

**TEXAS  
GEAR  
UP**

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**LETTING GO**

*PARENT  
SPOT*

## LETTING GO

**Each year millions of students leave their family nest and go off to college. As daunting as it is to bid goodbye to your child, as a parent you know that by supporting their pursuit of education, you're empowering them to start building a stronger, more prosperous future. Of course, the reality is that it may take at least a full semester for both you and your teen to adjust to this new experience. And it's incredibly important to give yourself the time and space to do so.**

Both you and your student will experience a combination of emotions: elation, anticipation, excitement, anxiety, and, perhaps at times, loneliness. These are natural expressions as each person in your family seeks an identity outside of what you've known for the past eighteen (or so) years.

However, awareness of what's occurring will help all of you make a healthy transition onto the new path.

## THE LAUNCHING YEARS

While going to college is one of the most common rites of passage into young adulthood, it's also a time full of uncertainty. The emotional intensity you feel as a parent is often found in questions like:

***Are they safe?***

***Are all of their needs being met?***

***What if something happens?***

Feelings of anxiety, worry, and fear are normal for both you and your child. You each may also have bouts of doubt, depression, and anger. These emotions are not unusual.

Indeed, fresh challenges will present themselves, and your family will need to establish a brand-new kind of balance. The goal here is to emphasize your child's independence and resilience while understanding there will be tough decisions to make.

On the one hand, you'll naturally want to help your child if they encounter a rough patch during their college experience. On the contrary, if you enable them too much, they're less likely to accept and learn from errors they've made in decision-making.

Most parents do find the right mix of being appropriately supportive versus being overbearing and controlling. One of the best ways to provide assistance that supports your child's maturity is by being available to talk about the problems they're experiencing. Listen. But stop short of taking their problems on as your own. This is the culminating point in a lifelong process of helping your child to discover their individual solutions.

## READY, SET, LAUNCH!



Since college is a definite decision that signals a launching into adulthood, the process began as soon as they made a choice to complete the college application. The admissions process all by itself can be a stressful ordeal. As such, this selection communicated their need for more freedom and the acceptance of larger responsibilities.

While most college application processes are started during their senior year in high school, throughout the launching years you may find your student having more conflicts with you. Again, this is natural. It's a way to break free from the family identity and further explore their familiarity with their individuality. An upside to these self-seeking behaviors may be a desire to begin working and paying their own expenses.

Further evidence of emerging adulthood involves the exploration of romantic relationships and

experimenting with different types of work. Such experimentation helps your child to become more independent and develop their own world view.

Along with independence often comes risky behaviors. At times, these behaviors are a way to handle the increasing stress of adulthood. They can also be a coping mechanism or boundary experimentation to see how far this newfound freedom can really be stretched.

# THE LAUNCHING PROCESS AND PARENTING

What can you do as a parent to help the launching process take on a smooth current?

First, it's important to accept that there's a sense of loss involved. The former parent-child relationship is in the past. You'll no longer have the direct control over your college-student child as you did when they were younger and more dependent. Your relationship now shifts into guidance from a distance and agreed-upon ways to continue to stay close. Once in a parent-child communication pattern, you're currently moving into an adult-adult relationship.

This isn't an overnight process. As with all relationships, there are negotiations and continued growth. Make sure you pay attention to your own emotional well-being during this time. It models good self-care for your child and helps keep you in a balanced space for those moments when you'll need to be the reliable guide during stressful times.

Some types of support you can offer your teen include:

- ▶ **EMOTIONAL:** Many times all your child needs is for you to listen rather than jump in and solve the problem for them. Listening is one of the most powerful ways you can offer support. Don't be surprised if you hear from your child frequently during the first semester, or the entire first year of college.
- ▶ **PRACTICAL:** Helping to fill out paperwork or making sense of the paperwork flurry from the various school departments.
- ▶ **COMPANIONSHIP:** Family rituals and traditions may take on a larger significance during this time. If your child is (or will be) attending a non-local school, creating new traditions is a great move towards maintaining closeness.
- ▶ **ADVICE:** A good way to approach giving advice to your student is to ask them directly, "Do you want my help?" Each situation will require an understanding of whether or not the information is helping independent decisions or enabling further dependence on you.
- ▶ **FINANCIAL SUPPORT:** Ideally, the who, what, where, how, when, and why of budgetary assistance should have hard-and-fast rules. While you want your student to thrive and not have to stress over basic necessities, at the same time, you want them to cultivate their independence further.

