Episode Book

EPISODE #5689

What Actually Makes People Stick With Things

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SYNOPSIS

Most perseverance advice is inspirational noise. The actual research says grit is perseverance AND passion, that willpower isn't what keeps people going, and that sunk cost works on your need to act, not your belief in the work. Drawing on Angela Duckworth's founding grit study, a 127-study meta-analysis, and a preregistered replication of the marshmallow test, this episode digs into what separates healthy persistence from grinding — and why the fast win is so hard to resist.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Most of what gets written about perseverance is inspirational garbage. Posters with eagles on them. Quotes attributed to people who never said them. The whole genre is designed to make you feel something rather than do something.



Herman

And the actual science is stranger than the posters. There's a reason people fail at this, and it isn't laziness.



Corn

Right, so, Daniel sent in a prompt this week, and it's about exactly that. He's been going through our episode history, tidying it into playlists, and somewhere in that process he started thinking about the days he considered walking away from this project. Which, to be clear, loses money. He says that plainly. It's a loss leader financially. And he takes great joy in it.



Herman

Both of those at the same time.



Corn

Both at once. His framing is that the world is complicated and we chew at it one bite at a time, that the only horizon that makes sense is the long one. And then he said something I want to come back to. He said when a project captures your attention over the long term, it becomes more than your contribution to it. It becomes the work you're called to do.



Herman

That word, called.



Corn

It is. So here's what he's asking. Why is perseverance becoming a lost skill? What does it actually take to stick with something? What's the difference between the unhealthy version, where you're just obeying a sunk cost, and the healthy version? Why does the human appetite for quick wins make long projects so hard? And then the real question underneath all of it. How does an average, fallible person stay the course when they have a genuine sense that the work is worth it?



Herman

That last one is the whole episode.



Corn

Yeah it is. And there's real research on every part of it, which is not what I expected when I started pulling on this.



Herman

Start with the founding study, because it's cleaner than people remember. Angela Duckworth's 2007 paper defined grit as perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Not one or the other. Both, in the definition, from the beginning.



Corn

And it predicted what, exactly?



Herman

Retention of West Point cadets through that first brutal summer. Final ranking in the National Spelling Bee. GPA among Ivy League undergraduates. Educational attainment in two large adult samples, one of them over fifteen hundred people. Wildly different domains, same trait showing up.



Corn

Which is the part that should make you sit up. Spelling bees and military training have almost nothing in common.



Herman

Nothing. And the finding that matters most for Daniel's question is the one people skip past. Grit did not correlate positively with IQ. It showed incremental predictive validity beyond IQ and beyond conscientiousness. Meaning you can't explain who persists by measuring how smart they are.



Corn

Talent doesn't tell you who stays.



Herman

Duckworth's own summary is that achieving difficult goals takes not only talent but the sustained and focused application of talent over time. The talent is the raw material. The persistence is the machine that turns it into anything.



Corn

So far so motivational-poster. Here's where it gets less comfortable. Perseverance by itself isn't a virtue. It's neutral.



Herman

That's the Jachimowicz meta-analysis. Twenty eighteen, PNAS. A hundred and twenty-seven studies, forty-five thousand participants pooled. And the result was that grit's effect on performance is larger in studies where the people were actually passionate about the domain they were in.



Corn

Which sounds obvious until you realize what it means for the earlier research.



Herman

It means the field had over-emphasized the perseverance half and ignored the passion half. Which is embarrassing, because passion was in the definition the whole time. Their framing is that passion is a strong feeling toward a personally important value, one that motivates you to act in ways that express it. It's not enthusiasm. It's not excitement. It's a value you keep expressing.



Corn

So perseverance without passion is grinding. Perseverance with passion is the thing that actually works.



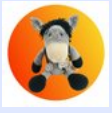
Herman

And that's the scientific version of Daniel's distinction. He described the podcast as a loss leader financially but a source of great joy. That's the passion-attainment profile. That's exactly the configuration the research says predicts sustained performance over years.



Corn

He didn't know he was describing himself accurately.



