

Positive Psychology and Success Science vs. Self-Help Snake Oil

**Psychological Foundations of Success: A Harvard-Trained Scientist Separates the Science of Success from Self-Help Snake Oil**

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## Chapter Seven. Step Four: Persistence – The Science of Drive and Determination

*“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act but a habit.”*  
*Aristotle*

This is the longest chapter in the book, mostly because it’s the step at which people most frequently run into problems. We’ve all known people who have underachieved in life despite a clear Vision, a reasonable Strategy for making it happen, and at least at first, true Belief they could do it. For such people, Persistence is usually the problem – they start enacting their Strategy, encounter obstacles, suffer setbacks, and give up.

Achieving true success is challenging not just because of its inherent difficulty, but also because of its unpredictability. For example, we’ve seen that quitting smoking usually takes several failed attempts before “it sticks.” But still, success is unpredictable: the number of previous attempts to quit smoking does not predict success on the next attempt.<sup>236</sup> In other words, someone who has failed to quit five times is just as likely to be successful on the next attempt as someone attempting to quit for just the second time. As mutual fund companies are fond of reminding us, “past performance does not guarantee future results.” Success is difficult to predict or forecast, and therefore requires persistence in the face of uncertainty. Attempts to change often have unexpected consequences – sometimes we will face the surprise of quick success, but too often we must contend with the surprise of repeated failures.

It’s easy to underestimate the importance of Persistence. It isn’t “sexy.” It isn’t glamorous. You might go into the wilderness for a dramatic, life-altering Vision quest, but nobody goes into the wilderness on a Persistence quest. Even its clichés aren’t glamorous – you “plow ahead” or “toil away” or just “keep on keepin’ on.” Persistence often goes unnoticed and unrewarded, “flying below the radar screen” of others, even after it produces remarkable results. After a great achievement, everyone wants to know “the secret of success,” but when they are told “persistence,” they turn away disappointed and keep searching for a sexier answer.

This unheralded role of Persistence is precisely what Jim Collins discovered when he researched extraordinary companies for his book *Good to Great*.

Persistence is just as crucial to corporate success as it is to personal success, and is just as often overlooked. Executives who transform companies from good to great typically can point to “no single defining action, no grand program, no one killer innovation, no solitary lucky break, no wrenching revolution... [there was] no name for their transformations. There was no launch event, no tag line, no programmatic feel whatsoever. Some executives even said that they weren’t even aware that a major transformation was under way until they were well into it.”<sup>237</sup> When prodded for some deeper secret to success, some dramatic insight, these executives become frustrated. One exclaimed: “Look, it just wasn’t that complicated! Once we understood the concept, we just moved straight ahead.”<sup>238</sup> Many echo Sam Walton, who described his Wal-Mart empire as an overnight success 20 years in the making. They downplay formal change processes like motivational exercises and corporate “encounter groups,” emphasizing instead “fanatical consistency” or “consistent execution” or a “crawl, walk, run” approach. They talk less about “explosive growth” and more about “sustainable, organic growth.” They use mergers and acquisitions to maintain momentum rather than create it from scratch. They don’t fall head-over-heels for the Internet, but rather carefully plot out a strategy and execute consistently, even if it means not being first to market. But the media are often unsatisfied with such “mundane” explanations. Persistence makes a boring headline, so the business press features stories of critical “inflection points” or “celebrity CEOs” or other dramatic if largely irrelevant factors.

Certainly change can happen very suddenly. The decision to change can be dramatic. But true success comes from Persistence. As we all know, even if we don’t like to admit it ourselves, successful people don’t give up, and they work hard...

### **Common Knowledge: Successful People Don’t Give Up, and They Work Hard**

Perhaps because Persistence is so easily overlooked, success writers and motivational speakers go out of their way to highlight famous examples of persistence. Many point to Thomas Edison, whose 1,093 patents remains a record, citing his famous remark that success is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration (although I prefer his quip, “Everything comes to him who hustles while he waits”). Another favorite is Abraham Lincoln, who persisted despite being born into poverty, failing in business, going deeply into debt, and losing several elections. Still others point to Albert Einstein, who achieved the “overnight success” of his theory of relativity only after a decade of laying the foundation

through intense study and thought. Other tales of persistence, featuring less familiar names but offering even more inspiration, are staples of the motivational speaking circuit. W Mitchell, a popular speaker whose story is told by others as well, suffered burns over nearly two-thirds of his body in a fiery motorcycle accident. His persistence during years of physical therapy and 32 operations was impressive, and he recovered to the point of even being able to fly a plane. Then fate struck again – Mitchell’s plane crashed, leaving him permanently confined to a wheelchair. At this point, many people would simply give up, their spirits crushed. Mitchell, however, persisted and prospered, eventually becoming a mayor and running for statewide office; he even poked fun at his own disfigurement by running with the slogan, “Not just a pretty face.”

Writers are often cited as examples of Persistence, in part because success writers are (obviously) writers themselves, but also because writing is one of the most rejection-filled professions. Persistence is a prerequisite for writing success. I’ll spare you my own stories of agents and publishers who told me it was “impossible” to publish the book you now hold in your hands. (An actual conversation: Me: “I realize it’s challenging...” Allegedly respectable agent: “No! Not challenging!! IMPOSSIBLE!!!” I’ve since sent her an autographed copy). Other tales of writing Persistence are far more impressive than mine. *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Gone with the Wind*, and Dr. Seuss’s first book were each rejected over 20 times; each became a classic and sold millions. *The Good Earth* was rejected 14 times; Pearl Buck went on to win a Pulitzer Prize for it. Louis L’Amour was rejected 350 times before first being published; he went on to write over 100 novels. Jack London was rejected over 600 times before publishing his first story; he went on to write hundreds of short stories and over 50 books, some of which have been translated into 70 languages. Another writer received rejection letters every week for four years, and later spent nine years working on a project that nearly drove him to suicide; but as he contemplated throwing himself off a ship into the Pacific Ocean, that writer, Alex Haley, heard the voices of his ancestors telling him, “Don’t give up!” *Roots* went on to change America. These examples all come from *Chicken Soup for the Writer’s Soul*, itself a Persistence success story. The first *Chicken Soup* book was rejected by 123 publishers before selling millions and spawning dozens of sequels.

Persistence is a key theme, not only in inspirational tales, but also in pithy quotes repeated so often they become clichéd. Some emphasize bouncing back from obstacles. (Confucius: "Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." Mary Pickford: “This thing that we call ‘failure’ is not the falling down, but the staying down.”) Others emphasize hard work. (Thomas

Jefferson: “I find that the harder I work, the more luck I seem to have.”  
Anonymous: “The road to success is dotted with many tempting parking spaces.”  
But perhaps the ones that resonate most strongly are those that capture the essence of Persistence itself. Aristotle is often quoted as saying, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act but a habit.” But that sentiment had clearly gone mainstream when basketball’s Shaquille O’Neil said the quote embodied his philosophy during his MVP season, and asked reporters to henceforth call him “The Big Aristotle.”

Persistence is clearly a social value, an American ideal deeply engrained in our culture. It is inherent in popular theories about success. Over 90% of Americans agree that “willpower and hard work” are primary reasons why a person’s life turns out well or poorly.<sup>239</sup> Roughly two-in-three believe hard work plays a bigger role in “getting ahead” than luck or help from others;<sup>240</sup> in contrast, only about one-in-three believe “success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control” or “hard work offers little guarantee of success.”<sup>241</sup> We admire perseverance; 86% choose their heroes in large part because they are exemplars of Persistence.<sup>242</sup> We teach Persistence as well – the popular children’s story *The Little Engine That Could* conveys two values: Persistence and Belief (“I think I can . . . I think I can”). Persistence permeates adult media experiences as well; consider, for example, the common theme of Persistence prevailing over unrequited love.<sup>243</sup> We’ve all seen this movie: Boy meets Girl, Boy falls madly in love with Girl, but Girl has no interest in Boy. In fact, Girl is typically engaged to Gorgeous-Rich-Obnoxious Guy. But Boy persists, sending flowers, engineering “chance” encounters, and sometimes charmingly disrupting Girl’s wedding (often, for some reason, while wearing a gorilla suit). In real life, when Boy is so persistent, Girl takes out restraining order against Boy. But in the movies, Persistence is rewarded, and Girl comes to realize that she loves Boy.

Although the benefits of Persistence are occasionally overstated, research confirms that the common knowledge notion of Persistence being crucial to success is no urban legend. Consider a sampling of relevant findings...

