

A retrospective on the last 100 days - Doing Hard Things

PERSONAL

What I mean by hard things, what I don't, why the neuroscience behind willpower makes a compelling case for doing them anyway, and how that played out over 100 days.

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Recently, on May 29th, 2026, I completed my version of 100 hard. I usually don't like to write about completing challenges like this one for various reasons. One of the main reasons I don't like talking about this is that if I'm not careful with my wording, it can come across as abrasive or like I'm bragging. However, this time around, I want to write a small post to reflect on this version of the challenge - mainly because there were several circumstances that made this challenge unique, and the payoffs were very clear.

Before starting, however, I do want to mention that "hard" is subjective, and in my opinion, there are constructive and destructive versions of "hard" things. When I refer to hard things, I refer to the internal dialogue you have with yourself - that few seconds that go into making any decision. For a concrete example, consider this: it's 10 pm on a Friday night, and you're exhausted, but you've already promised yourself you'll go to the gym and get a workout in. However, there's a little voice in your head that reminds you of how comfortable the couch is and how nice it would be to dim the lights and put on a movie. In that moment, you have a decision to make - stick to the promise you made to yourself, or give in to the voice that tells you it's okay to skip a day. This is the hard thing I'm referring to.

The above example should not be taken at face value. I am not saying that rest is bad (in fact, it is very necessary for optimal recovery), nor am I saying that you need to go to the gym to do hard things. Hard things, to me, are really about two things: the promises you make to yourself, and the discipline to honor them when it's inconvenient. I suspect you've had your own version of that 10 pm conversation. What you fill it with is up to you.

This post is not intended to be a proponent of the "grindset" movement or hustle culture, but a more principled and balanced rationale for doing hard things. Keeping with that theme, before discussing my personal experiences, I want to ground them in a little bit of neuroscience.

Why do hard things?

A couple of years ago, I came across this episode on the Huberman Lab Podcast starring David Goggins. Now, while I'll admit I've done "hard" things before listening to the episode just for the fun of it, this episode completely rewired how I think about doing things you don't want to do. The episode touches on the neuroscience behind willpower, and one idea in particular stuck with me.

The neuroscience about doing hard things is fascinating. There's a region called the anterior mid-cingulate cortex (aMCC), which has been identified as the neural seat of willpower and grit. This is the specific part of the brain that fires up when you do something you don't want to do - and the interesting part is that the more you do things you don't want to do, the more this region grows. Notice how this nicely ties in to the definition of "hard" that we've been assuming. It doesn't say you have to move a mountain or lift a car, but the key driver here is doing things you don't want to do.

You might be thinking, all that is well and good - but why should I care about the aMCC? To answer that question, I'll take a slight tangent to discuss the aMCC (I should note that I am not an expert in neuroscience, and while the following have been corroborated by various sources, my knowledge may be incomplete).

The aMCC is at a very interesting location in the brain - it's connected to the prefrontal cortex (the part responsible for logical, goal-oriented thinking), the amygdala (the fear center), the insula (the region that monitors your internal bodily state), and the motor cortex (the area responsible for physical movement). The aMCC is also incredibly plastic. When you push through friction, the aMCC physically thickens and strengthens. Conversely, sustained patterns of avoidance and inactivity are associated with reduced aMCC volume over time. The aMCC also seems to have a natural tendency to shrink as we age.

Given all this, the benefits of having a strong aMCC start to become clear. First, the aMCC is domain agnostic - so if you develop your aMCC by doing hard things in one domain, you will see the benefits transfer elsewhere. As an example, say you hate going to the gym, and you go for a sufficiently long period of time, and build up your aMCC - this will then help you in other moments of micro-friction, say, for example, when you need to study but the TV is just so tempting!

Second, the aMCC is also responsible for running a cost-benefit analysis for any decision you make (see how it's connected to the amygdala and prefrontal cortex!), and a weaker aMCC gets overwhelmed by the cost (the discomfort of doing a task) and will nudge you to quit.

Third, consistent aMCC training shifts the way your brain releases dopamine. Typically, dopamine is the reward that comes after the fact, a pat on the back for achieving something. However, consistently training the aMCC forces the brain to release dopamine during the activity itself - essentially forcing the brain to rewire itself to reward action and not outcomes. Beyond willpower, the aMCC also has downstream effects on the cardiovascular system, respiration, the immune system, and other endocrine mechanisms.

