

The Positive Psychology of Persistence and Flexibility

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What are the most valuable life strategies essential for survival and resilience?
What are the most common traits shared by successful athletes and CEOs?
More importantly, what are the virtues most important in living the good life?

My answer to all the above questions is the same: persistence and flexibility. You need these two virtues to slay your inner dragon and vanquish your deadly foes. Persistence beckons you with eternal hope, while flexibility enables you to get through the obstacles that stand between you and your dreams.

If you can understand and apply the positive psychology of persistence and flexibility, then nothing can prevent you from achieving success. In this essay, I can only scratch the surface on this topic, but I trust that it will get you thinking about its relevance to your own life.

Persistence pays

Imagine yourself in the last stretch of a marathon. Your entire body is aching and crying out desperately for oxygen. Your legs become rubbery. The end is within sight, but your spirit is wavering. No, you can't do it, you will never make it – this negative voice gets louder and louder. You are on the verge of total collapse. At this crucial moment, what keeps you going? What sustains you when all the opposing forces seem overwhelming?

Once you dig deeper into your inner reserve and change gears, somehow you manage to find the second wind. By sheer determination or some magic power, you are able to muster just enough strength to reach the finish line.

What separates winners from losers is how they persist in situations when most mortals would give up.

Those who outlast everyone else will have the last laugh. Refusing to be deterred by problems or discouraged by setbacks, they forge ahead, limping and crawling, towards the goal. Whatever their aspirations and life goals, their capacity to persist is their key to success.

Elsewhere, I have elaborated on the virtues of endurance, determination and commitment, which are all ingredients of purposeful, goal-oriented persistence. It is worth repeating the famous quote from Calvin Coolidge, the 30th President of the United States:

Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.
Talent will not;
Genius will not;
Education will not;
Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.

But why do some people persist in the face of mounting difficulties, while others fall prey to helplessness? Why do some people manage to overcome great obstacles, while others simply give up? The answer rests in the differences in their past experiences and learning.

Psychological research on learned helplessness and learned persistence gives us a great deal of insight how we can increase the capacity of persistence and decrease the tendency of learned helplessness.

Learned helplessness

What happens to animals when they are exposed to an experimental setup, where events are uncontrollable? How would they eventually behave when they learn their behavior has no effect on the outcome?

In the late 60's and early 70's, at the University of Pennsylvania, Marty Seligman and associates (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1995; Seligman, 1992) discovered that when laboratory-raised dogs or rats were confined in a box and given uncontrollable shock, they eventually would give up their frantic but futile efforts to escape and become passive. Later, they would give up the chance to initiate an appropriate action to avoid the shock, even when avoidance was now made possible by the experimenter. They called this phenomenon "learned helplessness".

Later, they found that when university students were given unsolvable problems, this experimental manipulation would also lead to emotional, motivational and cognitive deficits. This set of findings gives Seligman the insight that depression may be caused by learned helplessness.

According to the learned helplessness theory, exposure to uncontrollable events gives rise to the expectation that events in the future will also be uncontrollable. Such negative expectation would result in passivity, demoralization and even depression.

Obviously not everyone exposed to uncontrollable situations would become helpless; otherwise, no one would have survived given that many situations in real life are beyond our control. In fact, everyday observation and experimental research show that most people can cope with such situations quite well. Seligman (1996, 1998) has reported cognitive strategies of learned optimism can prevent learned helplessness. Amsel and I have discovered some more basic behavioral strategies of learned persistence that can also immunize people and animals against helplessness.

Learned persistence and frustration theory

Frustration theory as developed by Abram Amsel (1992) and extended by Paul Wong (1995) has a long and venerable history. It began with the recognition that organisms live in a world where biological significant events (reward, non-reward, and punishment) are often unpredictable and uncontrollable. Through simple S-R mechanisms, frustration theory is able to explain a variety of motivational and learning effects related to the inconsistency of reward and non-reward.

For example, frustration effect refers to the invigoration of behavior immediately after an encounter with non-reward following a series of reward. Persistence effect refers to the phenomenon of increased persistence after experience of a mixture of reward and non-reward. Without our awareness, long-term dispositions are developed, depending on how we have learned to react to success and failure (Amsel, 1992; Wong, 1995).

Generalized persistence and resilience

During the same time period when Seligman and Steve Maier were publishing their studies on learned helplessness, Abram Amsel and myself at University of Toronto and later the University of Texas were publishing a series of studies on generalized persistence, a phenomenon seems to be the opposite to learned helplessness. We exposed rats and chicks to a variety of uncontrollable events, such as shock, nonreward and aversive stimulation. We discovered that if we introduced these negative events gradually in order not to disrupt their goal-oriented behavior, this habit of persistence tends to generalize to other uncontrollable situations.

