lead to flourishing across gender, class, race, culture and geography.

Dr Martin Seligman and Dr Christopher Peterson in their book, ‘Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification’ recognized and described the 24 character strengths as grit, integrity, hope, self-control, citizenship and team work, curiosity, love of learning, open-mindedness, love, social intelligence, gratitude, zest, kindness, creativity, fairness, leadership, forgiveness and mercy, bravery, modesty and humility, spirituality, perspective, humour, discretion and appreciation of beauty and excellence. (1) We all have these though in different combinations.

## GRIT: THE SIGNIFICANT PREDICTOR OF SUCCESS

Dr Angela Lee studied children and adults from different challenging environments, including West Point military cadets, national spelling bee contestants, and rookie teachers in difficult schools. The research question remained the same “Who is successful here and why?”

(2,3).

The answer that emerged across numerous contexts was amazing. The significant predictor of success was found to be Grit among the numerous factors that influence learning. Grit enables individuals to persevere despite challenges, hardships in weird unseen untoward circumstances for years to achieve their long-term goals. Grit according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is defined as “firmness of mind or spirit: unyielding courage in the face of hardship or danger”. Angela based on her studies called grit to be “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (4).

Today the world is facing challenges because of the pandemic crises and the medical students are not exempted. They are surrounded by questions and doubts regarding their studies, classes, practicals, exams and future. The stress predisposes them to develop anxiety and depression. As such the medical students do suffer from anxiety and depression as shown by G G Gan and his colleagues in their study. (5) The social cut off and boredom because of COVID-19 pandemic makes it worse (6,7,8). In the midst of all this, they need to continue with the studies, assignments, assessments to stay in the course. The students are left with no choice but to stay in the game.

According to Dr Angela Duckworth grit predicts progress where the challenge is to stay in the game. Grit is the sole example to the idea that accomplishing something very worthwhile could be done with this kind of determination in the face of adversity. In her research grit is unrelated to IQ or sometimes inversely related

to IQ meaning that individuals who are little higher in IQ or average are lower in grit. These students, termed as fragile perfects by her are to be worried about. They are to be concerned about because they are very able students who lack these other capacities/characters. They have never encountered failures. Success was always easy and destined. Dominic describes them as fragile thoroughbreds. (9) These are the Dean's list students who never got less than A plus but once they face a failure or an untoward situation, they are too fragile to stay in the game.

The good news is character strengths like grit can be learned. It is paramount for the educators to realize their importance and include them in their teachings to create future resistant and resilient meaningful doctors. Dr Duckworth quotes that character strengths like grit are malleable and can be encouraged in the students. One of the ways of teaching is modelling. The educators can give examples of failures leading to success or getting up after falling to bring these to their classrooms.

#### **THE FOUR PARAGONS OF GRIT IDENTIFIED ARE INTEREST, PRACTICE, PURPOSE AND HOPE (10)**

##### **Interest**

The Gritty individuals have passion. The seed of that passion is interest and curiosity for knowledge to know more about something and eventually develop a love affair with that something. Medical students by all means have the interest in medicine. Interest is the very beginning of passion and it proceeds the next three things.

##### **Practice**

The second characteristic of grit is practice. Deliberate practice is the technical term used as paragon of grit. It is having an interest and going deeper into it to get better at it. It is beyond having fun and enjoyment in the task. Medical students study hard and revise the subject many times. There is a discipline to deliberate practice and with constant positive feedback entailing incremental improvement day after day. The medical educators play a pivotal role in positive feedback.

##### **Purpose**

The third phase of development of a mature paragon of grit is having a purpose, the period of integration with one's identity. It started as a seed of interest, one worked hard to get better at it and now has stemmed into a mission. Medical student is on a mission to become a doctor. It gels with the individual's values, identity and personality. It is chosen as the way the individual is going to have an impact on the outside world. The way to contribute to make the world a better place for others.

##### **Hope**

The other important paragon is hope. Its maintaining hope when others lose hope. It is not really the fourth

phase because hope must be maintained constantly throughout. It is a belief irrespective of the stage of development that there is a solution to a problem. In the midst of adversaries one stays in the game. The secret is having a growth mindset and being positive. The constant hope drives the medical students through the long five-year journey of medical education to lifelong learning as professional doctors.

The science of hope has matured over the last 15 years. Human beings are creatures of the future and not slaves of the past as quoted by Dr Martin Saligman. (1) Human beings adapt, learn, and grow in the phase of challenge. Medical education today is an apt example.

These four paragons (10) are malleable and need to be supported by our culture and society especially the medical education fraternity. They suggest that one can become interested in something that eventually becomes a lifelong curiosity. One can learn to practice with feedback on the weaknesses to become better and better and develop courage to repeat the endeavour. Progressively developing a purpose in their work to have an impact on the world. Similarly, one can learn to find hope and believe that human beings including medical fraternity will adapt and grow in the phase of challenges.