- People who successfully maintain their New Year’s resolutions for at least two years report an average of 14 slips or setbacks during that time.<sup>244</sup> But they rebound, and a majority even say that their setbacks strengthened their resolve to make life changes.
- Among college students, each additional hour spent studying per week leads to only a 0.025 increase in grade point average. In other words, you’d need

to spend an additional 40 hours per week studying to just raise your GPA by a full letter grade.<sup>245</sup>

- You probably knew that Persistence is crucial to losing weight, but you may not realize it's also the key to putting on weight. The average person gains only one pound over the holidays, and only a pound and a half over the course of a whole year. But the problem is Persistence: that weight goes on each year, typically staying on permanently, leading to a 10 pound weight gain in only seven years.<sup>246</sup>
- History's true achievers persist and work hard, producing both quality and quantity. In fields as diverse as chemistry, geology, geriatrics and linguistics, 10% of the people make about half of the scientific contributions.<sup>247</sup> Of the roughly 250 "classical" composers, for example, 16 account for half of all the works in the repertoire.
- Acquiring the skills and knowledge to change the direction of the field – not just contribute to it – typically takes a decade or so of 70-hour weeks.<sup>248</sup> Of course talent and other factors come into play, but Persistence is a necessary ingredient.

Research obviously confirms the common knowledge that successful people are persistent and work hard. But it also confirms a more elusive truth: Persistence is the key to happiness...

### **Uncommon Knowledge: Persistence Is the Key To Happiness**

Scholars and sages have tried to unlock the secrets of happiness for centuries, but I think it's fair to say they've been more successful identifying what doesn't contribute to happiness than what does.<sup>249</sup> Consider the following "likely suspects," all of which have all been shown to have little or no impact on happiness:

- *Intelligence.* Ignorance is not bliss, nor are brilliant people particularly happy.
- *Physical attractiveness.* The beautiful are not happier than the rest of us, except among young women, and even then the effect is very slight.

- *Marriage.* Married people are moderately but not dramatically happier than their single counterparts. About four-in-ten married Americans describe themselves as “very happy,” compared to only 24% of those who never married.<sup>250</sup>
- *Children.* As any parent will attest, having kids is no guarantee of happiness. In fact, childless couples are slightly happier than parents, but again the effect is very modest.

Even money has a smaller effect on happiness than one might expect. When asked what would make them happier, “more money” tops the list,<sup>251</sup> but in fact the relationship between money and happiness is relatively small and limited. Certainly it’s difficult to be happy if you are very poor and have trouble meeting basic needs for food or shelter, but beyond a certain subsistence level, financial wealth is uncorrelated with happiness. Many people have trouble accepting this conclusion because it runs so contrary to our free enterprise ideology and today’s glorification of entrepreneurs. A recent Lexus ad tried to convince us that “Whoever said money can’t buy happiness isn’t spending it right.” A *New Yorker* cartoon questioned this conclusion in a more humorous way, depicting a man saying: “Researchers say I’m not happier for being richer, but do you know how much researchers make?” But the data are clear. For example, over the past 25 years, personal income in America has increased dramatically, while happiness levels have remained very stable; in study after study, about a third of Americans describe themselves as very happy, and an additional 55% or so say they are pretty happy.<sup>252</sup> If anything, happiness levels have declined slightly; 25 years ago, about 34% of Americans described themselves as very happy, compared to only 30% today.<sup>253</sup> Psychologist David Myers calls this *the American paradox*: “Compared with their grandparents, today’s young adults have grown up with much more affluence, slightly less happiness, and much greater risk of depression and assorted social pathologies.... We are twice as rich but no happier. Meanwhile, the divorce rate doubled. Teen suicide tripled. Reported violent crime nearly quadrupled.”<sup>254</sup> Clearly, money can’t buy happiness.

The drivers of happiness have been so elusive that some psychologists have even concluded that a person’s level of happiness is largely genetically determined, and that any fluctuations in happiness are at best temporary, and at worst illusory.<sup>255</sup> Studies of identical twins raised apart confirm that genes do play a role; there is a genetic component to personality traits like extraversion and optimism, and these traits in turn shape one’s tendency to experience happiness or

sadness. Certainly it is hard to permanently change your level of happiness; lottery winners experience an initial surge of excitement, but adapt to their new circumstances within a year and “settle back” to their previous levels of happiness.<sup>256</sup>

Perhaps it’s the eternal optimist in me, but I’m not willing to concede that our level of happiness is immovable. It’s psychologically beneficial to believe that you can become happier, even if it isn’t true; fortunately, I believe that it is true. I agree with University of Missouri psychologist Ken Sheldon who concluded, “If you’re a more gloomy, pessimistic person, you’re probably never going to be really deliriously happy, but you can get into the high end of your possible range and stay there.”<sup>257</sup> But if happiness isn’t driven by money, marriage, procreation, beauty or intelligence, then what’s left? In a word, Persistence.

## **Persistence, Progress and Happiness**

Happiness is ultimately about progress. It is about moving forward, just as in the old saying about the journey being more important than the destination. Happiness is the emotional juice that emerges from a sense of momentum, from overcoming inertia to get the ball rolling toward inspirational goals. Psychologist Roy Baumeister summed it up this way: “The best prescription may be a slow crescendo of successes, allowing one to celebrate and savor each increment in achievement or each improvement in circumstances... Everyone may want to get to the top, but if you want to enjoy it, you should take the stairway rather than the elevator.”<sup>258</sup> The American constitution guarantees “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” – not happiness itself. But as it turns out, the pursuit of happiness *is* happiness.

Happiness is about progress toward goals rather than accomplishing them per se. We’ve already seen that lottery winners aren’t happier than the rest of us. You probably haven’t won the lottery, but you probably have labored long and hard toward goals only to find that accomplishing them was less satisfying than expected. Psychological crises often driven by accomplishing a goal and being left with nothing more than a profound feeling of “Is that it?” As my man Mr. Spock once said, “After a time, you may find that having is not so pleasing a thing, after all, than wanting. It is not logical, but it is often true.” You may recall the Vision Quest-ions that asked about when you were most excited about your future. I’ve found that most people answer with stories, not of accomplishing goals, but of the excitement inherent in initial progress. They tell tales of an inspiring Vision, an



achievable Strategy, Belief in themselves, and the joy that comes with “getting the ball rolling.” In other words, they talk of the excitement that comes with progress, Persistence and momentum.

Happiness is one of only a handful of basic emotions. Psychologists debate the exact number, with most estimates falling somewhere between five and ten. These emotions are innate and universal; people from all cultures throughout the world use the same facial expressions to convey these emotions.<sup>259</sup> Many of these emotional states are largely determined by the status of your goals. Happiness, as shown in the table below, is the affective component of ABC cycles that take hold after Persistence leads to solid progress toward goals.<sup>260</sup>

Status of goal	Affect	Behavior	Cognition
Progress toward goal	Happiness	Heightened motivation; further progress	Confidence; self-efficacy; recalling past successes
Lack of progress; loss of goal; failure	Sadness	Loss of motivation; giving up; learned helplessness; depression	Lack of confidence; pessimism; recalling past failures
Frustration; progress inhibited by others or by circumstances	Anger	Aggressive striving toward goal, or striking out at obstruction/obstructor	Problem solving; denigration of obstructor
Goal conflict; ambivalence; Vision but no Strategy; avoidance goals; external threats or dangers	Fear, anxiety	Freezing; flight or fight; procrastination	Rumination; paralysis of analysis

This chart obviously simplifies complex dynamics. For example, not all progress is created equal; the direction and velocity of progress are important to understanding how ABC cycles will unfold. Progress only brings about happiness if you are moving toward inspirational goals that reflect your Vision,<sup>261</sup> and if you progress at a pace you consider acceptable.<sup>262</sup> These subtleties aside, it is clear that progress and Persistence are crucial to happiness, even if we are far from our goals.<sup>263</sup> Properly managed, ABC cycles can grow into ABC spirals. By setting goals, accomplishing them, and setting even more rewarding and challenging goals, happiness can increase in lasting and pervasive ways. College students who create ABC spirals not only experience greater happiness, they get better grades than would be expected based on their standardized test scores (even if their goals weren't about getting good grades), and exhibit more personal growth.<sup>264</sup> But

again, Persistence is the key. Spirals require continual effort; it is easy to lose momentum and fall back into ABC equilibrium.

This notion of Persistence and progress driving happiness explains why money, intelligence and attractiveness aren't good predictors of happiness in general, but do predict happiness for some people. If money and attractiveness enable progress toward your goals, then having them in abundance can boost your sense of well-being.<sup>265</sup> The Beatles were right that money can't buy love, but if your goal is accumulating a house full of stuff, then more money does tend to make you happier. Similarly, self-esteem is a stronger predictor of happiness in very individualistic countries, where it facilitates independence and the pursuit of individualistic goals, but a much weaker predictor in countries where community and collectivism are more valued.<sup>266</sup> Money, intelligence and the like don't create happiness directly, but if they are "resources" that facilitate progress toward your particular goals, then they will indirectly tend to make you happier.

