

3 Reasons It's So Hard to "Follow Your Passion"

by [Jon M. Jachimowicz](#) October 15, 2019

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How many times have you been told to “follow your passion?” It’s a message that appears in everything from graduation speeches to job ads. We even say it ourselves. When I surveyed a recent class of Columbia Business School MBA students, over 90% of them listed “pursuing their passion” as an important goal for their future jobs.

But according to a [recent Deloitte survey](#) of 3,000 full-time U.S. workers, across job levels and industries, only 20% say they are truly passionate about their work. Research [that I and others](#) have conducted show that many—if not most—of us don’t know *how* to pursue our passion, and thus we fail to do so. How do we fix this conundrum? Research on passion suggests that we need to understand three key things: (1) passion is not something one finds, but rather, it is something to be developed; (2) it is challenging to pursue your passion, especially as it wanes over time; and (3) passion can also lead us astray, and it is therefore important to recognize its limits.

Don't Wait to Find Your Passion

One common misperception people have [about passion is that it is fixed](#): you either have passion for something or you don't. The problem with this belief is that it's limiting, leading us to think of passion as something we discover or happen upon. As a result, we may try many different jobs looking for the right "fit," the role that instantly flips the passion switch, and we may not take into account the fact that it often takes time to develop one's passion for a job, along with the skills, confidence, and relationships that allow one to experience passion for work.

Indeed, [research has shown](#) that believing passion is fixed can make people less likely to explore new topics—potential new sources of passion. It also leads people to give up on new pursuits more quickly if they seem difficult.

To better pursue your passion, challenge your assumption that passion is something to be *discovered*. Focus on actively *developing* a passion instead. For example, you can craft your job to spend more time exploring the tasks you are more passionate about (or simply those that pique your curiosity) and working with those who inspire you. It also helps to get to know coworkers, what they are passionate about, and how they view their work. This can lead to opportunities to help each other pursue your passions. Finally, you don't necessarily even need to pursue passion at work. If your job does not allow you to pursue your passion, or if you just

don't want to do so at work, you can find time and space to pursue activities you are passionate about outside of your job.

Focus on What You Care About, Not on What Is Fun

One of the most common ways we try to pursue our passion is that we chase what gives us the most joy or is the most fun.

[In one study](#), my coauthors and I analyzed every graduation speech given in the last 10 years at the top 100 U.S.

universities and plucked out instances where speakers gave students advice on how to pursue their passion. Much of the advice centered on “focusing on what you love” as the way to follow your passion. But some speakers described the pursuit of passion as “focusing on what you care about.” The distinction is subtle but meaningful: focusing on what you love associates passion with what you enjoy and what makes you happy, whereas focusing on what you care about aligns passion with your values and the impact you want to have.

In a subsequent study of several hundred of employees, we found that those who believed pursuing passion meant following what brings one joy were *less likely* to be successful in their pursuit of passion, and were more likely to quit their job 9 months down the line, than those who believed following passion was focusing on what one cares about.

Why does following what you care about make you more successful at pursuing passion? It seems that this belief helps you weather the challenges that are part of the pursuit.

Consider that the [German word for passion](#), “Leidenschaft,” literally translates to “the ability to hardship.” [In another set of studies](#), I found that passion alone is only weakly related to employees’ performance at their work. But the combination of passion and perseverance—i.e., the extent to which employees stick with their goals even in the face of adversity—was related to higher performance.

The reality is that [passion wanes over time](#), so if you just focus on following happiness, you might not stick with an endeavor like you would if you focused on how it helps you achieve what you care most about. When you’re pursuing your passion, it’s important to bear in mind that resilience is key, because the pursuit of passion is an ongoing—and challenging—process.

Overcome the Limits of Passion

It’s also important to understand when passion won’t help you. In one [set of studies](#), my coauthors and I found that passion is only linked to better performance when (a) others agree with what one is passionate about, and (b) when passion is expressed in an appropriate context (since people tend to view passion as more appropriate in some fields,

such as consulting, than others, such as accounting).

What does this mean? Imagine you're presenting a project at work that you are passionate about. We find that expressing your passion may only help you if your audience already agrees with what you are presenting. If they are not already on board, your passion for the subject may not be effective in bringing them along. Similarly, if you are an entrepreneur, expressing passion for your idea may help bring investors on board, but expressing passion when discussing the term sheet may not have the same inspiring effect because of who we allow to demonstrate passion.

In [another series of studies](#), employees described as passionate were more likely to be exploited by others because they were seen as enjoying their work more. As a result, others were more likely to ask passionate employees to take on undesirable tasks and work overtime. This highlights a challenging paradox: expressing your passion can be beneficial because others admire you more and may help you become more successful. At the same time, it may also make it more likely they will *ask you* to take on tasks that fall outside of narrow job descriptions, placing you at risk of stretching yourself too thin and burning out.

Another study, led by Erica Bailey at Columbia Business School, found that more passionate employees were also more likely to be overconfident. In some situations, this is

beneficial; for example, if entrepreneurs took the actual base rate of start-up successes into account, many would not continue founding. In many work settings, however, overconfidence [can lead to detrimental work outcomes](#), such that passionate and overconfident employees are less likely to [seek the feedback and information necessary](#) to succeed. If you are passionate about your work, bear in mind that this may lead to an inflated view of your own abilities and work output. This might make it more important that you seek out feedback from others, and clarify on where you truly stand; otherwise you may believe that your passion propels you, while it only does so in your head.

Many of us want to pursue our passions, and organizations commonly encourage this. But the fact is we often don't know *how* to do this. Viewing passion as able to be developed, as a challenging ongoing process, and as something that may lead you astray may help us better achieve our goals.