

# Reading the Story Behind Success

Jeff Cain, EdD, MS

Everyone who is successful in their career and in life has a story. While the storylines may differ from individual to individual, there is almost always something more to the plot than innate talents and skills. Obstacles, failures, and setbacks are common to everyone, but the successful somehow find a way to rebound, recover, and persevere. This editorial describes one such story of passion and grit of an award-winning pediatric pharmacist.

**KEYWORDS** achievement; grit; motivation; networking; resilience

J Pediatr Pharmacol Ther 2020;25(8):661–662

DOI: 10.5863/1551-6776-25.8.661

I will be the first to admit that when I read “The Power of Networking and Lessons Learned from Omegaven,” there was a considerable amount that I did not understand. My educational and professional background is

*see related article on page 663*

not in pediatric pharmacy, thus the historical and clinical significance of Dr Gura’s work is beyond my comprehension. However, I was able to follow the backstory, which aligns more closely with my areas of expertise. Instead of reading this through the lens of pediatric pharmacy, what I read was a story about what career success looks like beneath the surface. It is a story that should be read by students, residents, and young clinicians who often look at leaders in their field with the assumption that their path to success was straight and well-paved.

“Why are some people more successful than others? One obvious answer is talent. Another is opportunity. But even people who have comparable levels of talent and opportunity often enjoy strikingly different levels of success.”<sup>1</sup> This quote from Angela Duckworth provides a perfect backdrop for Dr Gura’s story, which provides a real-life case study of those principles. I often wonder if those new to clinical practice truly understand that professional life does not automatically become easier when handed the diploma. If not, it could be because those of us in academia and practice do not always showcase our setbacks and failures to students and trainees. Whereas popular media often highlight celebrities who overcame adversity to reach success, those same concepts are featured less prominently in academic press. I have spent considerable time studying the academic literature regarding characteristics crucial for individual success, and when I read Dr Gura’s paper, 3 of those characteristics were clearly evident.

First, as Dr Gupta led the reader through historical accounts of her career, it was easy to sense the “passion” she had for her work. Someone who misses their child’s marching band event to spend a Saturday night in the

hospital with a patient “just in case” must have a powerful craving for that type of work. Passion in that sense is easy to recognize, but it is much more complex to measure and study because passions can be developed and often change over time.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, passion is what leads people to consume themselves in something of personal interest. It is hard to overestimate how impactful and rewarding it is to become completely absorbed in the problems you are trying to solve, whether that be in a particular moment or throughout the longevity of a career. As some researchers would say, that is when creativity and innovation flourishes.<sup>3</sup> Although passion lays a critical foundation for success, it is just a starting point.

Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist, author, and professor at the Wharton School of Business quipped that “passion without perseverance is idle curiosity...Passion with perseverance is grit.”<sup>4</sup> It is this construct of grit that Duckworth<sup>5</sup> made popular with her research, and is so readily evident in Dr Gura’s career. Although measurement of the grit construct is fraught with controversy,<sup>6</sup> the *concept* of grit is recognized through the works of successful people. One of the most conspicuous characteristics on display throughout Dr Gura’s speech is the perseverance exhibited throughout her career. She could not find sponsors for research, was told she was not qualified to do translational research, and was denied funding after nearly 20 different grant proposals. Each of those could have been a point at which she abandoned that work, yet despite all the negative feedback, rejections, and setbacks, she continued to press forward. She garnered new skills, tried other avenues, and used different approaches until her work came to fruition. This is exactly what Duckworth<sup>5</sup> referred to when discussing the results of her seminal grit research. One interesting and key aspect of the interplay between perseverance and the aforementioned passion is that individuals who have an intense passion and desire to achieve something are those most likely to persevere long enough to reach breakthroughs. The motivation to persevere can come in many different

forms, but those who are motivated by *meaning* more so than *pleasure* tend to embody the elements of grit.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the pursuit of meaningful and altruistic activities leads to life satisfaction,<sup>8</sup> and that, in itself should be considered a marker of success. Dr Gura's work was driven by meaning; it was significant to her, her patients, and the field of pediatric pharmacy.

Although the combination of passion and perseverance (i.e., grit) is a highly favored characteristic to possess, young readers need to know that it should not necessarily be exalted as the pinnacle of traits. It is important to realize that grit comes with its own downsides.<sup>9</sup> There can be negative repercussions for never giving up. That can reveal itself in the costs of refusing to abandon a losing effort or as Dr Gura alluded to herself—sacrificing other important aspects of life, such as family relationships. Those are decisions that each individual has to make for her or himself and how it is written into their own story of success.