The Persistence-happiness link may also explain why people in some countries are happier than one might expect. Across nations, happiness correlates with income and economic productivity – people living in poverty-stricken nations are unable to meet basic needs and tend to be unhappy. But some nations "over-perform" – people in Brazil, Chile and Argentina are happier than one would expect based on their income, whereas people in Russia and eastern European nations are less satisfied with their lives than one would predict from their income.<sup>267</sup> The reasons are complex, and not easily pinned down to a single explanation. But people in South American countries may, because of cultural factors, tend to choose highly attainable goals toward which they can make progress relatively easily; in contrast, people in former Soviet-bloc countries may tend to choose goals based on expectations shaped in previous decades, but which are now difficult to make progress toward because of political and economic impediments.

## **The "Happily-Ever-After" Myth**

If progress and Persistence are the keys to happiness, then you need to avoid thinking that permanent fulfillment is just around the corner if only you accomplish certain goals. In other words, you must avoid the "happily-ever-after" myth. Fill in the blank: "I would be totally, completely happy forever if only I \_\_\_\_\_." What did you say? Meet your soulmate? Get a certain job or promotion?

Win the lottery? If winning the lottery doesn't lead to lasting happiness, then anything else you might list probably won't either.

The happily-ever-after myth is seductive and pervasive. People tend to be very work-oriented early in their careers, unrealistically expecting that a certain level of achievement would result in a stress-free, problem-free, happily-ever-after life. When those lifestyle transformations don't occur, the result is often disillusionment and a "mid-life crisis."<sup>268</sup> As the saying goes, "Be careful what you wish for – you just might get it."

Mythology and literature also warn us about the happily-ever-after myth.<sup>269</sup> The quest for the Holy Grail led to heroic adventures and brought out the noble, chivalric traits in King Arthur's knights. But those who actually saw the Grail quickly died; Sir Galahad even asked to die so that life afterward would not seem anticlimactic. The message: happiness comes from progress, not necessarily from accomplishing the goal. In Goethe's story of Faust, the devil offers a lifetime supply of earthly pleasures, until the moment that Faust finds something so enjoyable he wants it to last. Faust takes the bargain, confident in his belief that happiness is fleeting, resulting from progress. But he eventually becomes tempted, and the devil takes his soul. The message: the happily-ever-after fallacy is irresistible, and man is, metaphorically speaking, "lost to the devil" as soon as he begins to aspire to permanent, blissful happiness.

My favorite warning against the happily ever after myth comes from a classic Star Trek episode, *This Side of Paradise*. Captain Kirk and his crew are sent to the distant planet Omicron Seti III to check the status of an agricultural colony, and they uncover several mysteries. First, the planet is being bombarded with radiation that should have killed the colonists, but instead they are in perfect health. Also, instead of a thriving agricultural colony, they discover the settlers had only planted fields to meet their immediate needs; instead of being world-builders, they had become mere subsistence farmers. These mysteries are resolved when Kirk discovers a plant with spores that both protects people from radiation and induces a blissful state of happiness. The spores infect his entire crew. Ambition is lost. They abandon their duties, spending their days blissed out as if on drugs, dreamily finding shapes in clouds. But Kirk knew that, at some level, the happiness inspired by the spores was illusory. He argued the point with Sandoval, the governor of the colony:

Sandoval: ". . . they give you complete health and peace of mind."

Kirk: "That's paradise." [skeptically]

Sandoval: "We have no need or want, Captain."

Spock: "It's a true Eden, Jim. There is belonging . . . and love."

Kirk: "No wants? No needs? We weren't meant for that. None of us. Man stagnates if he has no ambition – no desire to be more than he is."

Sandoval: "We have what we need."

Kirk: "Except a challenge."

Eventually Kirk finds a way to counter-act the effects of the spores (the key to breaking their hold and bringing about personal change: strong negative emotions. Sound familiar?). When Sandoval "sobers up," he recognizes that the spores brought only an illusory happiness: "We have done nothing here. No accomplishments. No progress. Three years wasted." Dr. McCoy comments that man has been thrown out of paradise for a second time. But Kirk disagrees, and launches into what Spock calls "non-regulation poetry": "No, no, Bones. This time we walked out on our own. Maybe we weren't meant for paradise. Maybe we were meant to fight our way through. Struggle. Claw our way up. Scratch for every inch of the way. Maybe we can't stroll to the music of the lute. We must march to the sound of drums." It may be a classic bit of Shatner-esque over-acting, but this episode, based on the ancient legend of Odysseus and the island of the lotus-eaters, shows a keen insight into the notion that progress brings about true happiness.

## **Tools: Ten Proven Principles for Persistence and Progress**

Our first three steps – Vision, Strategy and Belief – laid the groundwork for Persistence, progress and happiness. People work longer, harder and faster when they have clear objectives, SCAMPI goals, and both broad and task-specific self-confidence.<sup>270</sup> These three initial steps also increase your chances of rebounding from a setback, rather than letting a single lapse snowball into a more serious problem.

We've laid the groundwork for Persistence, but we have not guaranteed it. Persistence requires more. Motivation can help, but it too is often not enough. Chronic disease sufferers are highly motivated to follow the medical regimens prescribed by their doctors, and at first most do, but over time about half stop complying.<sup>271</sup> Boosting motivation doesn't help as much as you might expect, because educating people about the seriousness of their conditions, or about the specifics of how and when to take their medication, doesn't boost compliance rates.<sup>272</sup>

Persistence requires, not just a motivational pump-up, but rather the right tools and techniques, like the ten proven tools that follow. The more you use, the better. As we saw earlier, across different areas of life, from weight loss to smoking cessation, from academic success to dating, those who are more successful are those who use multiple techniques for change; moreover, they use those techniques more frequently, more consistently, over longer periods of time, and thoughtfully apply different techniques to different kinds of problems.<sup>273</sup>

### **Persistence Promoter #1: Think Like a Genius**

Each characteristic of genius-level thinking highlighted in the Vision chapter is a potential Persistence-enhancer. Particularly optimism. Over the years, this basic concept has gone by many names. "Positive thinking" first took hold as a popular philosophy in the late 1800's, spurred by several popular religious and philosophical movements including Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science, the New Thought movement, the Don't Worry Movement and the Gospel of Relaxation.<sup>274</sup> The basic tenets of these movement can still be found in popular success books today, but they reached their zenith in the 1950s when, amidst a religious revival as the World War II generation raised families, Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* had a record-setting run on best seller lists. The message was simple: faith, prayer and positive thinking were the keys to a successful life. Devotees were to practice daily "mind emptying" – clearing the mind of all fears and anxieties while replacing them with positive thoughts. The book was just one element of Peale's far-flung empire of inspiration, which included a weekly syndicated newspaper column, a monthly magazine, published sermons, and long-playing records (forerunners of today's success audiotope programs). Peale was, in a sense, the Oprah of his day.

Today, psychologists generally prefer the term optimism, and its benefits are well documented. Optimism "has been linked to positive mood and good morale;

to perseverance and effective problem solving; to academic, athletic, military, occupational and political success; to popularity; to good health; and even to long life and freedom from trauma. Pessimism, in contrast, foreshadows depression, passivity, failure, social estrangement, morbidity and mortality.”<sup>275</sup>

The Vision chapter documented how successful people tend to be “overly” optimistic, but they also know when to “turn it on” and when to “tone it down.” On your Vision quest, optimism is highly beneficial – turn it on, because the more, the better. When formulating strategy, tone it down – a more realistic mindset results in better decisions and more realistic deadlines. Of course, there is a fine line between beneficial optimism and destructive, unrealistic expectations. When former Vietnam prisoner of war and vice-presidential candidate Admiral Jim Stockdale was asked who didn’t make it out of the POW camp, Stockdale raised eyebrows when he said, “the optimists.” By that, he didn’t mean those confident they would make it out eventually (optimistic in Vision), but rather those who repeatedly developed – only to be disappointed by – unrealistic expectations about *when* they would get out (overly optimistic in Strategy and timelines). Those who said, “We’ll be out by Christmas,” only to see Christmas come and go, and then said, “We’ll be out by Easter”, only to be further disappointed, soon had their spirits crushed.<sup>276</sup>

After you’ve formed your Strategy and defined your timelines, and it comes time to pursue goals and implement plans, turn the optimism back up,<sup>277</sup> because in no domain is optimism more crucial than Persistence. Summing up years of research, psychologist Martin Seligman concluded: “When pessimistic people run into obstacles in the workplace, in relationships, or in sports, they give up. When optimistic people encounter obstacles, they try harder. They go the extra mile.”<sup>278</sup>