## ➤ LETTING GO

### FAMILY STRESS TEST

Sending your child off to college is both thrilling and stressful. A new chapter is unfolding before you, and there are tons of emotions at play during the letting-go process. Both positive and negative emotional experiences are a normal part of the change your family is going through. Much of what you feel has its source in fear. Your family is under a lot of stress as you complete mountains of paperwork, scrutinize your financial situation, and adjust to a life where there's one less person in your household on a daily basis.

The good news is that the emotions can be managed and the stress eased with the understanding that different types of stress call for distinct responses. For example, eustress is a positive form of stress associated with feelings of fulfillment. Gaining acceptance into a dream college and earning an excellent scholarship reinforces eustress. While both you and your child will still experience stressful emotions, this doesn't have the same emotional impact typically connected to demanding events. Eustress is motivational, tends to be short term, and is aligned with our coping ability levels. Under eustress, we still have a "can do" attitude.

Stress begins to shift into distress when anxiety takes hold. You or your child will start to feel

the demands are overwhelming and pushing the boundaries of your coping ability. Self-doubt may creep in and begin to dominate your thoughts. Another distress signal is decreased performance. Should your or your child's momentum drop, then it's time to take a step back and reassess your approach to the demands.

#### Additional signs of distress are:

- **Headaches and stomach aches**
- **Muscle aches and pains**
- **Difficulty sleeping**
- **Can't stop thinking and difficulty concentrating**
- **Anxiety or panic**
- **Change in eating pattern (eating too much or too little)**

Distress can lead to depression, and these symptoms are a sign of depression if experienced for six months or more. However, everyone's tolerance for these symptoms varies, and it's wise to seek professional help should they persist beyond a two-week period.

Recommended ways of coping with distress will be described in the sections below. But first, it's important to understand its sources.

## CHANGE

Going to college is the initiating change in the family structure. Daily habits are disrupted. The fear of the unknown is present. A massive learning curve is required as students navigate their coursework and the brand-new social culture they're jumping into.

If there are younger siblings in the home, they too will need to adjust to a new family dynamic. Since there'll be one less person in the household, the siblings may also need to take on additional responsibilities. This transfers stress to them, as well. Not everyone handles change in a positive way so there could be a greater potential for resistance to adjusting to the new experience.

## PRESSURE

Add this to the pressure of performance now placed on your child. Though going off to college symbolizes freedom, the institutions do have patterns of conformity.

Cut-off dates for registration, grade point average, class credit requirements for financial aid, and less direct guidance from teachers are just a few variables to consider. Even high school academic superstars will be pressed into a disorienting world. They'll be transitioning from being a big fish in a small pond, to a fish in a pond with other stellar students.

The family is a small, yet significant group affiliation that serves to stabilize your child. They'll encounter differing viewpoints from students and teachers. Some of those views may be directly opposed to their upbringing and, as a result, will test their maturity level. Family

support is crucial to propel your student forward into successful progress.

Meanwhile, there's also a need to practice delayed gratification. Your child will need to stick to a budget, which is a highly valuable lesson in adulthood. While there's more freedom in decision-making as an adult, there are also direct and indirect consequences for making poor choices.

Consequently, how you'll offer support will also shift. This depends on your child's personality. Some college freshmen will call their parents daily during their adjustment period. Others may dive right into making friends and only contact the family when they're overly stressed or need help out of a sticky situation. Each family will need to find a supportive approach that works for them.

## **FRUSTRATION**

As with all things in life, there are highs and lows in the pursuit of college goals. Any number of frustrations can arise. An increased academic workload pushes students into coming up with better time management. If they're in sports or take on employment while in school, the added stress will feed into frustration.

