Sarah Whitlock, of Huntsville, Texas, has a personal understanding of grit due to circumstances she faced in high school.

“I have personally had to be mentally tough in several areas of my life,” Whitlock said. “School alone was mentally challenging and then my need to be successful compounded that stress. My junior year of high school, my dad became very ill, and we found out he had Amyloidosis, a cousin to blood cancer.”

Whitlock said that her relationship with her father shifted in high school, but she is thankful of the woman she has become through it.

“We bickered and argued all the time but came to find out it’s because we were so similar. He raised me with his sarcasm and independence that I now really appreciate.”

The transition from high school to college is a big step in a person’s life, and Whitlock is thankful for the lesson her father taught her.

“My dad taught me how to think for myself, work around my house, build things, and take care of myself.”

Kent Hance, lawyer, politician, and Chancellor Emeritus of Texas Tech University said that mental toughness comes in part from how one is raised.

“Part of it comes from your family and growing up but part of it comes from you,” Hance said. “Just telling yourself ‘I am not going to be beat down on this. I'm not going to let this get after me I am not going to let this occupy my thoughts.’”

Whitlock exemplifies this through her experience with her father.

“I recently found out that when describing me, he would always say that he wasn’t worried about me in the world because I knew how to take care of myself and wouldn’t put up with people treating me less than I deserved.”

Melba Benson, Ph.D. coach, mediator, consultant, and mental toughness expert, said that mental toughness is grown through everyday experiences.

“I have faced greater and greater challenges, just as you will. The skills that I have learned to develop mental toughness and grit have served me well throughout my life and I still must work on it every day.”

When asked what mental toughness meant to her, Whitlock defined it as perseverance even during conditions that make it seem like the easiest option is to give up.

According to the American Psychological Association, grit entails working strenuously to overcome challenges and maintaining effort and interest over time despite failures, adversities, and plateaus in progress.

Benson defined mental toughness and grit like Whitlock.

“Someone who is mentally tough can stick with something when the going gets tough. In Atomic Habits, by James Clear, he points out that mental toughness, or grit, as it is sometimes called, requires flexibility and adaptability and that your mood should not be dependent on your condition.”

Whitlock’s father fought hard to stay with his daughters but passed away in March 2022. Mental toughness and grit were key factors in helping Whitlock persevere through that period in her life.

“I had so many regrets of things I didn’t say or didn’t do, and I almost drowned in that grief,” Whitlock said. “I decided that giving up may look easy but grit and mental strength were what was really going to help me through that time.”

Claire B. Willis is a clinical social worker who has worked in the fields of oncology and bereavement for more than 20 years. She said that grief is vital to moving towards a more fulfilling life.

“We can think of grief as a sacred passage. We are torn from the life we knew before. We are not who we were, and we are not yet who we will become,” Willis said. “Like everything else, we are changing. This experience, profoundly different for each of us, is confusing, agonizing, and potentially life transforming.”

As Whitlock prepares to start her college career, she is taking the lessons she learned through this time and creating a positive outlook.

“College will be a new challenge for me. I grew up in a small school where I knew all the same teachers and students since I was 6 years old. College is a new start but also a scary one.”

Hance says that having a positive attitude to new things is a sign of mental toughness.

““No matter how thin a coin may be, it'll have two sides.”

Whitlock has this mentality when describing her college career.

“The size, the structure, the possibilities are exciting but very different from what I am used to. I am sure grit and mental toughness will play a big part in my college life as I navigate through the new part of my life.”

Lydia Shivers, a senior nursing major at Texas Tech from Montgomery, Texas, said that she found strength in numbers her freshman year to increase her mental toughness.

“I really thrive when I know that I am not the only person struggling with something,” Shivers said. “For mental toughness, I found that it really helped me to find friends that were holding me accountable in a class or be struggling through something.”

Benson said relationships, especially in college, make a big impact in growing mental toughness and working through tough times.

“The people that we run around with and surround ourselves with have a tremendous impact on our lives. Even when something goes wrong, choose to stay positive. The more traumatic the situation, the more difficult that is and being able to pick ourselves up after setbacks.”

“Being able to talk to somebody about whatever you are struggling with is great,” Shivers said. “When I find out that someone else is struggling with it, but they were also able find ways to overcome it, it encourages me to not just give up and that was like really a game changer for my freshman year.”

According to an article on grit and peer relationships, the establishment of healthy relations with peers becomes particularly critical as early adolescents experience strong desires for personal validation through interpersonal intimacy.

Renee Underwood, chief development officer, Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth Advancement Foundation, said that friendships build up mental toughness by acting as soundboards.

“They are literally just feeding things back to you. So much of it is giving you advice,” Underwood said. “They are helping you verbalize and get what needs to be said out loud and recognize traits you may or may not have where you need to build them.”

Shivers said that her friends pushed her to pursue the degree she truly wanted.

“I had to make up my mind that if I wanted to pursue nursing, I was going to have to struggle in those classes and be OK with struggling in those classes,” Shivers said.

“For me I have been able to get through classes like that because I know the pain is just temporary and I know I'm not going to be in a certain class forever. It makes it easier to be in pain and I have to really work through that.”

Shivers said that purposefully doing the hard things shows grit.

“I have to learn that ultimately, I will come out stronger in the end, so even though it's hard and even though it's mentally hard, I know it's doable and I know that I'm able. I'm fully capable of passing that class.”

Hance said that one needs to have grit to be successful in life after college.

“There is so much out there to do and that you need to be excited. You are going to have a good life and are going to do a lot of great things. You just got to be aggressive and stay after it.”

Whitlock thanks her father for giving her the tools she needs to have mental toughness and to be successful in life.

“I remember how he dragged me outside with him as a kid to learn woodworking, or mow the grass, or fix a fence. A good portion of my grit and determination came from my dad and that’s how I continue to remember and honor him.”

Sidebar:

Benson has three things that she encourages new college students to keep in mind when building mental toughness: Show up to class every day, Be excellent every day, and do not make excuses.

“It is the formulation of these simple habits that we go through every day that are going to make us who we are now,” Benson said.

“Do not just let yourself barely get by but be excellent and keep your eye on the prize of getting a college degree. Your professors have probably heard every excuse in the book and people who are mentally tough don't offer excuses.”

Benson reflects on her time as a college student and the challenges she endured.

“I will never forget what it was like to be a student and especially on my PhD and I finally realized that this is an endurance contest. It is just up to me to keep going every day and doing all these things.”

Service Journalism:

A scholarly journal found that grit in college students can be grown, just like any other skill.

Here are some tips:

* + Turn the problem into a picture or puzzle.
  + Start with smaller problems they can more easily solve and help them get some quick wins.
  + Share the "why" before the "what." We often fail to inspire kids because we don't share the relevance of the problem.
  + When possible, place students in communities to work together. Students learn best in communities where they can solve problems in cooperation with peers. They often give up when they feel alone and inferior.
  + Make it a game or competition.
  + Reward hard work and delayed gratification. What gets rewarded gets repeated. Affirm hard work and reward completion in the end.

Author/Source Page

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