In “high-rejection” fields, such as writing or sales, the most persistent are often the most successful. As a result, many companies now incorporate optimism tests into their recruiting and hiring practices, sometimes with dramatic success. Before optimism testing, about half of Metropolitan Life’s salespeople quit in their first year, and 80% quit before five years. Research confirmed that optimism and Persistence were powerful predictors of job success at Met Life; in one study, optimistic salespeople outsold their pessimistic counterparts by 21% in their first year on the job, and by 57% in the second year (a classic case of momentum – a positive ABC cycle fueling itself and spiraling over time). By hiring optimistic, highly persistent salespeople, Met Life was able to grow its sales force with people well-suited to the rejection-filled task of selling life insurance. Obviously the company benefited – market share increased nearly 50%, and as turnover

decreased, hiring costs dropped dramatically. Optimistic job candidates benefited, obtaining jobs well-matched to their skills and personalities, whereas pessimistic candidates were spared the stress, burn-out and failure they would likely face in such a rejection-filled profession.<sup>279</sup>

Can you become more optimistic? Yes, to a degree. Just as you can become somewhat happier, moving to the upper end of a biologically-shaped emotional range, you can learn to become somewhat more optimistic, but don't expect to totally revamp how you view the future, at least not at first. And, unfortunately, the process is more complex than many popular success books would suggest. Simple techniques like Peale's "mind emptying" can lead to greater happiness and a heightened sense of psychological adjustment, but only as long you continue to hold those thoughts in your mind. When you stop thinking positive thoughts, the sense of happiness quickly fades (unfortunately, the effects of negative thinking can be much more pervasive and long-lasting – in a sense, "non-negative thinking" is more powerful than positive thinking).<sup>280</sup> So how do you become more optimistic? Try these three ideas...

- Focus on the belief-building tools "Crushing the ANTs" and "Arguing with yourself." These lie at the heart of creating positive ABC cycles that will have more lasting and pervasive effects than "positive thinking."
- Read Martin Seligman's *Learned Optimism*. It includes an optimism test as well as practical tools for becoming more optimistic.
- Use the next tool, manage your attributions, over and over and over...

## **Persistence Promoter #2: Manage Your Attributions**

*Attributions* are explanations of why things occur, and are some of our most influential cognitions. Successful people have a distinctive *attributional style*, displaying a natural tendency to take credit for success while attributing negative events to external, easily changeable causes. Winning athletes and their coaches typically take credit for success, attributing wins to hard work, great play, or a sound game plan; losing teams tend to deflect responsibility by blaming external factors such as the weather, poor playing conditions, bad officiating, or just plain bad luck.<sup>281</sup> Winning politicians readily take credit for electoral victories, pointing to the righteousness of their political stands or tireless campaigning efforts, while losers blame uninformed voters or ill-timed economic downturns.<sup>282</sup> As President

John F. Kennedy put it, “Success has a thousand fathers, but failure is an orphan.” Learning to make attributions in this way habitually and instinctively is one key to developing optimism and persisting in the face of obstacles. Everyone gets a little sad after negative events, but your thoughts and explanatory style determine whether you bounce back or get mired in depression.<sup>283</sup>

When good things happen, try to make “3P” attributions for them – in other words, try to understand why those events occurred in *personal*, *permanent* and *pervasive* terms. If you manage a successful project at work, take credit for that success – attributing it to your intelligence, for example, offers an explanation that is personal (*you* are intelligent), permanent (you’ll always be intelligent) and pervasive (your intelligence will help on other projects as well). Of these three dimensions, permanency is the most seductive – attributing success to intelligence dulls your ambition and lures you into a comfort zone. As a result, “2P” explanations – such as hard work – are often even better. As an attribution, effort is personal (you worked hard) and pervasive (you can work hard on other projects), and although it’s not permanent (you might or might not work hard in the future), it is certainly a factor under your control. Therapists routinely encourage their clients to take credit for their progress in these terms; successful parents do the same for their children. These explanations get ABC cycles rolling, fostering persistence and bold action.<sup>284</sup> In programs for weight loss, smoking cessation, and insomnia, those who take credit for their progress are most successful in maintaining their progress even after the formal program ends.<sup>285</sup>

Over time, if you continue to take credit for your successes, you may experience a “crystallization of contentment.”<sup>286</sup> We saw in the Belief chapter that a crystallization of discontent is a motivating experience that occurs when people recognize that seemingly unrelated dissatisfactions in their lives are due to a larger, more fundamental problem. A crystallization of contentment is a lot more fun. It occurs when you recognize that seemingly isolated successes in your life are the result of a larger, more fundamental success – the fact that you’ve truly taken control of your life, and you’re heading down the path of truly fulfilling your potential. The crystallization of contentment triggers a cascading effect, an avalanche of change; your identity begins to evolve, people begin treating you differently, and greater successes follow.

When negative things happen, avoid “3P” attributions. In fact, using the 3P attributional style for negative events is a prime cause of learned helplessness and depression. It undermines Persistence as well. People who explain setbacks in permanent, pervasive and personal terms tend to give up easily, letting single



lapses snowball into full-blown relapses.<sup>287</sup> Similarly, those who have the greatest difficulty in recovering from psychiatric breakdowns are those who make 3P attributions for the negative events that preceded their breakdowns.<sup>288</sup> Instead, focus on explanations that are external (non-personal), temporary (non-permanent) and/or focused (non-pervasive). If a project you are managing goes poorly, obviously you want to consider the situation objectively and learn from it (more about the importance of learning from negative events in the next chapter). But over time and across projects, you will tend to be psychologically healthier if you focus on explanations that are external (I wasn't given the resources I needed), temporary (I didn't work as hard as I could have, but I'll work harder next time), and/or focused (I may not be the best project manager, but I'm still a talented person with a lot to offer in other ways).

Obviously you shouldn't deny responsibility for events that are clearly your fault, and you must believe your attributions to derive psychological benefits from them. But the fact is you'll be happier and more persistent if you don't beat yourself up for every failure, and take some credit for your successes. Managing your attributions takes time and practice, so don't expect immediate effects, but over time, this is a very powerful tool for Persistence.

There's an important caveat to the principles outlined here: Tone down or moderate your explanations when you make them publicly. People who publicly take too much credit for success are viewed as braggarts, whereas those who publicly deny too much responsibility for failures are viewed as slick or untrustworthy. If you are a manager, and you're asked to explain publicly the successes or failures of your group, reverse the normal attributional pattern: give credit for success to others, and personally accept the blame for failure (but be sure that your explanation for failure emphasizes how performance can be improved next time).

### **Persistence Promoter #3: Surround Yourself With Excellence**

Humans are social animals, and the people around you are among the most potent influences on your successes and failures. Your popularity *in the third grade* is a better predictor of your mental health functioning at age 18 than just about anything else, including your IQ, academic record, and scores on psychological tests.<sup>289</sup> Among adults, social support is one of the most powerful influences on physical and psychological health. For virtually every cause of death, from heart disease and cancer to accidents and suicide, those with

significant social support (for example, are married or have close friends) have lower death rates and are less at risk than those who are socially isolated.<sup>290</sup> Similarly, losing social support – as happens when interpersonal ties are broken through divorce, death of a spouse or losing a job – leads to lower immunity and increased mortality. Social support doesn't just “predict” good health; it has a causal effect, even after controlling for pre-existing physical conditions, income, age, education, smoking, drinking, exercise, blood pressure, cholesterol, access to health services, and satisfaction with life. In terms of magnitude, the beneficial effect of social support on health is comparable to the negative effects of cigarette smoking, obesity and lack of exercise. “Social support” even works among animals; being around members of the same species helps rats and goats avoid ulcers when subjected to stress.

Obviously, better health facilitates Persistence, but social support has more direct effects on Persistence as well. Supportive friends and family encourage progress toward goals, providing advice and emotional comfort after setbacks; they also encourage a wide range of pro-active “self-care” behaviors that facilitate progress and Persistence, including exercising more, eating better, and obtaining preventative medical care. Social support also has a “buffering,” minimizing effect on stress, and stress is a prime cause of goal abandonment. These pathways of psychological influence combine to make social support one of the most potent drivers of Persistence. Those with social support persist more vigorously and successfully in response to life's hardest challenges; they more effectively kick addictions, maintain weight loss, stick to exercise programs, grieve lost loved ones, and make a variety of beneficial life changes.<sup>291</sup>

Social support also contributes to success because the expectations others have of you have a way of coming true. We saw in the Belief chapter that expectations for yourself can morph into reality, not by some mystical process, but via self-fulfilling prophecies. The expectations of others can create their own realities in a similar way. Literally hundreds of studies have documented this effect.<sup>292</sup> If teachers are led to believe their students are about to bloom intellectually, then those students do in fact go on to have better grades. Why? Because teachers with higher expectations of their students spend more time with them, set more challenging goals for them, are more encouraging, and so on. It even works with animals. If scientists are led to believe that laboratory rats have been bred to be highly intelligent, then those rats do in fact go on to run mazes more quickly because the researchers handle them more often, provide more stimulating environments, etc. Fortunately, Vision, Strategy and Belief have “stacked the deck” in your favor, making it more likely that others will have positive

expectations of you. For example, compared to avoidance goals, approach goals are more supported by others, and are considered more desirable, more attainable, and more associated with success.<sup>293</sup>

The good news: seeking supportive relationships is not only a highly effective tool for enhancing persistence, it is one of the most commonly used techniques for change and growth.<sup>294</sup> And it's relatively easy to put into action, using any or all of the following six techniques...

