

Why quitting may be good for you

Are there times when it is better to simply give up? Psychologists have been exploring this question, and more specifically a possible link between tenacity and both physical and mental health.

It would seem that persistence would be tonic over the long haul; hanging tough should increase the odds that you'll succeed, and personal success is closely linked to well-being. But what if the goal is extremely unlikely? When does an admirable trait like perseverance start to look more like beating your head against the wall?

To test this in the laboratory, psychologists Gregory Miller and Carsten Wrosch developed a psychological instrument that can reliably distinguish between people who when faced with a difficult goal either persist or let go of it. In a series of experiments, the psychologists exhaustively studied these two personality types to see how healthy and well adjusted they are.

In their most recent study, published in the September issue of Psychological Science, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, the psychologists followed teenagers for a full year. Over that time, individuals who did not persist obtaining hard to reach goals had much lower levels of a protein called CRP, an indicator of bodily inflammation. Inflammation has recently been linked to several serious diseases, including diabetes and heart disease, suggesting that healthy but overly tenacious teens may already be on the road toward chronic illness later in life.

Accordingly, Miller and Wrosch suggest it may be more prudent to cut one's losses in the face of an insurmountable obstacle. "When people are faced with situations in which they cannot realize a key life goal, the most adaptive response for physical and mental health may be to disengage from this goal," write the authors.

But all is not lost for go-getters. The psychologists also sorted both groups by their willingness to re-engage and set new goals after they gave up on something important. While they did not find a direct link between re-engagement and physical health, they did find that people who readily jumped back into life had a greater sense of purpose and mastery and were less likely to ruminate about the past. Setting these new goals appears to buffer the emotional consequences of failure, especially for those who have the hardest time letting go.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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