



Virtues Are Like Vitamins, by Adam Grant

Virtues can be a little bit like vitamins. Vitamins are essential for health. But what if you get more than your body needs? If you take too much Vitamin C, it won't hurt you. If you overdose on Vitamin D, though, it can do serious harm: you could wind up with kidney problems.

A great philosopher named Aristotle thought virtues were like Vitamin D. Too little of a virtue is bad, but so is too much. He believed that every virtue lies between vices of deficiency and excess. Too little humor is dry; too much is silly. Too little pride makes us meek; too much breeds narcissism. Too much self-restraint leaves you doing homework while your friends are tailgating. Too little self-restraint means you'll really regret eating that fourth [ice-cream].

Consider generosity. I'm a huge fan of generosity. I've spent my whole career studying it and I wrote an entire book about how it can drive not only our happiness but also our success. I found that in the long run, givers tend to outperform takers. But there's such a thing as being too generous. It's a recipe for burnout. Take teachers. Education is about helping students, so we love teachers who are selfless. But in our research Reb Rebele and I found that the most selfless teachers ended up being the least engaged in the classroom—and their students did the worst on standardized achievement tests.

A second beloved virtue is authenticity. "Be true to yourself" is a core theme in more than half of commencement speeches. I wouldn't encourage you to be false to yourself. Of course you should be genuine. But if authenticity is the value you prize most in life, there's a danger that you'll stunt your own development. To be authentic, you need to be crystal clear about your identity and values. You need to know exactly who you are. And that can tether you to a fixed anchor, closing the door to growth.

A third popular virtue is grit. "Never give up" appears in more than four of every ten graduation speeches. Persistence is one of the most important forces in success and happiness. But that's only half the story. For every J.K. Rowling and Walt Disney and Lennon and McCartney, there are thousands of writers and entrepreneurs and musicians who fail not for lack of grit, but because of how narrowly they apply grit. Never give up is bad advice. Sometimes quitting is a virtue. Grit doesn't mean "keep doing the thing that's failing." It means "define your dreams broadly enough that you can find new ways to pursue them when your first and second plans

fail.â€•Â

Today, my advice for you is to take a page out of the Goldilocks story. Like porridge, virtues can be too hot or too cold. More isnâ€™t always better. Watch out for virtues that burn too hot, not just too cold. If you want to be resilient, find the right amount of generosity and authenticity and grit.

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