- *Start building a “web of support.”* Simply asking for help is a start. Social support need not involve constant displays of encouragement; instead, the more important factor is minimizing negative comments, or at least maintaining a reasonable proportion of supportive versus negative comments and actions.<sup>295</sup>
- *Bring people into your Vision.* Asking for help is good, but better results come from actively involving others in your Vision and Strategy. Those who are most satisfied with life tend to set goals and initiate projects with others, whereas those who set goals and work toward them in isolation tend to be less satisfied with their lives.<sup>296</sup> A working relationship with a skilled partner is more beneficial than simply being around someone who offers uniform encouragement, in the same way that motivation without a specific Strategy does little to boost performance. Merely having a supportive spouse doesn't aid weight loss, but if the spouse is given training in the kinds of techniques highlighted in this book – measuring progress toward SCAMPI goals, rewarding productive behaviors, and so on – then weight loss is significantly greater.<sup>297</sup> Similarly, problem drinking can be reduced if spouses of alcoholics are trained, not just in giving general support, but in stopping “enabling” behaviors such as reinforcing drinking or protecting their spouses from the negative consequences of their drinking.<sup>298</sup>
- *Create a Dream Team.* Creating a Dream Team or Mastermind Group means going a step beyond surrounding yourself with “supportive” people. It means surrounding yourself with excellence. It means identifying and regularly interacting with “peer role models” – people of integrity with similar ambitions who will encourage and reward your success. Too often people are resentful about the success of others; such people are not good Dream Team candidates. Your Dream Team might meet weekly or monthly, sharing resources and encouraging one another. Set SCAMPI goals in one meeting, and report on your progress during the next. It works. Among

artists, scientists and inventors, those with the most professional contacts in their fields are more productive and judged as greater talents by history.<sup>299</sup> Roger Bannister, the first man to run a four-minute mile, trained using a variation of the Dream Team idea. He used what he called “rabbits” – different friends who paced him for different miles. Running with just one friend for all four miles offered little challenge, but by having different friends pace him for different miles, he structured his social environment to push him and maximize his performance. Ask yourself how you can do the same. Who can be the rabbits in your life?

- *Know when to be alone.* When sad or depressed, many people instinctively withdraw from others, and the resulting isolation can intensify those negative emotions.<sup>300</sup> It’s a natural reaction that you should be aware of, and avoid when possible. But if you are highly stressed on a habitual basis, try “unwinding” alone before seeking social support. People with stressful jobs, for example, have better family relationships if they spend time alone “decompressing” after work rather going straight home.<sup>301</sup>
- *Ask yourself if you need to fire some “friends.”* Just as supportive people bring out the best in you, negative or conflict-prone people can have the opposite effect. Those who live with depressed people, for example, tend to become depressed themselves.<sup>302</sup> Upon leaving drug rehabilitation centers, people are routinely told not to socialize with their old drug-using friends; similarly, those who successfully battle alcohol abuse are in fact likely to have changed their friends, whereas not changing friends is a risk factor for relapsing.<sup>303</sup> Of course, I’m not suggesting that you “fire friends” cavalierly. If you have “friends” who chronically affect your life in negative ways, you should obviously try helping them first. But people don’t change unless they want to, and addicts often insist they don’t need or want to change. There are times when it’s in your best interest to fire some “friends,” keeping in mind that they aren’t really friends at all.

#### **Persistence Promoter #4: Reshape Your Physical Environment**

Reshaping your *social* environment is a powerful and commonly-used technique for enhancing persistence; reshaping your *physical* environment can be just as powerful, but is frequently overlooked.<sup>304</sup> Laboratory rats reared in enriched environments (e.g., lots of ramps and ladders for climbing) have heavier, more complex brains than those reared alone in barren cages (“solitary

confinement”).<sup>305</sup> Humans, of course, are not rats, but it is clear that stimulating environments benefit people as well.

- *Do a “cue purge.”* Negative ABC cycles are often triggered by environmental cues. People trying to quit smoking, for example, are often lured back into their habit by tempting cues like cigarettes, ashtrays, lighters, bars, meals, or even sex – anything they previously associated with smoking.<sup>306</sup> Mahatma Gandhi reportedly demonstrated his ability to resist tempting cues by sleeping next to attractive young followers yet maintaining his chastity.<sup>307</sup> Few people have the willpower of the Mahatma, so I’d recommend eliminating tempting cues from your environment, a Persistence-enhancing process psychologists sometimes call *situational management* or *stimulus control*. Those who successfully battle alcohol addiction tend to get rid of all the alcohol in their homes, avoid former drinking places, and change their daily routine to avoid temptations.<sup>308</sup> During the Vietnam War, about half of all American soldiers tried heroin or opium, and about 20% were regular users; upon returning home, the vast majority kicked the habit relatively quickly, thanks to environmental changes and the elimination of drug-related cues.<sup>309</sup> About half of all “broken diets” are due to tempting cues.<sup>310</sup> Indeed, one of the reasons that success rates for losing weight are lower than those for quitting drugs or alcohol is that, because everyone has to eat, it is impossible to remove all food-related cues and temptations from the environment. If you’re mired in very destructive ABC cycles, consider moving to a different part of the country for a massive change in physical and social environments; those successful in making life changes are significantly more likely to have moved than those who attempt life changes but fail.<sup>311</sup>
- *Create a motivating environment.* After purging your environment of cues that might trigger negative ABC cycles, it becomes time to “accentuate the positive.” Restructure your physical environment so that it nurtures the positive ABC cycles you are trying to create. Post your goals where you can see them, and consider adding photos to create a “Vision collage” with more emotional impact. If accomplishing your goals requires breaking long-standing habits, then alter elements of your physical environment to bring change in your life more generally. Rearrange the furniture. Change your daily routine. Make success easy. Think *alignment*: How can you align your physical environment with your ambitions? Attendance at AA-type meetings can be predicted by how far people have to travel to get to the meetings.<sup>312</sup> You may not be an alcoholic, but it is worthwhile to ask

yourself how you can make the resources you need for success more easily accessible.

## **Persistence Promoter #5: Leverage the Power of Commitment**

People who are highly committed to their goals work harder and persist more vigorously after setbacks. How can you get more committed? The Strategy chapter documented that putting goals into writing enhances commitment. Now take it further with these two techniques...

- *Go public.* Publicly expressing your goals is an infrequently-used but powerful technique proven to lead to stronger commitment and better performance.<sup>313</sup> We all want to appear successful to others, and public expression channels that desire into goal-directed behavior. It also minimizes the “wobble room” that enables you to be satisfied with substandard performance, or give up altogether by denying you ever really set that goal. Public expression has important “internal” consequences as well. When you tell others about your goals, you also end up making more determined statements to yourself,<sup>314</sup> and these more assertive cognitions facilitate Persistence and perpetuate ABC cycles.
- *Get pre-committed.* Author Franz Kafka wrote, “From a certain point onward there is no longer any turning back. That is the point that must be reached.” Pre-commitment means committing yourself in advance to your desired course of action in such a way that when temptations arise, you will have no choice but to go forward. Victor Hugo, author *Les Miserables* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, used pre-commitment to resist being tempted into ABC cycles of distraction and procrastination. He instructed his valet to hide his clothes, forcing Hugo to work naked in his study until the valet returned at the pre-arranged end of the writing session.<sup>315</sup> The mythological character Odysseus used a different approach, tying himself to the mast of his ship so he could listen to the beautiful yet normally suicide-inducing songs of the Sirens without harm; when the urge for suicide took hold, he was safe because he had pre-committed himself to safety. Today you might place your alarm clock on the other side of the room before going to bed, or cut up your credit cards before going shopping. In each case, the principle is the same: make decisions that commit you to a course of action when you feel strong, before temptation arises. A friend of mine procrastinated an important career step: taking exams that would let him

become a Certified Financial Planner. I suggested a form of pre-commitment: sign up for a study course, or even the exams themselves, even before feeling ‘ready.’ Commit first, and get confident later. Ask how you can push yourself past the point of no return, and apply the power of pre-commitment to your goals.

