

# Reinventing Plateaus as Opportunities

(from 3 Tips on Overcoming Learning Plateaus by Walter Chen)

1. Stick with It
2. Practice Deliberately
3. Embrace Discomfort



## 1. Stick With It

This is often your first stop on your journey to mastery, and it can be a shock to the system. It's when you begin to realize that you won't be an exceptional, overnight success—and that mastery is a long way off. It's when you realize that overnight successes actually take years and years.

Progress junkies seeking short-term gratification give up, and that's why success turns more on character than it does on talent. University of Pennsylvania psychology professor Angela Duckworth argues in [The Plateau Effect](#) that “if you're myopic and only look at the next moment in time and you base your decisions on ‘what am I going to get out of this in the next nanosecond?’ ... then when you hit a plateau, your natural conclusion is to quit and move on to the next thing.” But “if you're able to think about things in much bigger chunks, you can make good long-term choices and investments of your effort and time.”

**Success turns more on character than it does on talent.**

It's “grit”, not aptitude or talent, that plays the biggest role in your success. Duckworth defines grit as “sticking with things over the very long term until you master them . . . . [T]he gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina.”

In a study of 1,200 West Point cadets before the beginning of basic training, Duckworth measured cadets based on her grittiness index and grittier candidates were 60 percent more likely to make it through training.

### Be gritty, and stick with it.

2. In 1885, German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus discovered what's now known as the "spacing effect." Ebbinghaus studied gibberish words and showed that his ability to learn and recall those words improved dramatically when he spaced his study session out over time. It's intuitive to any student who has crammed for an exam and then immediately forgot everything. It's the phenomenon that your ability to learn a concept improves when you study it multiple times, spaced over a long time span rather than within a short time frame.

On the other hand, the spacing effect seems counterintuitive because it feels like and is misinterpreted by outsiders as laziness. It feels more logical to push forward with hard work, even as we see diminishing, plateauing returns, because the alternative is inaction. The spacing effect demonstrates the role patience plays, in tandem with pushing, in the way our minds learn and improve.

The fact remains that to improve, we need rest and rejuvenation, a connection seen in not just the spacing effect but elsewhere, such as the strong link between sleep and productivity. The risk in impatience and the refusal to slog and pause is not only plateauing results, it's also the increased exposure to injury and burnout as we push harder and harder, from which it may take a long time to recover.

Don't push too hard, no matter how tempting it might be.

### 3. Embrace Discomfort

It starts with acclimation. First you hate the plateau, then you get used to the plateau, and finally, you *need* the plateau.

The plateau doesn't feel like a plateau any longer—something foreign and uncomfortable. Instead that flat line becomes the new normal. This happens more easily than you might expect because of the way our brain adapts to stimulus.

If you've experienced walking into a subway in the summer, you've noticed how a musky, stinky odor will hit your nose quite strongly at first but within a few minutes you'll hardly notice it. This happens through a process called olfactory

fatigue, which is a kind of neural adaptation. Your sensory neurons respond immediately when exposed to new stimuli but that responsiveness decreases with continual exposure to the stimuli at a constant intensity—your mind and body actually go numb.

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To get things going again, you need exposure to new stimuli, but there's where the rub is. Trying something new may not only fail to make you better, it might actually make you worse. In fact, you're likely to get worse before you get better.

The problem is that getting better means putting at risk what you've already gained, and that butts up against a powerful human bias of preferring to avoid losses over acquiring gains, called "loss aversion." It's an extremely potent bias, too. In a study offering a gamble on a 50/50 coin toss where an individual might lose \$20, those people demanded at least a \$40 payoff if they won, suggesting people irrationally require gains of twice the amount that they could potentially lose.

The perniciousness of loss aversion is that, to outside observers, it looks like you're doing it the right way—plugging away steadily and diligently—when in reality, your decision-making is driven by a deep-seated fear of losing what you have. As Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon, put it, to break through the status quo with a pioneering innovation, you must reject that external validation and have "a willingness to be misunderstood for long periods of time." That means pursuing mastery for itself, not for outside approval or self-preservation.

Try new things, and be willing to get worse.

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The topography of success contains all manner of planes and gradients. It's easy to see how getting to the peak of a mountain requires you to scale its steepest inclines. What's not as obvious, but just as integral, is that you must make the journey across the stretching plateaus as well—with grit, respite, and exploration

<https://bulletproofmusician.com/3-reasons-why-you-may-be-stuck-on-a-plateau/?hilite=%27plateau%27>

<https://99u.adobe.com/articles/16431/overcoming-plateaus-on-your-path-to-mastery>