The through-line here is that the aMCC doesn't care what domain you train it in; it just gets stronger when you use it and weaker when you don't. So when I talk about doing hard things, I'm not just talking about grit for grit's sake. I'm talking about a very concrete, physiological argument for why the habit of pushing through discomfort is one of the highest-leverage things you can do for yourself.

My Personal Reflection

The rules of my challenge were simple: for 100 days, I had to complete a 90-minute workout every day (one recovery day per week) and eat clean. Eating clean meant eating no outside food, since I could not vouch for the preparation.

Why did I choose these rules specifically?

1. **The workout rule:** When I started this challenge, I wasn't in the best state of mind emotionally. Over the last year, I've suffered multiple injuries that have made consistent training extremely challenging. Last May, I got into a horrible car crash, two weeks later, I dislocated my left shoulder, and these injuries put me out for a couple of months. Every time I'd try, some part of my body would ache. I would wake up with terrible inflammation, and some days getting out of bed would be a hassle. The final kicker was when I found out that an old ligament tear to the wrist hadn't healed properly, which put me out for another couple of months. All these compounded into me becoming very frustrated with not being able to do the things I like doing (not to mention I got broken up with out of the blue, which definitely did not help). Long story short, because I was blocked on training the way I enjoy (weights and kickboxing), I gave myself permission to slip - telling myself it's okay to take a break from training. I didn't like that - I couldn't wait for the perfect situation anymore, and I realized I had to make do with what I could. If I can't lift weights, I have to adapt to doing cardio. If I can't use my hand, I have to figure out other workarounds. That was the motivation for this rule - it doesn't matter what I do, I have to move for 90 minutes a day.
2. **The food rule:** This one doesn't have a long backstory like the first rule. I love food. I've always loved food - and giving myself hard constraints forces me to be disciplined. Honestly, this might have been more annoying for the people around me.

Results

After (finally) being consistent, these 100 days have been transformative in more ways than one. Due to my wrist injury, I was unable to put any load on it, and even mundane tasks like carrying my laptop and groceries were extremely challenging. I now seem to have recovered and can go back to doing push-ups. More interestingly, I can finally do pull-ups. Something that I've struggled with since I got a shoulder surgery many years ago. At the start of the year, I had given myself a goal to hit 5 pull-ups by the end of the year, and I'm already at 4! I hadn't imagined I would be able to progress as quickly as I did, but I suppose consistency does compound. I also got back into fight training, and I'm super excited for that.

Now, back to the main spiel I gave earlier - I consciously noticed myself winning more of these micro-friction battles with myself. I won't lie and say that I've never caved in to the voice that chooses comfort; I have - there have been times when I've procrastinated or have been genuinely frustrated when I have to do things I do not enjoy, but I do feel myself winning more of those internal battles. 100 days is just the start, and I'm interested to see how this will scale.

What's next?

On we go! Next up is an extended version of this challenge with slight modifications. This time, I want to push myself for 120 days with the following rules:

- **Do a 90-minute workout 6 days a week.** 4 days of weight training and 2 days of kickboxing. This regime is to be followed rigorously unless a physical injury prevents me from doing so, in which case I default to the previous rule of doing whatever I can. In the 100-day challenge, the rule was to do any sort of movement. The reason for a more relaxed rule back then was to accommodate my injuries. However, I noticed that on certain days after I had healed, I didn't push as hard as I could have, and I let my inner voice tell me it was okay to take it slow when I knew I had more in the tank. For example, on certain days when I had to choose between leg day and just walking on the treadmill, I chose the treadmill (the easier option) with no good reason to skip leg day. That's why this time around I'm being stricter with my definition of what counts as a workout.
- **No outside food, with the exception of 1 optional cheat meal per week.** Not eating out is the most efficient way to maintain and track your macros, since you're preparing everything yourself. However, this time around, I'm adding an optional cheat meal. It's optional in the sense that I can only use that cheat meal at a social event, and even then, I must protein-load beforehand to eat as clean as possible. I cannot use the cheat meal on my own.
- **5 minutes of Pranayama:** This is an ancient yogic practice of breath regulation. This is probably the "easiest" thing on the list, but also the thing I don't want to do the most. My mom made me put it in here anyway, and doing things we don't want to do but are beneficial is what it's all about.

I probably won't do another write-up after the next challenge unless I have new insights to share, since I've covered everything I had to say about doing "hard" things here.

Thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed this and found something you can take away!

Sources

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5. PubMed Central — PMC7381101