#### **METHODS TO ENCOURAGE GRIT AND CHARACTER IN THE STUDENTS**

Various interventions and strategies can be implemented to encourage grit, but the success lies in the quality of interactions and interventions and not the strategies. Trusting and caring human relationships lead to human change. (11) Duckworth suggests teachers and educators to teach students, the value of deliberate practice. Explaining students that practice is not always fun, at times it is frustrating and boring. During the learning process mistakes are inevitable, despite the failures and adversities the process needs to be repeated to achieve the results. During the process teacher's role is to provide positive feedback and reward delayed gratitude. Teachers should focus on the all-round development of the students.

Creating and facilitating mastery structured classrooms and not performance structured classrooms. In mastery structured classrooms students tend to relate failures to lack of efforts, value practice, work harder, put in more effort, and persist at academic tasks. On the other hand, students in performance structured classrooms attribute their failures to lack of talents and fixed ability, more likely to procrastinate and less likely to persist. (12,13,14) Creating an environment that emphasizes the value of learning for the sake of learning may encourage students to sustain interest in and effort toward long-term goals. An environment where mistakes are not penalized but efforts are encouraged. An environment that rewards

hard work and perseverance. Culture encouraging personal growth and effort.

Institutions that facilitate mastery and learning may lay the foundation for students to inculcate passion and perseverance for their future, which in turn will help them to succeed in schools and beyond. (15)

## CONCLUSION

Character strengths like grit can be taught through modelling to create future resilient doctors. In these times of COVID crises, it is time to build the paragons of grit in addition to academic excellence in our students. A teacher's role is to provide positive feedback and reward delayed gratitude. Our future doctors need to be "dynamic perfects" as opposed to "fragile perfects".

## REFERENCES

- Peterson C, Seligman M. Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification. Oxford University Press. 2004. ISBN 0199883246, 9780199883240.
- Duckworth AL, Quirk A, Gallop R, Hoyle RH, Kelly DR, Matthews MD. Cognitive and noncognitive predictors of success. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A*. 2019 Nov 19;116(47):23499-23504. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1910510116. Epub 2019 Nov 4. Erratum in: *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A*. 2019 Dec 16;: PMID: 31685624; PMCID: PMC6876246.
- Duckworth AL, Yeager DS. Measurement Matters: Assessing Personal Qualities Other Than Cognitive Ability for Educational Purposes. *Educ Res*. 2015 May;44(4):237-251. doi: 10.3102/0013189X15584327. PMID: 27134288; PMCID: PMC4849415.
- Duckworth AL, Peterson C, Matthews MD, Kelly DR. Grit: perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *J Pers Soc Psychol*. 2007 Jun;92(6):1087-101. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.92.6.1087. PMID: 17547490.
- Gan GG, Yuen Ling H. Anxiety, depression and quality of life of medical students in Malaysia. *Med J Malaysia*. 2019 Feb;74(1):57-61. PMID: 30846664.
- Silliman Cohen RI, Bosk EA. Vulnerable Youth and the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Pediatrics*. 2020 Jul;146(1):e20201306. doi: 10.1542/peds.2020-1306. Epub 2020 Apr 28. PMID: 32345686.
- Wang G, Zhang Y, Zhao J, et al. Mitigate the effects of home confinement on children during the COVID-19 outbreak. *Lancet*. 2020;395(10228):945-947.
- Coronavirus: impact on young people with mental health needs. *YoungMinds*. 2020. [cited 2020 September 7]. Available from: <https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/>
- The Almighty 'A' is the Death of Learning. *Huffpost*. Updated 2017 Jan 04. [cited 2020 September 7]. Available from: [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-almighty-a-is-the-dea\\_b\\_8900590](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-almighty-a-is-the-dea_b_8900590)
- Duckworth A. Grit: The power of passion and Perseverance. Scribner Book company;2016. ISBN10 1501111108, ISBN13 9781501111105.
- Jennifer B. Developing Grit in Our Students: Why Grit Is Such a Desirable Trait, and Practical Strategies for Teachers and Schools? *Journal for Leadership and Instruction*. Fall 2014;13(2):14-17. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1081394.pdf>
- Ames C, Archer J. Achievement goals in the classroom: Students' learning strategies and motivation processes. *Journal of educational psychology*. 1988 Sep;80(3):260.
- Wentzel KR. Student motivation in middle school: The role of perceived pedagogical caring. *Journal of educational psychology*. 1997 Sep;89(3):411.
- Wolters CA. Advancing Achievement Goal Theory: Using Goal Structures and Goal Orientations to Predict Students' Motivation, Cognition, and Achievement. *Journal of educational psychology*. 2004 Jun;96(2):236.
- Park D, Yu A, Baelen RN, Tsukayama E, Duckworth AL. Fostering Grit: Perceived School Goal-Structure Predicts Growth in Grit and Grades. *Contemp Educ Psychol*. 2018 Oct;55:120-128. doi: 10.1016/j.cedpsych.2018.09.007. Epub 2018 Sep 26. PMID: 32831457; PMCID: PMC7441845.