Herman

Nobody ever does. There's a second piece that answers his question about quick wins directly. Von Culin, Tsukayama and Duckworth, twenty fourteen. They looked at what motivates gritty people, and found grit tracks with two orientations. Engagement, meaning you're drawn to activities that absorb your attention. And meaning, meaning you're oriented toward a larger purpose.



Corn

And the third one?



Herman

Inversely associated with pleasure orientation. Immediate hedonic reward. The gritty profile is not someone who enjoys the dopamine hit of rapid feedback. It's someone oriented toward absorption and purpose, and specifically not toward the quick reward.



Corn

So the person who needs the fast win is wired differently from the person who can wait.



Herman

Not differently in a moral sense. Differently in what they're pointed at. And there's a neurological reason the fast win is so seductive. Silvetti and colleagues, twenty thirteen, modeled how the anterior cingulate cortex and the mesolimbic dopamine circuits handle immediate versus delayed rewards. The short version is that the brain's reinforcement learning is tuned to immediate feedback. Delayed reinforcement is harder for the system to process.



Corn

So a long project is fighting the default wiring.



Herman

It's fighting the default wiring. Which reframes the whole thing. If you struggle to stay with something whose payoff is three years out, that isn't a character flaw. That's the machinery doing what the machinery does.



Corn

That's useful, because the standard advice is just try harder.



Herman

Try harder is the advice you give when you don't understand the system. So here's the sharpest part of the research, and it's the answer to Daniel's sunk-cost question. Feldman and Wong, twenty eighteen, Psychological Science. They wanted to know why escalation of commitment actually happens. Not the story we tell, the mechanism.



Corn

The story we tell is that people keep going because they've already invested so much.



Herman

That's the folk version, and it's incomplete. What they found is that escalation is driven substantially by negative feedback triggering what they call an inaction-effect bias. When things go badly, people feel a compulsion to take action. And here's the trick. If escalation is framed as action and quitting is framed as inaction, people escalate harder. The effect size was around zero point three seven, which is not trivial.



Corn

So the driver isn't belief in the project. It's the discomfort of sitting still while the news is bad.



Herman

It's the discomfort of doing nothing. Which gives you a diagnostic you can actually use. Unhealthy perseverance is often driven by the need to be seen doing something, in the face of bad news, rather than by any honest conviction that the work matters. And the test for the healthy version is clean. Can you articulate why the work matters independent of what you've already put in? If the only answer you have is because I've already spent three years on it, that's the sunk cost talking.



Corn

Because I've already spent three years is a statement about the past.



Herman

And it should have no bearing on a decision about the future. The money and time are gone either way. The only question that survives is whether the thing is worth doing from here.



Corn

That connects back to something Daniel wrote, and I want to put it in his words, because he said it better than I would. He said there's a version of perseverance that's unhealthy, where you stick with something because of a sunk cost fallacy. But there's another version where the obstacle isn't stubbornness at all. It's the natural human tendency to seek quick wins and rapid positive feedback. And any long-term project inherently challenges that reward system.



Herman

He's got the mechanism right. The obstacle isn't stubbornness in either direction. In the unhealthy version the obstacle is discomfort. In the healthy version the obstacle is the reward system itself.



Corn

So given all that, the question becomes practical. If willpower isn't the answer, and the reward system is fighting you, what actually keeps people going?



Herman

That's where the research takes a turn most people don't expect. Inzlicht and Roberts, twenty twenty-four. They looked at people high in trait self-control. Conscientiousness, grit, ability to delay gratification. And the finding is that those people do not engage in more moment-to-moment willpower.



Corn

Say that again.



Herman

They engage in less. People with high trait self-control are not white-knuckling more temptations than you are. They're white-knuckling fewer. They still get the better outcomes, better health, more wealth, higher achievement. But not through heroic daily resistance.



Corn

Then what are they doing?



Herman

They've built a life where the long-term choice is the easy default. The temptation isn't defeated in the moment. It never comes up, because the environment and the habits have already settled the question.



Corn

That flips the whole frame. It's a design problem, not a willpower problem.



Herman

It's a design problem. And the marshmallow test reinterpretation points the same direction. Michaelson and Munakata, twenty twenty, Psychological Science. Preregistered replication of the famous delay-of-gratification study. And they found the predictive power of the original was better explained by social support than by self-control.