For example, if animals learn to overcome frustration in one situation, they show **learned courage** later in situations of uncontrollable shock. Similarly, if they learn to overcome fear and pain in one situation, they demonstrate **learned optimism** later in situations of prolonged failure. Such generalized persistence has shown to be very durable. The effect still remains even after long durations of intervening events and in very different situations.

Consider this vignette: Some young rats learn to expand efforts to feed from a difficult-to-access food-hoper, while their counterparts enjoy the luxury of having a pile of food right inside their cages. When both groups reach adulthood, they are tested in a variety of learning situations. Rats that have learned industriousness and persistence later perform better, and show greater persistence.

Consider another vignette: Rats that have been trained on a partial reinforcement schedules later not only show greater persistence, master more difficult learning tasks, but also win more contests when they have to compete with other rats for food. Taken together, these studies provide solid empirical evidence of learned resilience, because they demonstrate the effect of dispositional learning of bouncing back in the face of repeated setbacks, unrelenting frustration and prolonged fear. Most of these studies have been summarized in Amsel (1992) and Wong (1995).

The positive psychology of learned persistence

Woody Allen once said that 80% of success is just showing up. I can add that 80% of success in anything, including finding happiness and meaning, is staying alive. It is not thinking or feeling but action that really counts. Only action can get you from Point A to Point B. Only action can see you through the vicissitude of life. Evolution psychology (Buss, 2005) has fully attested to the importance of behavioral mechanisms in adapting to changing environments.

More precisely, what really matters in life is to persist in the business of living, even when you feel depressed and anxious. What really matters is to persist in a pursuing your life goal, even when you cannot fully understand the meaning and purpose of life.

We need to cultivate gratitude and celebrate our aliveness. Praise God for every breath, and appreciate every moment of life. As long as we stay alive and persist in getting through the night, there is hope. There is always a new dawn for those who endure.

The first important lesson for the quest for meaning is persistence. Darkness will lift and the sun of enlightenment will shine on us, only when we persist through the debilitating feelings of helplessness and despair.

A determined person can change his life; a committed person can achieve her dream. Generalized persistence is the only thing that ever matters not only in the risky business of survival, but also in the hazardous quest for meaning. Life is dangerously exciting for those who dare to persist. That is why we need to emphasize the virtue of persistence in parenting, education, and counseling.

Persistence and resilience

Dr. F. Flach (2003) has spent years studying how people cope with major catastrophes and terrible hardships, as well as potentially dangerous major turning points in their lives. He has discovered that three the most common traits of resilient people are (a) creativity, (b) the ability to tolerate emotional or physical pain, and (c) the ability to discover new ways to approach life.

Frustration theory provides the guideline for the dispositional learning of these new character strengths. For example, various parenting practices, such as feeding on demand, picking up the baby whenever it demands attention, will not cultivate character strength. Similarly, protecting children from experiencing failure or difficulty also deprive them of the opportunity to learn persistence and resourcefulness. What is needed is to allow children to have ample opportunities to learn how to stretch themselves to overcome obstacles and how to tolerate unpleasant tasks in order to achieve positive outcomes. Even luck tends to favors those who persist.

Dr. Flach also reports that resilient people tend to develop new perspectives on interpreting the negative events and giving them meaning. To maintain a state of coherence is part of the adaptive mechanisms to restore homeostasis in times of stress and disruptions.

If 80% of survival is persistence, then the remaining 20% is finding the meaning for survival (Wong & Fry, 1998). The take-home lesson from research on learned persistence is that you will make it, and you will even bounce back stronger, only if you persist through whatever life throws at you. Keep on keeping on, and doors of opportunity will open for you.

Persistence and flexibility

Flexibility is another mega-life strategy for survival. Charles Darwin put it very clearly: "It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change." Living in the midst of rapid social change and increasing uncertainty, the capacity to adapt to change is another key to survival and success.

Just ask any CEO or HR manager what kind of employees they would like to have. One of the most valued quality is the capacity to respond to change with agility and creativity. One either surfs the mighty waves of change or gets buried under. It takes flexibility to harness the huge amount of energy inherent in any movement of change.

How is flexibility related to persistence? I have made the distinction between **response persistence** and **goal persistence** (Wong, 1995). The former refers to perseveration or the habit of repeating the same response, even when it is no longer appropriate. The latter refers to commitment and tenacity in pursuing a

goal-object. Clearly, response persistence restricts flexibility, while goal persistence provides more opportunities for flexible display.