## **Persistence Promoter #6: Reward Success**

Perhaps the most fundamental law in all of psychology is the *law of effect*, which states that actions resulting in rewards are strengthened and likely to recur. We saw earlier the beneficial effects of taking credit for success, and that in and of itself is a kind of reward. Setting up more formal rewards for personal success, known as *contingency management*, is one of the least frequently used techniques for change,<sup>316</sup> but one of the most powerful, particularly when combined with goal-setting.<sup>317</sup> Those who accomplish their goals or successfully make life changes are significantly more likely than others to use some kind of self-reinforcement strategy.<sup>318</sup> It has proven beneficial in aiding weight loss, smoking cessation, writing productivity, kicking addictions, battling depression, boosting self-efficacy, and adhering to prescribed medical regimens.<sup>319</sup>

The process is simple but powerful. Identify your most important goal, and a few rewards that you value, perhaps dinner at a nice restaurant or an afternoon hike. If the goal is relatively modest, then reward yourself for achieving the goal (a “bonus” system). If the goal is more ambitious, identify a key milestone (e.g., making it halfway) or some measure of progress (e.g., ten hours of goal-directed work per week), and reward yourself for that progress (a “piece-rate” system).<sup>320</sup> Writer Jack London committed himself to writing at least 1,000 words a day, and rewarded himself for achieving that goal by drinking in saloons, but if he wrote less than 1,000 words, he didn’t allow himself to drink. Of course, we saw in the Vision chapter that alcohol actually impairs creative work, but you get the idea. In institutional settings such as mental hospitals or homes for the mentally retarded, psychologists often formalize principles of reinforcement by instituting a “token economy.” Patients receive plastic coins or tokens for engaging in appropriate behaviors such as getting up on time, cleaning their rooms, or cooperating with others; they can then “spend” those tokens on rewards like watching TV, taking trips into town, or upgrading to a nicer bedroom.<sup>321</sup> Whatever your system is, just remember that you’ll be more likely to stick with it if you keep it simple.<sup>322</sup>

The most common stumbling block to using self-reward systems is *contract infidelity* – making a self-reward plan, but not sticking to it. To avoid this problem, combine self-rewards with pre-commitment by using the *deposit-and-refund technique*.<sup>323</sup> Suppose you want to lose 10 pounds. Give a good friend \$500, and have him or her return the money at the rate of \$50 per pound lost. Commit to spending the money on something enjoyable. Soon you'll find yourself very focused on your goal, and very persistent in the face of setbacks. There are a lot of natural rewards that come with losing weight, such as looking and feeling better. Unfortunately, those rewards are weeks and months into the future. Pizza, in contrast, can be delivered in 30 minutes or less. For better or worse, we live in an instant gratification society. And therein lies the power of the deposit-and-refund method – it makes instant gratification work for you. Lose just one pound, and you get an immediate reward.

Some have called the deposit-and-refund method a process of making “side bets,”<sup>324</sup> but if you make these bets on your most important goals, then there is nothing “side” about them – they are main bets crucial to your future. This process can work even with small amounts of money,<sup>325</sup> and you'll find it brings other processes into play, such as public commitment and social support. Consider this example from a college student who applied the deposit-and-refund method to his goal of participating more in class: “I gave a good friend five dollars to hold for me. He would give it back to me one dollar at a time after he had checked my records once a week to see if I had spoken up in class according to my goals. Two other friends ... displayed a lot of interest in my self-modification plan, and this put some social pressure on me. They would also compliment me when I reported my results for the week. The use of my friends in my plan was quite effective. They seemed to set off a positive emotional response in me that was very motivating.”<sup>326</sup> Once the ABC cycle is rolling, it takes on a momentum of its own. One study found that weight lost using this process was maintained for a year, even though the self-reward period lasted only a few months.<sup>327</sup>

For even greater effectiveness, combine self-rewards with the Dream Team concept. Each team member deposits money, and each gets money back based on group, not individual, performance. Again using the example of weight loss, suppose you and four friends each want to lose 10 pounds, and you each deposit \$100. Your group, therefore, wants to lose 50 pounds, and has deposited \$500; the payback rate will be \$10 per pound. When the group loses 10 pounds, it gets \$100, to be split equally among the members of the team. Obviously, you should only do this if everyone on the team is committed, and you don't want people who are just “along for the ride.” But the group setting provides social support, and perhaps



even a bit of competitiveness, both of which can be highly motivating. And it works. People using the deposit-and-refund method in groups lose more weight, and keep it off longer, than those using the system individually.<sup>328</sup>

## **Persistence Promoter #7: Avoid Self-Punishment**

In some ways, we live in a society more comfortable with punishments than with rewards. Husbands with obese wives, for example, make 12 times as many critical comments about their wives eating behavior than complementary ones.<sup>329</sup> That's unfortunate, because punishment is far less effective than reward.<sup>330</sup> In fact, people who struggle in making life changes consistently self-reward too little, and self-punish too much.<sup>331</sup> Blaming yourself for failures is a kind of punishment, and we've seen that blame-oriented attributions contribute to depression; depressed people are likely to punish themselves in other ways as well.<sup>332</sup> Binge eaters also fail to do enough "self-nurturing" – they are hard on themselves, and end up being "good" to themselves only by binging.<sup>333</sup>

There are many reasons for avoiding self-punishment as a strategy for boosting Persistence, even beyond its ineffectiveness. It doesn't encourage progress toward SCAMPI goals because punishment can only discourage old behaviors, not encourage new ones. And self-punishment obviously isn't much fun – that's one reason why people don't follow through on about a third of self-change plans that call for self-punishment.<sup>334</sup>

Overall, rewards are more effective than punishment, but if you insist on using self-punishment, here are a few principles to keep in mind.

- Give up money or something you enjoy as opposed to doing something painful or unpleasant.<sup>335</sup> You might try writing checks to political parties that you dislike, and have a friend send them if you do not accomplish your goal.<sup>336</sup>
- Make your impending punishment large enough to be a deterrent. Some personal coaches ask their clients to write them checks for thousands of dollars, and if the clients don't accomplish their goals, the coaches cash the checks and keep the money. The key to this punishment-oriented version of the deposit-and-refund approach is that the checks are large enough to motivate and shape behavior.

- Recognize that success is a process, and setbacks are common. Whatever your self-punishment system, build in ways to forgive yourself for setbacks, and recognize that sometimes things are truly outside of your control. Perhaps build in some loopholes, institute a “three strikes rule,” or start with small punishments that gradually get larger. For example, one therapist used a rather unconventional treatment with a bulimic patient.<sup>337</sup> The patient agreed to pay the therapist one penny the next time she induced vomiting, and to double the penalty with each subsequent occurrence: two cents the second time, four cents the third time, eight cents the fourth time, and so on. It doesn’t seem like much, but after calculating that she would owe thousands of dollars by the 20<sup>th</sup> vomit, she discovered a whole new level of commitment in dealing with her problem. Such “ordeal therapy” works under limited circumstances, but again, you’ll find that self-reward is generally a more effective tool than self-punishment.

### **Persistence Promoter #8: Manage Your Attention**

We saw earlier the importance of managing your attributions. Managing your attention is equally important. Much of the time you want to focus your attention inward, on your Vision, Strategy, and Belief, particularly when planning and preparing for the future. But an inward focus only helps if you have completed the previous steps in the process. Self-focused attention combined with SCAMPI goals enhances performance;<sup>338</sup> without SCAMPI goals, it intensifies anxiety and angst. Self-focused attention coupled with self-efficacy further boosts confidence; without confidence, it intensifies uncertainty and undermines motivation.<sup>339</sup> Test anxiety, for example, is the result of focusing inward when you lack confidence in your test-taking abilities.<sup>340</sup>

If you’re confident in your Vision, Strategy and Belief, then try these half-dozen tools for focusing your attention inward.

- *Visualization.* In addition to building Belief, repeated visualization also has a very focusing effect, heightening your attention on your Vision and Strategy.
- *Keep your ambitions “top of mind.”* People often set goals, only to forget about them amid busy schedules and daily distractions. Over 60% of U. S. workers report having unpredictable daily work routines, and nearly 40% are interrupted six or more times *per hour*.<sup>341</sup> Look for ways to keep your goals

and action plans “top of mind” despite a cramped calendar. Writing them down helps, and posting them where you will see them often helps even more. Use them as the basis of your organizational system; devoting drawers and files to specific goals will keep them top of mind and aid in prioritizing tasks.