This is where listening and asking if they'd like your advice is a good move. You won't be a mind reader, and you won't always know when or what type of support your child needs. After all, they're not kids anymore. They're now adults coping with grown-up responsibilities.

It may be helpful to understand and target the exact frustrations your student is having. Are they experiencing academic failure? Is there a purely emotional thing going on? Are they running short of money? Have they been hit with an illness? Is the source of their frustration a break-up with a significant other? Have they been partying a lot

(and using or abusing alcohol or drugs)?

Although the college years can be a liberating time, they're also filled with being a stranger in a strange land—at least for the first year. There's so much your child will need to keep track of on their own.

You also have your own questions and feelings. Did you make the right decision? Did your family choose the best college? Can your child succeed at the selected school? The answers to these questions will differ between you and your child. Indeed, they may be different for all family members.

Of course, conflict is to be expected at some point, even if it's not a conflict between you and your student. Understanding that not all conflict means the world is going to end is the start to a healthy perspective on how to handle different points of view in the home and at school.

## **WAYS TO COPE**

So, you're now in the middle of this transition period. Both you and your child are excited. You may also feel a bit anxious. That anxiety is connected to fear. This is basic human psychology that every single one of us feels at one point or another when facing something new. It doesn't mean you're weak. It doesn't say that you're a failure as a human being. What it does mean is: You're human.

The difference between success or failure is how you and your student respond to the fear. One way to manage fear is to get more firsthand information about the college and its expectations. Find out if there is a parent orientation given on the first day of student arrival on campus. Many institutions do offer such orientations to help your letting-go process. This is where you'll be able to ask such questions as:

- **What will a typical day be like for my child?**
- **What will happen if they don't like their roommates?**
- **What if they get locked out of their dorm?**
- **What if they can't deal with the transition? Is there help? Is there additional guidance available on campus?**

Going to campus with your student on the first day also gives you the opportunity to talk to other parents of freshman students. They may give you ideas about how they're structuring communications with their child. In this age of constant digital connectedness, each family will have a preferred way to keep in touch. Some students will welcome text messages every day. Others may want emails and weekly phone calls instead of any daily contact with their parents.

It's best to discuss communication frequency and type with your student before the first-day orientation. Otherwise, they'll be far more focused on the hustle and bustle of getting themselves primed for their college experience, and all you might get is a, "Yeah, yeah...I'll text you tomorrow or next week sometime."



## **CHANGE YOUR THINKING**

You've gone to the parent orientation, or you've reached out to the school directly, and they've answered your questions. But you still have some distressing thoughts. Or your child continues to be anxious about the new experience. What can you do?

First and foremost, all fear (and its cousin, anxiety) begins in your mind. Our emotions follow the thoughts associated with them. Changing your thinking, or helping your child to change theirs, will impact how you feel and respond to each situation that arises.



Practice reframing your thoughts. Much of the time our thoughts are overly magnified projections of fear. Asking yourself, “Is this true? How do I know it’s true?” and then rephrasing the thought gives new insight into what’s really going on.

For example, if you experience the thought: **“I don’t think I can handle my child being away for so long.”**

Ask: **“Is it true?”**

Then ask yourself: **“Were there other times when my child was away, and I coped with it just fine?”**

Is that equally true?

Focus on moments when your child was away, and you felt comfortable, relaxed like everything was okay. Hold those feelings, take a deep breath, and turn the thought into: **“They’ve been gone for ‘X’ number of hours, and I feel fine right now.”**

#### OTHER EXAMPLES:

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Old Thought: “My student is going to get homesick. This makes me feel sad.”

New Thought: “My student may miss home for a while, but they’ll adjust and grow and gain so much by going to college in ways I never could’ve expected. This makes me feel happy.”

Old Thought: “I’ll never get used to the idea of my child not living in our home anymore.”

New Thought: “It may take some time, but I’ll eventually get used to my child not living in our home and becoming independent.”

Old Thought: “College is so expensive. There’s no way we can pay for everything.”

New Thought: “We may have to spend a lot of time hunting down different forms of financial aid, but we’ll do it.”

Old Thought: “I was a supportive parent for my high school student and have no idea how to do the same for a college student.”

