



University Hospital of Wales

mmorgan@bmj.com Follow Matt on

Twitter: @dr_mattmorgan

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CRITICAL THINKING

Matt Morgan: “Less grit, more quit” has its benefits

Matt Morgan *intensive care consultant*

Sundays are much better nowadays. They used to start with gentle encouragement for my daughter to practise the piano. Then mild threats. Then bribes. Five minutes of her pressing the wrong keys would be followed by, “Do I have to do it today?” The sunk costs of the grades she’d already done and the books we’d already bought would lead me to exclaim, “Yes!” More grit needed, I’d think.

Monday morning at work, I’d try to put this grit to good use. We all have projects we keep deferring, roles we’ve grown tired of, or entire jobs that just pass the time. Yet we don’t quit. We grit. Because quitting is a dirty word. We think of the time already spent, the progress already made, and the promises to fulfil.

Then one Sunday I said to my daughter, “Fine, don’t do it.” I expected her to back down. But she didn’t. Thankfully. Instead, the time she normally spent on something she didn’t enjoy, and was frankly not very good at, went elsewhere. Now, Sundays are for dancing. She loves it. She’s good at it. She told me that it makes her feel more like her. And the girl who took her spot at the piano is happy, too. The answer wasn’t more grit, but more quit.

As leaders, we’re taught that quitting is failure. Yet I believe that leaders are there to help others rise. Those others need somewhere to rise to, a gap to fill. What if you are that gap? In Tim Harford’s excellent podcast *Cautionary Tales*,¹ he discusses how Nobel prize winners—the ultimate gritters—have a much broader range of superficial interests than their colleagues. They dip in and out, rather than staying committed to the end. They quit more.

Grit isn’t all bad, of course. Sometimes it’s essential. The answer is to apply it selectively. Keep trying hard at the things you love, the things you’re good at, or the things that make you feel more like you. Dance if you’re a dancer and not a pianist. At the same time, pass on that project that deep down you know you’ll never complete. Quit the roles that have become dusty and tired, freeing them up for others to love. Think about the opportunity cost from keeping hold of things you don’t really want, rather than mourning the time already spent.

Medicine, too, should learn to quit. It can take 17 years² to adopt new research into practice—yet even longer to stop using outdated treatments. Medicine finds it hard to quit. It needs fewer resilience workshops promoting grit, and more that teach us how to be better at quitting.

Covid-19 has shown us, tragically, that you only live once. In lockdown, some have embraced the JOMO (joy of missing out), replacing their FOMO (fear of missing out). But I’m here to stand up—or rather, sit

down—for quitting. Let’s promote JOWO: the joy of walking out. You’re never too old to learn the piano.³

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Matt Morgan is an honorary senior research fellow at Cardiff University, consultant in intensive care medicine, research and development lead in critical care at University Hospital of Wales, and an editor of *BMJ OnExamination*.

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