Another important finding is that there is a dynamic interplay between persistence and flexibility. Organisms are more likely to persist in their goal pursuit, when many response options are available; they persist as long as they are free to explore alternative pathways to success. However, they are less likely to persist, when there are more competing goals to distract them (Wong, 1995).

To maximize goal persistence, one needs to focus on what really matters and ignores competing opportunities. At the same time one also needs to be creative and flexible in trying alternative pathways to goals.

Apart from a history of partial reinforcement, goal persistence requires that we be committed to some core values, centered in what matters most and focused on our major life goals. Flexibility, on the other hand, requires that we need to be agile and resourceful to change our tactics in order to achieve success.

The strategy of flexibility needs also be applied to goal-persistence. Blind commitment to an unattainable or out-dated goal can be very costly. From time to time, we need to reevaluate our life goals. In different stage of development and in different circumstances, our priorities may change. When assimilation no longer works, change is needed to accommodate the new reality. The unending process of reconstruction requires both openness to change and commitment to a set of core values.

The many faces of flexibility

The best metaphor for flexibility is water, which can fit into any situation. It can go over, under and around any blockage. It can penetrate, evaporate and solidify. Combined with persistence, water can cause landslides and reduce rocks into fine sands.

According to a well known Chinese idiom, a real man can shrink and expand, knowing how to live in poverty and prosperity. I have known professors and medical doctors from China now doing menial jobs, such as pumping gas and cleaning offices because of language handicaps. They know that their jobs do not define them, and they can still realize their dreams in a foreign country, but they need to be patient, humble and flexible.

The Apostle Paul personifies flexibility. When he was in prison, he was able to say: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether

living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:11-15, the Bible).

But flexibility can also be weakness. Bamboos are flexible, but they have strength. Water is flexible, but it has strength. Flexibility without some built-in durability becomes weakness. That’s why flexibility always needs to be wedded to persistence.

Hollow reeds bend with the wind. A jellyfish has no backbone. A person without a clear sense of self or direction is no better, because such a person only responds to external stimulation. He can never stand up for anything, because he does not know what he believes, and nor does he have the courage to follow his own conscience. Flexibility without firm guiding principles amounts to prostituting one’s soul.

How to manage change

Persistence and flexibility are mega-life strategies, because they enable us to manage ourselves and interact with the external world with a sense of freedom and security. We are able to persist and move forward without self-doubts, when we know who we are and where we are headed. We feel free from anxiety and fear in the face of uncertainty, because we are prepared to respond to any change without losing our way. Persistence and flexibility are always a winning combination. They are the wings that can carry you to your Promise Land through the storms and the valleys.

Most people are fearful of change, because it threatens their habitual way of existence and heightens their sense of insecurity. They prefer things to be the way they used to be and would do anything to defend their way of life.

Unfortunately, technological innovations greatly increase the rapidity of social change. Very few cultural customs can long survive the relentless onslaught of progress. Very few traditional values can long withstand the tidal waves of secularism and materialism.

The scope and intensity of the recent cartoon rage in the Muslim world (<http://www.cbc.ca/story/world/national/2006/02/10/cartoon-fury060210.html>) illustrate just how sensitive and fierce people can be when they perceive that their cherished religious beliefs and symbols are violated. Their violent protests reflect the intensity of their fear and insecurity in the face of modernization.

But violence can never turn back the clock, and terrorism is doomed to fail as a cultural defense, because violence is self-destructive. I have made the compelling case that creative flexibility is a far more adaptive strategy than aggression (Wong, 1995).

How should we manage change constructively, when it creates a crisis situation? O'Neill and O'Neil (1974) have offered some helpful insights.

In the crisis culture in which we live, the need for commitment takes on a special significance. We continue to hunger for love, whatever we may tell ourselves. In our hearts we know that life cannot have real meaning for human beings without challenge and creativity. But we tend to be particularly skeptical of commitment in this period of social upheaval. What are we supposed to be committed to? (p.22)

This is essentially a crisis of meaning. It directly challenges us to commit to something meaningful, something bigger than ourselves. This something may be our most cherished beliefs or universal values. Once we discover who we are and what really matters in life, then we can pursue the good life with determination and tenacity. Being centered in our secured self-knowledge, we can persist with a sense of confidence and security.

The crisis also challenges us to be creative and flexible in our pursuits. Commitment always manifests itself in action, but actions must be appropriate and effective. Banging our heads against a stone wall is not the way to succeed. We need to keep on trying different pathways until we realize our dreams. It may take ten years. It may take a life time. But it will be a life of vitality, meaning and significance.

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