Corn

The kid who waits isn't necessarily the kid with iron will.



Herman

The kid who waits is often the kid whose environment makes waiting reasonable. If the adult in the room keeps their promises, waiting is rational. If the adult in the room has burned you before, grabbing the marshmallow now is the correct play. So the test might have been measuring the child's early environment the whole time, not some inner reserve



Herman (continued)

of discipline.



Corn

Which is a much more humane reading. It stops being about who's strong and starts being about what's around you.



Herman

And the corollary is that if you're trying to stay with something for years, the support structure around you is not a nice-to-have. It's load-bearing.



Corn

There's a tactic in there too. Moeini-Jazani and colleagues, twenty twenty-five. Opportunity cost salience. Making the cost of not pursuing the valued long-term goal vivid.



Herman

Vivid is the operative word. When you make the foregone future concrete, it shifts the subjective value of the present versus the future, and it does it with minimal effort. You're not summoning willpower. You're changing the comparison the brain is making.



Corn

So instead of asking yourself how good the quick win feels, you ask what you're giving up to take it.



Herman

And you make the giving-up side specific. Not I'll regret this, but a picture of where you'll be in three years if you keep trading the long thing for the short thing. Vivid and concrete, not abstract.



Corn

I want to bring in the retention evidence, because a lot of this is lab work and I want the real-world version.



Herman

Robertson-Kraft and Duckworth, twenty fourteen. They looked at novice teachers, and the grittier ones outperformed their less gritty colleagues and were less likely to quit mid-year.



Corn

Mid-year is the interesting part. Quitting in June is a decision. Quitting in November is a collapse.



Herman

It's a collapse, and grit predicted who didn't collapse. And Schimschal's twenty twenty-one concept analysis found grit is associated with reduced burnout and depression, plus improved performance and well-being. Which matters for Daniel's framing specifically. He said the project is a loss leader but a source of joy. That's not a contradiction. The research says that profile is protective.



Corn

Here's where I want to push, because I don't want this to become a cheerleading episode.



Herman

Go ahead.



Corn

Persistence doesn't guarantee anything. There's a thread from years back on the Ang Lee question, the uncertainty of success, and a commenter in it described knowing two bands that spent the better part of a decade trying to make it. He said they became absolutely phenomenal musicians and they never became famous. His reason was that the music



Corn (continued)

industry is full of amazing musicians, only a few of whom ever become stars.



Herman

The same commenter named the trap directly. Sunk cost fallacy. You put so much of yourself into the vocation that you can't imagine quitting.



Corn

That's the honest tension and I don't want to smooth it over. Persistence is necessary and it is not sufficient. The world does not reward all persistence equally.



Herman

It doesn't. And I'd go further. That commenter is describing the same mechanism Feldman and Wong identified. By year eight, those musicians weren't necessarily playing because they believed in the band. They were playing because stopping felt like a betrayal of what they'd already given. The action-versus-inaction framing had them locked.



Corn

The diagnostic has to run in both directions. Early on, you're asking whether the work is worth doing. Late on, when the sunk cost is enormous, you're asking whether you'd start this today if you were new to it.



Herman

That's the question that survives the sunk cost. Would I begin this now, knowing what I know? If the answer is yes, the years behind you are irrelevant. If the answer is no and the only reason you're still in it is the years behind you, that's the trap.



Corn

Where does this land for the average fallible person? Because Daniel's question is specifically about that person. Not the exceptional one. The ordinary one who senses the work is worth it and can't seem to hold on.



Herman

The research gives you four things, and none of them is try harder. Passion and meaning as the anchor, because perseverance without them is just grinding. Systems and environment that make the long-term choice the default, so you're not spending willpower you don't have. Social support, because the marshmallow work says the structure around you matters more than the discipline inside you. And honest evaluation, which means being able to say why the work matters without reference to what you've already spent.



Corn

The called-to frame maps onto the meaning orientation from Von Culin.



Herman

It does. Called is the meaning orientation in a single word. It's not about the reward. It's about the purpose. That's the motivational profile the research says actually sustains long projects, and it's the one Daniel reached for without having read any of it.



Hilbert

It was a front porch.