- *Start early.* Spend time thinking about your goals, and working toward them, first thing in the morning, before distractions mount. It is easy to begin the day by jumping into your obligations to others, but you’ll find yourself more relaxed, productive and persistent if you begin the day jump-starting your positive ABC cycles.
- *Schedule “ABC islands.”* In the previous chapter, we saw the Belief-building benefits of setting aside periods of time each day to focus on your goals. Building these prescheduled “islands” of ABC activity into your day can boost Persistence as well; it commits you to shutting out distractions and ensures daily progress. Managing by “to do” list tends to be less effective; you can create detailed to do lists, but if you don’t preschedule islands of progress, you’ll find that you have little to cross off your list at the end of the day. To do lists invite you to spend your day “putting out fires” and responding to the agendas of others rather than focusing on ambitions important to you.
- *Add mirrors.* OK, this idea might seem a little “out there.” But research confirms that looking in a mirror heightens your self-awareness – that is, your focus on internal standards, principles and goals. When asked to complete a test in a very short time period, 70% of college students worked beyond the time limit (a mild form of cheating). Taking the test in front of a mirror, which focuses attention internally on their values and sense of honesty, caused the cheating rate to drop to just 7%.<sup>342</sup>
- *Just say no.* Alcohol has the opposite effect of mirrors – it reduces self-awareness,<sup>343</sup> focusing your attention on the immediate environment rather than on goals and values. Alcohol lessens your internal sense of what behaviors are appropriate; it also makes you less aware of, and less concerned about, past behaviors and the good or bad things that resulted from them.<sup>344</sup> It should come as no surprise that these attentional effects of alcohol contribute to poor Persistence and weak progress toward goals.<sup>345</sup>

Of course, focusing inward isn't always good. Excessive self-focus can contribute to depression, sadness and other negative emotions.<sup>346</sup> After a failure or setback, we all get a little sad and focus internally. But non-depressed people redirect their attention outward with temporary distractions, and then move to a problem solving approach, short-circuiting negative ABC cycles; depressed people, in contrast, maintain their inward focus, inadvertently extending their negative ABC cycles.<sup>347</sup> So when negative ABC cycles take hold, as we saw in the Belief chapter, focusing outward or distracting yourself is generally a better strategy. Experienced joggers enjoy the process of running, and gain benefit from focusing inward, paying careful attention to body signals such as breathing, fatigue, and their own self-talk. Novice runners, however, must contend with boredom, soreness and low self-efficacy; they perform better and stick with running longer if they use distracting strategies such as focusing attention on music or non-running related thoughts.<sup>348</sup> Similarly, novice runners do better if they run outdoors, where they can be distracted by scenery, rather than running on an indoor track.<sup>349</sup> Distraction is also a good strategy if you are struggling with temptation. At the very least, focus your attention on the least appealing aspect of what tempts you. If you are trying to resist alcohol or drugs, then focus on memories of hangovers or disturbing mental images of addicts.<sup>350</sup> People faithful to their spouses do this naturally, focusing their attention on the unattractive features of otherwise attractive, potentially tempting people.<sup>351</sup>

If focusing inward is good for planning, and distraction is good while mired in negative ABC cycles, then how should you manage your attention when in a positive ABC cycle? Surprisingly enough, you want to stop thinking altogether. When competitive athletes describe their greatest moment, 95% say they weren't thinking about their performance, and a similar number say their attention narrowed so completely that they lost their sense of self-consciousness and became totally immersed in the activity.<sup>352</sup> Consider these experiences...

- A cyclist: "I am a vehicle for this. I initiate the performance and then the experience takes over."
- A lacrosse player: "It is a world within a world ... focused right here. I am not aware of the external. My concentration was so great I didn't think of anything else."
- A skier: "I was really blending into the snow, the mountain... I wasn't different from the hill."

- A football player: “It was effortless for me. I hit him and he just flew. Physically, I didn’t put as much as usual into it.”

This combination of clear focus, intense involvement and loss of self-attention isn’t limited to sports – it accompanies peak performance in many areas of life.<sup>353</sup> Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls it *flow*. Flow is the experience of being totally immersed in something, when thought and action merge, time slows, and the boundaries between self and environment seem to blur. Flow occurs when the challenges you face are matched by the skills you possess; it lies in the balance between stress and boredom, between being overwhelmed and being disengaged. Happiness pervades the moment, as happiness and flow are both about progress toward valued goals rather than accomplishing them (Csikszentmihalyi: “Climbers do not climb to get to the top but get to the top so that they can climb; chess players do not play to win but try to win so that they can play.”<sup>354</sup>). Flow is created by a combination of factors familiar from previous steps: clear goals, a do-able strategy for accomplishing them, unambiguous feedback about progress, self-confidence, and persistent progress. And, of course, you have to stop thinking. *Resource recommendation:* For more on creating flow in your daily life, read Csikszentmihalyi’s *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, or his shorter and more practical, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*.

The opposite of flow is excessive self-attention while trying to perform. As we’ve seen, this is the essence of test anxiety – anxious people who doubt their test-taking abilities begin focusing inward, amplifying their anxiety. Test anxiety sufferers trained to “stop thinking” – that is, direct their attention away from themselves, and focus directly on the task – perform better.<sup>355</sup> Similarly, elite athletes who use a lot of self-talk (verbal statements to themselves) during preparation perform better than those who don’t,<sup>356</sup> but they “quiet” that self-talk when performing; this quieting balances the highly verbal left hemisphere of the brain with the non-verbal right hemisphere that controls balance and coordination, enhancing performance. The sports equivalent of test anxiety is choking under pressure. Intense pressure can heighten self-awareness, hampering the ability to “stop thinking,” and this self-consciousness can interfere with the performance of highly practiced, well-learned behaviors.<sup>357</sup>

## **Persistence Promoter #9: Exercise**

It should come as no surprise that exercise is one of the best predictors of long-term weight loss. But it also facilitates Persistence and progress in many aspects of life. It helps in smoking cessation; among smokers who become competitive runners (e.g., running in 10K races), about 80% give up smoking.<sup>358</sup> Exercise helps in battling alcohol and drug addictions, particularly if it is substituted for an end-of-day cocktail or drug session.<sup>359</sup> It moderates depression (at least in the short-term), minimizes the impact of stress on health, facilitates coping with chronic illnesses, reduces anxiety and improves self-efficacy.<sup>360</sup> It even enhances job performance<sup>361</sup> and financial achievement; about 60% of millionaires exercise regularly to reduce their fears and worries, while 50% use the mental toughness they developed in sports.<sup>362</sup>

For our purposes, the key finding is that exercise and participation in sports enhance Persistence, resilience and determination among both kids and adults.<sup>363</sup> If you're not already exercising, start (but seek a doctor's input before beginning an exercise regimen). As little as a 10-minute walk can boost energy levels and reduce stress for hours.<sup>364</sup> If you are already exercising, do more. The irony is that exercise only boosts Persistence in life if you are persistent about exercise – if you stop exercising, its benefits fade away.

## **Persistence Promoter #10: Have a Strategy for Setbacks**

There's an old military saying: "A warrior prays for peace but prepares for war." Use that philosophy for thinking about progress toward goals – expect success, but at the same time, have a strategy for dealing with setbacks. It's like a fire drill<sup>365</sup> – you prepare for fires even though they are rare and you do everything possible to prevent them. Unfortunately, setbacks are more common than fires. Success is a dynamic process that ebbs and flows. One of the most popular psychological models of how people change is actually circular in nature, documenting how people typically move through cycles of making decisions, making progress, suffering setbacks, and then going back to re-evaluate and refine their initial decisions.<sup>366</sup> Smokers who quit permanently, for example, typically go through this process several times before quitting permanently.<sup>367</sup> Having a strategy for setbacks minimizes their negative effects, and speeds up the cycle. Among smokers who relapse but go on to overcome it, virtually all had planned in advance for a slip or two; among those who let a single lapse snowball into a full-blown return to smoking, only about half had a plan.<sup>368</sup> Our plan will focus on

three objectives: minimizing the frequency of setbacks, preventing minor lapses from snowballing into full-blown setbacks, and learning from setbacks when they occur.

Setbacks can be made less frequent by using some of the Persistence tools described above, such as reshaping your physical or social environment and removing tempting cues that might trigger a reversion back to your old ABC cycle. But environmental cues tend to trigger temporary setbacks and isolated slips rather than full-blown relapses.<sup>369</sup> Instead, the primary drivers of major setbacks are stress and negative emotions. You try to make a change in your life, something happens that makes you sad or stressed, and you fall back into old habits. We've all done it. A lot. About half of all failures to quit smoking are driven by negative emotional states such as boredom, frustration, anger, anxiety and depression;<sup>370</sup> in contrast, only about 5% are attributable directly to physical withdrawal symptoms.<sup>371</sup> Negative emotional states don't necessarily kill motivation, drive goal abandonment, or create some wildly irrational urge to punish yourself through self-destructive behavior. Instead, they create a kind of myopia, focusing you on the immediate environment instead of on longer-term goals, and undermine your sense of self-efficacy, spurring the misguided belief that you can't deal with the upsetting event without reverting to your old ABC cycle.<sup>372</sup>

As the old saying goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and certainly preventing stress and negative emotions is ideal. But it's obviously unrealistic to expect that you can eliminate them forever, so the key becomes dealing with them once they occur. Among those who lose weight and keep it off, virtually none eat when getting upset; however, of those who lose weight and regain it, about 80% eat in response to stress.<sup>373</sup> Try creating a "stress response plan" by filling in the blank: "When I feel stressed or upset, I will deal with it productively by \_\_\_\_\_." Identify two or three options that work for you. You might exercise, meditate, call a friend for support, distract yourself with immersive experiences like going to a movie, and so on.