New Thought: “I can use the same skills I used to support my child in high school to help them in college.”

Old Thought: “There’s no way my child will be able to do the college-level math. It’s always been their hardest subject.”

New Thought: “The college has tutoring and math labs, and there’s help available if they have difficulty with college-level math.”

Old Thought: “What if my child’s roommate is the dirtiest person on the planet, and their dorm room is a disaster?”

New Thought: “Their dorm room may not meet my standards for cleanliness, but it’s their choice.”

Old Thought: “I feel like such a blubbing idiot because I’m so sad and can’t think straight.”

New Thought: “I know I’m sad and having a hard time concentrating, but that’s normal when I’m having this new experience of my child leaving for college, and it’ll get better.”

Old Thought: “The professor ought to tell them exactly what he expects.”

New Thought: “Professors have their own way of running classes, and my child will have to communicate to the professor what they don’t understand.”

Old Thought: “My child must remember to turn in all of their work.”

New Thought: “My child will eventually figure out it’s important to turn in all work even though I believe it’s important for them to be responsible on their own.”

Old Thought: “I forgot to pick up those items my student needs. I’m such a bad parent.”

New Thought: “I’m so busy and have so much on my mind that I forgot to pick up those items—but that doesn’t mean I’m not a caring parent. I won’t criticize myself.”

Old Thought: “The school should’ve told us how expensive books were going to be. How do they expect us to pay for them?”

New Thought: “I had no idea college textbooks would cost this much. We’re going to have to find a way to buy (or rent) cheaper ones.”

Naturally, starting new thought patterns takes time. Remember that you and your child are carving fresh pathways into your brain through repeating the new ideas. By doing that, you’re changing your habits of mind.

Merely recognizing cynical self-talk is another important step. But don’t punish yourself for engaging in negative thoughts—since that’s also what makes us human. Accepting that it’s natural, and recognizing that you have the power to shift your own thoughts is where you’ll see the most benefit. It’ll take at least 30 days to get the new views rooted in your thinking patterns and may take up to six months to be firmly practiced through action.

Frustration may creep in if you attempt to control your child’s thought processes. All you can do is control your own reaction to thoughts and turn them around. The simple act of consistently modeling this behavior is the best thing you can do for your child. Though they may always be a child in your eyes, the reality is they’re now adults who’ll need to experience their own coping mechanisms.

Also, seek additional support through positive family members, friends, and organizations where you have a spiritual connection (i.e. religious institutions). Surround yourself with practical yet optimistic people. Take time to have fun, laugh, and enjoy each moment. If you have younger kids, make sure to stay involved with them, as well.

Prayer, meditation (there are plenty of resources on the internet for learning how to meditate), and trusting that life takes its own course for growth will alleviate a good deal of your stress. Since not every situation presents a black or white decision for you, learn to accept some ambiguity (and let go of trying to make the decisions for your child). Take one day at a time.

The best advice you can give your child is demonstrating healthy coping mechanisms. They may resist, argue, hem and haw or roll their eyes, but when push comes to shove, they'll fall back on what you've shown them regarding how to behave (cope) with stressful situations.

## **PRACTICE HEALTHY PHYSICAL BEHAVIORS**

Everyone needs to let off steam at some point. Even when you've got the positive mental attitude locked down, you'll still need to make sure that your physical self-care is in a healthy state. Get plenty of rest. Go for walks, or if you're the gym type, head down to the gym.

For workaholics, schedule time off! Force yourself to take a day where you do nothing and have no responsibilities. All human beings need downtime. Neither you nor your child is a machine ready to operate on a 24/7 basis.

Focus on consuming healthy foods as much as possible. Eating well includes getting plenty of

water, vegetables, and good sources of fat in your daily diet. The amount of fruits, lean meats, or plant-based proteins you need is determined on an individual basis. However, if any of these nutrients (proteins, fats, and carbohydrates) are missing over an extended period of time, it can add stress to the body.

The same goes for your child. Obviously, trying to control what your new college student eats is an exercise in futility, but they'll go through cycles of returning to what they've learned from you over the years. That's why it benefits everyone if you're practicing great self-care.

