

If you want to be really good at something, it's going to involve relentlessly pushing past your comfort zone, along with frustration, struggle, setbacks and failures. That's true as long as you want to continue to improve, or even maintain a high level of excellence. The reward is that being really good at something you've earned through your own hard work can be immensely satisfying.

Here, then, are the six keys to achieving excellence we've found are most effective for our clients:

1. **Pursue what you love.** Passion is an incredible motivator. It fuels focus, resilience, and perseverance.
2. **Do the hardest work first.** We all move instinctively toward pleasure and away from pain. Most great performers, Ericsson and others have found, **delay gratification** and take on the difficult work of practice in the mornings, before they do anything else. That's when most of us have the most energy and the fewest distractions.
3. **Practice intensely,** without interruption for short periods of no longer than 90 minutes and then take a break. Ninety minutes appears to be the maximum amount of time that we can bring the highest level of focus to any given activity. The evidence is equally strong that great performers practice no more than 4 ½ hours a day.
4. **Seek expert feedback, in intermittent doses.** The simpler and more precise the feedback, the more equipped you are to make adjustments. Too much feedback, too continuously, however, can create cognitive overload, increase anxiety, and interfere with learning.
5. **Take regular renewal breaks.** Relaxing after intense effort not only provides an opportunity to rejuvenate, but also to metabolize and embed learning. It's also during rest that the right hemisphere becomes more dominant, which can lead to creative breakthroughs.
6. **Ritualize practice.** Will and discipline are wildly overrated. As the researcher **Roy Baumeister** has found, **none of us have very much** of it. The best way to insure you'll take on difficult tasks is to ritualize them — build specific, inviolable times at which you do them, so that over time you do them without having to squander energy thinking about them.