Finally, one important factor often left out of academic discussions of passion, perseverance, grit, and success is that of *support from others*. Even those who personify grit and resilience do not achieve success alone. Although it may seem like certain individuals have reached their career peaks in a solo fashion, there are always supporting characters. Dr Gura makes this visible in the retelling of her own career with mentions of collaborators, teachers, encouragers, connectors, and boosters. She extolls the virtues of networking with others and how important it has been to her success. Research backs those claims and shows that networking has positive effects on career success and life satisfaction.<sup>10</sup> I would go one step further though, and posit that not all support that one receives in their career or life is the result of networking. There are people who come in and out of everyone's lives that make our achievements possible. Some of those people play direct roles in our success, whereas others make subtle, but equally important contributions to help us advance along our paths. It could be a classmate that helped you get a good grade in a course, or the person who wrote a residency letter of recommendation for you. Perhaps it is the person who hired you for your first job or the co-worker who provided you with necessary information to complete a project. Maybe it is the cousin who gave you a book that changed your outlook on life and success. It could even be the stranger who made sure you found the location of your important job interview so you would not be late. Without those contributions, the power of one's passion and perseverance is limited.

In closing, it is always interesting for me to read or hear recounts of people's professional lives. The clarity of hindsight allows us to see all the individual and collective contributions that had to fall in place for significant accomplishments to occur. No one writes or talks about how easy it was to meet their career goals. Listen to anyone who has had some measure

of career success and they will have stories similar to Dr Gura's. The characters and obstacles may be different, but the storyline seems to be the same. Love what you do, pursue meaningful activities, persevere through setbacks, and recognize the people who have supported you along the way.

## ARTICLE INFORMATION

**Affiliation** Pharmacy Practice and Science Department, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY

**Correspondence** Jeff Cain, EdD, MS; jeff.cain@uky.edu

**Disclosure** The author declares no conflicts or financial interest in any product or service mentioned in the manuscript, including grants, equipment, medications, employment, gifts, and honoraria.

**Ethical Approval and Informed Consent** Given the nature of this study, the project was exempt from institution review board/ethics committee review and informed consent or patient assent was not obtained.

**Accepted** September 11, 2020

**Copyright** Pediatric Pharmacy Association. All rights reserved. For permissions, email: mhelms@pediatricpharmacy.org

## REFERENCES

1. Duckworth A, Gross JJ. Self-control and grit: related but separable determinants of success. *Curr Dir Psychol Sci*. 2014;23(5):319–325.
2. O'Keefe PA, Dweck CS, Walton GM. Implicit theories of interest: finding your passion or developing it? *Psychol Sci*. 2018;29(10):1653–1664.
3. Nakamura J, Csikszentmihalyi M. The concept of flow. In Csikszentmihalyi M, ed. *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology*. Springer, Dordrecht, Netherlands; 2014:239–263.
4. Grant A. Passion without perseverance is idle curiosity. LinkedIn. [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/adammgrant\\_passion-without-perseverance-is-idle-curiosity-activity-6448913900585971713-Ex3r/](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/adammgrant_passion-without-perseverance-is-idle-curiosity-activity-6448913900585971713-Ex3r/). Published 2018. Accessed August 5, 2020.
5. Duckworth A. *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. Vol 234. New York, NY: Scribner; 2016.
6. Credé M, Tynan MC, Harms PD. Much ado about grit: a meta-analytic synthesis of the grit literature. *J Pers Soc Psychol*. 2017;113(3):492–511.
7. Von Culin KR, Tsukayama E, Duckworth AL. Unpacking grit: motivational correlates of perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *J Posit Psychol*. 2014;9(4):306–312.
8. Peterson C, Ruch W, Beermann U, Park N, Seligman ME. Strengths of character, orientations to happiness, and life satisfaction. *J Posit Psychol*. 2007;2(3):149–156.
9. Houston JM, Luchner A, Davidson AJ, Gonzalez J, Steigerwald N, Leftwich C. The bright and dark aspects of grit in the pursuit of success [published online ahead of print February 20, 2020]. *Psychol Rep*. doi:10.1177/003329420907316
10. Wolff H-G, Moser K. Effects of networking on career success: a longitudinal study. *J Appl Psychol*. 2009;94(1):196–206.