## ADDITIONAL SELF-HELP TIPS

We have even more advice for parents who may be experiencing anxiety or depression about their child going off to college for the first time...

If you're going through lots of apprehension—or any of the distress symptoms described earlier—start here:

- **Stop and ask yourself why you're feeling this way.**
  - **Ask yourself if this is a realistic fear. (Is there any evidence that your thought is absolutely true?)**
  - **Talk with a trusted friend or family member about your concern.**
  - **Notice any negative self-talk that may be occurring.**
  - **Reframe your fear into a new thought pattern (as explained earlier).**
  - **Start a private journal. Write everything down and walk through the negative thoughts while practicing the thought "turnaround" process.**
  - **Make sure you're practicing good self-care—like taking time out to do things you enjoy, getting enough rest, and eating plenty of good food.**
  - **Try guided meditations or speaking with a spiritual advisor.**
  - **If you're experiencing persistent symptoms of depression (even after talking with a friend or family member), seek help from a licensed therapist or medical professional.**
- **Make sure you've set up regular times to speak with your child. In addition to making you feel better, this will help them maintain a sense of independence and closeness.**

Finally, cut yourself some slack. While you still have other life responsibilities to attend to, recognize the reality that what you're going through is a normal reaction. When a child leaves the family nest, there can be a grieving process that goes through five stages:

1. **Denial: "Oh, they're too young to take on all this by themselves!"**
2. **Anger: "Why do I have to always be the strong and reliable one making sacrifices? I just want them to stay here with me!"**
3. **Bargaining: "If you call me every week, I'll be happier about you going."**
4. **Depression: "I'm so tired all the time. There's not much of anything fun I want to do."**
5. **Acceptance: "They're an adult now. They've got their own decisions to make. I've raised them with a good head on their shoulders. They'll be fine."**

Remember, you're definitely not alone in this process. And you WILL make it through!

## LETTING GO

# HELPING YOUR CHILD LET GO

You aren't the only one who has some "letting go" to do when it comes to college. Your child, once nestled in the comfort of the family life you provided, is now attempting to fly outside the nest. There will be moments when they land with an audible thud while trying to find the right rhythm to being on their own in college. But your student will also learn to have extended and successful bouts of soaring through the air. And they'll be more likely to fly with the right amount of assistance from you.

In between the flurry of financial aid applications and the school admissions process, sit down with your student and have a family conversation. While it's never too late to do this, they'll be far too busy after college begins trying to learn a million different things in this new academic environment. In psychology terms, this is called cognitive overload. When we experience cognitive overload, all things except what's immediately in front of us (or have been deeply ingrained in our habits) get thrown out the window.

So, before they head off and begin practicing everything you've taught them about being an adult, the following topics are excellent letting-go discussion points. There's a good possibility you've previously taught them many of these philosophies throughout their childhood—which means you'll probably get an "I know all this already" response from your teen.

If that's the case, a good response is, "Well then, this discussion is more to help us let go because we love you. Can you help us do that by taking a moment to listen to what we have to say?"

**Here are some key messages to communicate:**

### THE NEW EXPERIENCE

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We're excited for you to go to college because this is a new experience for all of us. College provides high hopes for your future.

There's a lot we'll all have to learn about your new living arrangements and possible roommates. Maybe at some point, you'll transition from a dorm to an apartment, or possibly even rent a house. You'll likely be on a meal plan at the school or cooking for yourself—and we know both of those will take some getting used to. We're here to support your self-sufficiency!

## COMMITMENT

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We're committed to your success, and the same goes for you. Your primary role right now is to be a student. Go to class. Complete your assignments on time, and make sure you're allotting enough time for studying. The more active you are in your education, the more successful you'll be.

## SACRIFICE/RESPONSIBILITY

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We'll all be making some sacrifices for you to have this meaningful experience. Know that it won't always be easy for any of us, but this is well worth it. It's up to you to budget your money. Part of the adult responsibility is to delay instant gratification. Adulthood means more freedom, but it doesn't mean we've all got the freedom to do whatever we want, whenever we want. None of us are free from the consequences of our decisions.