Here are two more tools for pre-empting setbacks before they get started:

- *Surf.* Learn to "surf" unproductive urges or tempting feelings.<sup>374</sup> Just like a surfer rides an ocean wave, you can ride your temptation: feel the urge come upon you and peak, while you ride it out and let it pass. Try to experience it as an impartial observer. In the Belief chapter, we saw how the monologue in your head is not "you;" you are the listener who can observe thoughts come and go, without spinning them into stories and ABC cycles. The same

goes for counter-productive urges and temptations; you can observe them, focusing on how they feel in the moment rather than on the negative ABC cycles that might follow, and then let them pass. If you are trying to lose weight and feel tempted by fattening food, notice your immediate thoughts and emotions, rather than focusing on how sinfully good certain foods would taste; then let the temptation pass, and return to focusing on your future goals.

- *Pause.* Learn to pause between the urge and the activity. Over time, gradually lengthen the pause. Cues and negative emotions can trigger ABC cycles quickly, almost automatically; pausing for even a minute or two allows the urge to pass, and gives you time to focus on your goals. If you are trying to quit smoking, for example, gradually increase the pauses between the urge to smoke and the act of lighting up.<sup>375</sup> If you are really struggling, commit yourself to a writing assignment during your pause, focusing on whether the actions you are considering will take you closer to your Vision, or farther away.

Setbacks are inevitable, no matter how diligently you pause, surf, and enact your stress reduction plan. The next element of an effective strategy for setbacks is minimizing the impact of setbacks when they do occur. For this, we'll use *psychological stop losses*. Stock traders often use the stop loss concept to minimize their downside risk. For example, if you buy a stock for \$40 per share, you might decide to sell if it ever drops below \$36. By instituting this stop loss, you can insure that you will lose no more than 10% of your money on this investment. Stop losses form the basis of a classic investment strategy: minimize your losses, and let your winners run. To prevent a single reversion to your old ABC cycle from snowballing into a major setback, try one of these psychological stop loss techniques:

- *Pause again.* We've seen that pausing after temptation, but before giving in to it, can prevent setbacks and negative ABC cycles. Pausing is also helpful after a minor slip, and can prevent a negative ABC cycle from gaining momentum. A two-minute pause in the middle of meals, for example, is an effective weight loss tool.<sup>376</sup> In this case, pausing not only provides time to step back and focus on long-term, but it also allows eaters time to "feel" they are full.
- *Review your Strategy.* Looking at your goals and action plans will put your setback in context. You have not broken a resolution. You have not



committed yourself to “never again do X,” so there is no need to say “what the hell” and give up completely. Instead, you’ve set SCAMPI goals and had one day of weak progress, which can be overcome with stronger progress tomorrow. Similarly, your action plan contained something you could do each day; maybe you didn’t do it today, but you can do it tomorrow.

- *Manage your attributions.* Attributing setbacks to external and easily changed causes not only wards off depression in the long-term, it also prevents snowballing in the short-term. People who view setbacks as temporary obstacles that can be overcome are likely to bounce back. But those who attribute setbacks to permanent, personal or pervasive causes (such as personal weakness or lack of willpower) are most likely to “fall off the wagon” completely after a single lapse.<sup>377</sup> This isn’t to say that you should deny all responsibility for your setback, but rather that you’ll have more long-term success if you focus on what you can change and don’t beat yourself up over minor failures.

The final step in dealing with setbacks is learning from them. Believe it or not, setbacks can actually have some benefits. In rigorous weight-loss programs, for example, people who struggle a bit at first tend to have more long-term success than those who initially find it easy.<sup>378</sup> Setbacks can have a strengthening, inoculating effect that prevents over-confidence. They also trigger more thinking about the goal,<sup>379</sup> and often result in pursuing the goal with newfound vigor. But perhaps the greatest benefits of setbacks derive from the learning opportunities they present. You can learn what tempts you, what triggers your negative ABC cycles, and what doesn’t work in terms of avoiding them. Ask yourself what can be learned from your setback, and consider how you can apply that learning for greater success in the future.

These principles underlying an effective strategy for setbacks may be easy to remember now, but after a setback you may experience “myopia” that focuses you on your immediate disappointment. To stay focused on your strategy, try carrying a *reminder card* to review after a setback. Here’s an example from a study of smoking cessation by Alan Marlatt, a pioneer in understanding addiction and relapse; it’s a nice combination of snowball prevention via pausing, pre-empting negative emotions, managing attributions, and most importantly, learning. “A slip is not all that unusual. It does not mean that you have failed or that you have lost control over your behavior. You will probably feel guilty about doing what you have done, and will blame yourself for having slipped. This feeling is to be

expected; it is part of what we call the Abstinence Violation [snowball] Effect. There is no reason why you have to give in to this feeling and continue to smoke. The feeling will pass in time. Look upon the slip as a learning experience. What were the elements of the high-risk situation which led to the slip? What coping response could you have used to get around the situation? Remember the old saying: One swallow doesn't make a summer. Well, one slip doesn't make a relapse, either. Just because you slipped once does not mean that you are a failure, that you have no willpower, or that you are a hopeless addict. Look upon the slip as a single, independent event, something which can be avoided in the future with an alternative coping response."<sup>380</sup>

Want to learn more about the power of learning? First take a moment to see how Dick and Jane are doing, and then simply turn to the next chapter...

### **A Persistence Example: See Dick and Jane Try To Keep On Keepin' On**

Jane's Vision, SCAMPI goals, and blossoming sense of Belief form a strong foundation for Persistence, and those alone greatly increase her chances of rebounding from a setback. But she doesn't stop there – she aggressively uses several additional Persistence tools.

Learning to challenge her destructive automatic negative thoughts was good practice for managing her attributions (Persistence Promoter #2). Although it seems a bit “forced” and artificial at first, she soon finds it both natural and satisfying to make 3P (personal, permanent and pervasive) attributions for positive outcomes, and to avoid those attributions for negative outcomes. When she makes good progress toward her goals, she takes credit for that success and praises herself for her hard work. When she goes several days without exercising on a business trip, she avoids 3P attributions by placing blame on the schedule-imbalancing rigors of the trip. She reminds herself that it only amounts to a few days of weak progress, and she can get back on track as soon as she returns home.

She began re-shaping her physical environment (#4) when she was formulating her Strategy by placing her goals and adventure travel brochures on her coffee table (which also helps focus her attention on her Vision; #8); she continues that process now by doing a cue purge and removing all unhealthy foods from her home. She's always had a supportive family, but now sets herself up for even more social support by forming a Dream Team of three friends (#3). Together they use the deposit-and-refund method to lose weight (#6). Each person deposits

\$1,000. That may seem like a lot, but they decide the process will be most powerful if they use the money for a group trip to Europe, so it seems worth the investment. The deposit-and-refund technique also ensures that she publicly commits to her goals (#5) in front of her friends. She takes the notion of commitment one step further and uses pre-commitment when she hires a personal trainer before she feels ready for that kind of personalized, professional advice.

Dick's weak foundation for personal change finally comes back to haunt him. His weak Vision, resolutions and shaky Belief in himself leave him vulnerable to the snowball effect, which hits with full force when he has a single slice of pizza. With his no pizza resolution broken, and year-end weight loss goal too far in the future to be motivating, Dick says "what the hell" and gorges himself on an entire pizza. Because he viewed success in all-or-none terms, he had formulated no strategy for setbacks (#10) – he doesn't surf the urges, or pause when the urge strikes. He then compounds the problem by making a 3P attribution for his slip, blaming it on his own weakness and lack of willpower. He also fails to think like a genius (#1), making no effort to become more optimistic, thinking in inflexible terms, and not looking to mentors or role models in his efforts to change his life.

He tries to get "back on the wagon" and uses a self-punishment (#7) technique to strengthen his resolve. He's had a lot of practice punishing himself, given his tendency to deny himself things he enjoys and beat himself up over minor setbacks, but that doesn't make it an effective strategy. He writes a check for \$100 to a political party he hates, and gives it to a friend, asking her to send it if he has another pizza. Unfortunately, that amount of money is too small to motivate his behavior. He compounds his weak self-punishment strategy by drinking alcohol to lessen his focus on his negative ABC cycles, but that also focuses him on immediate stimuli rather than his goals and ambitions (#8), further setting himself up for failure.

Positive Psychology and Success Science vs. Self-Help Snake Oil

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