## CHALLENGES

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When things get tough, we plan to be as supportive as possible—while still allowing you to make your own decisions. We'll be here to listen and respond to your asking for help when you need it. But we also expect you to dig down deep and find the self-belief in your independent problem-solving ability. Our desire is for you to be a healthy, independent adult who's proactive in their approach to resolving conflict or any other challenges you may encounter.

## EXCITEMENT

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We're excited about everything you'll be learning. This is an excellent time in your young adulthood. Only you can make it a well-rounded and fun experience by getting involved in the college community. Are there sports or clubs you'd like to join? Maybe a gym or workout center nearby where you can release some stress? Getting involved in service projects is a great way to pump up your resume for potential employers. We support you having fun on campus, of course! While we want you to succeed academically and socially, we also know you may want to go to a few concerts or dance clubs (while still staying within budget).

## FEAR

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Because we've never done this before, and neither have you, we may not always know what to expect. So this is a courageous step for all of us since it's new. We all need to take a breath and when we can, slow down to enjoy the "now" of the situation. We've all got continuing responsibilities, but gratitude is the winning attitude. Know that we believe in you. We know you can and will succeed.

## SUPPORT

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When questions arise, the important thing is to find someone who can help answer them. We want you to succeed. The college has support available if you need it. Dorm advisors, academic advisors,

professors, and the health clinic are all avenues to help you get the support you need. You'll definitely experience normal stress and maybe be a bit disoriented for a few weeks. But if you still feel overwhelmed past that point, don't hesitate to reach out to us—or people at the college who are designated helpers. If you get homesick, we're here for you. Your college or other friends may also be a big help. Don't be afraid to reach out at any time.

### EFFORT

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Anything worthwhile in life requires effort. This is true for you and for us. This may mean going to bed early instead of going out with your friends. Demonstrating effort definitely means setting aside time for studying. As we discussed regarding sacrifices, there'll be decisions to make regarding working on a paper that is due A.S.A.P. versus partying.

### PATIENCE

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Adjustment to anything new takes time. Things don't always work on the first try. Life is full of ups and downs, and college life will be no different. Take things step by step. When you're on the stage accepting your degree, all the little frustrations will seem minuscule. And, in reality, they are minuscule. We know they don't look so tiny at the time. But patience and persistence will carry you through. Visualize the end result, and that'll help

get you through any temporary setbacks you might experience.

### HAPPY

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We're very happy that this is happening for you and for our family. You're so important to us. The university also sees you as a valuable addition to their community. The friends and professional connections you make at school will be your new "away from home" family. There's plenty of support available on campus. Take advantage of it.

### GROWTH

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This is a time of tremendous growth for you. College helps propel you into adulthood, and you have the opportunity to expand academically, socially, spiritually, and emotionally. Definitely take care of your physical self. Take advantage of the gym on campus. Join a recreational sports league or go for frequent walks in between study time. It'll help get the blood flowing and relieve any tension or pressure the increased responsibilities will place on you.

#### ***For parents of student athletes:***

Though you'll be working hard at becoming better in your sport, it's important to find a balance between athletics and academics. You'll want to push yourself on the field (or the court or the pool or the track or wherever the magic happens), but keep in

mind that your studies should always be your top priority. Being a star student is even more important than being a star athlete. So create a schedule that allows time for both sports and studying—and definitely don't forget to carve out some downtime, because even athletes need to relax every now and then. Also, be sure to take advantage of the resources that may be available on campus exclusively to student-athletes, from dedicated training facilities to extra tutoring support to financial assistance funds (just to name a few examples).

## FUTURE

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Your future is waiting for you, and it's starting now. Your college experience will be something you'll draw from the rest of your life. It'll open new doors for you while you increase your skill set and expertise. The contacts you make and networking you do will be invaluable. As you complete each assignment and each college course, you'll gain greater confidence. After all is said and done, the fact that you finished college will tell the world, and yourself, that you can stick to something challenging. It demonstrates you have tenacity and commitment. These are powerful influencers that place you in a winning position, whether you work for others or start your own business.