GRIN & BEAR IT!

PETER VAN KETS
WITH KIM VAN KETS

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This book is dedicated to my father – Padré –
Hendrik (Rik) Maria Victoria van Kets –
who died during its writing.
He was 88, and I miss him every day.

Dad, I can still hear your calm voice,
sharing your well-earned advice and constantly
encouraging me to be better. To find the right path.
To study before I climbed the Himalayas.
Thank you for always believing in me.
See you soon, but in the meantime, this is for you.

PETER VAN KETS is a world-renowned adventurer, speaker, leadership consultant, author and conservationist. Using the lessons learnt from his expeditions, he inspires audiences with stories of survival, courage, perseverance, passion, loneliness, tenacity, grit, teamwork and the will to win. He has worked with major corporations across Africa, Europe, the Middle East, China and the USA.

Peter was born in Durban in 1966, and attended a number of schools in both South West Africa (now Namibia) and South Africa. Originally a high- and junior-school teacher, he completed his first Atlantic Rowing Race in 2008, before going on to pursue a career as a full-time adventurer.

He has led and taken part in various expeditions around the world, the most high profile to date being two trans-Atlantic rows, his series of Beyond Expeditions throughout Africa, and a trek of nearly 900 kilometres to the South Pole. Among other accolades, he was honoured as SA OutThere Adventurer of the Year in 2011.

Peter has spent a great deal of time in or on the ocean as a diver, surfer, yachtsman and paddler. Kayaking and adventure racing are his major sports, and he races regularly in between major expeditions. He is a certified Yachtmaster, with five ocean crossings by yacht under his belt, and an experienced mountain biker and skydiver.

His first book, *The Eighth Summit*, was published in 2014 and is a multiple South African bestseller. *Grin & Bear It!* is his second book.

Peter lives in East London with his wife Kim (a lawyer, speaker, published author and endurance athlete) and their daughter Hannah.

basketball coach, defines success as the peace of mind that is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to become the best you are capable of becoming.

It's important to define success for yourself; in fact, you are obliged to do so because your notion of success is effectively your compass for life. You should clearly understand your direction. For me, success is inseperable from the idea of leaving a legacy worth remembering and celebrating. Success involves giving it my very best shot, my all; being in the arena covered in dust and sweat and blood (to paraphrase Teddy Roosevelt). Achieving the desired outcome is great, but not crucial. What is crucial to my definition of success is having spent every last ounce of my energy and ability in the attempt to achieve the worthy goal.

IS THERE A SCIENCE BEHIND RESILIENCE?

"I count him braver who overcomes his desires
than him who conquers his enemies;
for the hardest victory is over self."
– ARISTOTLE

When it comes to athletic ability, I've always considered myself to be just another guy. Nothing exceptional. At school, I managed to get myself selected for the waterpolo first team, but I didn't excel in any other sports and I never won any races. I'm skinny and chaotic and, if anything, I have too much energy. Which is to say, there is no obvious physical explanation for my ability to succeed as a multi-disciplinary adventurer and endurance athlete.

Throughout my professional career, I have continuously learnt from my experiences and organically developed my formula for ongoing success – lessons that are laid out in

the pages to come. This has been a process guided by gut feel and forged from the trial and error of expeditions all around the world. And one of the foundations of my approach has been the belief that you are not necessarily born with all the required mental traits for success, such as endurance and resilience, but that you can develop them in yourself with practice.

It is only in recent years that I have come to understand something of the science behind my processes, and behind what motivates and inspires people to endure even extreme hardship in the pursuit of their dreams and goals. For this, I have the innovative clinical psychologist Gerard Finnemore to thank.

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In November 2011, I received a call from Gerard. Gerard runs a practice in Johannesburg that specialises in getting the best out of people by combining traditional therapy and cutting-edge science, including the latest neuroscience and biotechnology. A few months previously, he had done some work with me to gain a better understanding of "post-expedition blues".

During similar interviews with other endurance sportsmen, Gerard had become interested in the notion of extreme performance and how it relates to everyday life. How far, he wondered, could ordinary people take this? He felt it would make for interesting research. That being the case, would I agree to being part of the study? This would entail having my brain tested using a quantitative

electroencephalogram, or qEEG, a technique that is increasingly used in clinical circumstances to investigate patterns or profiles of brain functioning.

Of course I said yes.

A few weeks later, Gerard flew from Johannesburg and arrived at my home outside East London to conduct the test. I was a bit anxious at first, especially when he explained that he would have to screw a "19-channel electrocap with a Mitsar amplifier" into my scalp. (Was this a sufficiently worthy goal to warrant my suffering?)

"Not to worry. It won't hurt," he promised.

True to his word, the process was fairly painless, and when I didn't hear from him for a while after, I just assumed there was nothing unusual or interesting about the way my brain worked. In fact, I almost forgot about the test altogether. Kim, however, was super-keen to get the results: she is of a slightly different opinion with regard to my brain function!

Several months later, Gerard called again. This time it was to ask my permission to present his findings at a conference. As it turned out, my results suggested something Gerard had not expected.

The spectral analysis he had performed revealed the presence of a phenotype – the way my genotype, or genetic constitution, interacts with my environment – with "an excess of beta activity". Beta waves are present in the brain when it is active, and this was the scientific way of saying I have "busy brain syndrome". So far so normal: this finding was not unusual among the extreme adventurers Gerard's team had sampled. As Gerard would later explain:

"What this profile suggests is a very active cortex, a higher-than-average level of cortical activity: a mind with a lot of drive, energy and the ability to hyperfocus on something. Inevitably, these individuals are busy people who can find it difficult to switch off. For them, this is fine because they usually don't want to. It is a phenotype defined by success rather than profession, and I have found it in subjects as diverse as rock stars, inventors or hedge fund owners."

There was, however, something out of the ordinary about my test, which Gerard's California-based supervisor Jay Gunkelman spotted. Jay, who is credited with having analysed more than 500,000 EEG records, noticed a slight deviance in a part of my brain called the anterior cingulate. Gerard describes this as "like the gear lever of the brain" which, among other things, facilitates cognitive flexibility – the ability to change your mind – and can suggest a tendency to become obsessive over things and refuse to give up. This can be a positive and a negative. So, along with a busy brain to drive me and keep me focused, the qEEG clearly – and unexpectedly – indicated "the possibility of tenacity".

I wasn't at all surprised by Gerard's findings. I know I have a busy mind, that I can focus when I must, and that the ability to be flexible in decision-making is vital for endurance events. And if there's one thing I've learnt, it's the art of endurance and resilience – synonyms for tenacity. What did astonish me, though, was that the evidence of tenacity, an essential trait for extreme athletes, was in some way unusual.

The important question is that of nature versus nurture. Was I born with this trait of tenacity coded into my DNA, or did I grow it in my interactions with my environment? Can you consciously learn to persevere through deliberate practice? Can you exercise your willingness to suffer in pursuit of a worthy goal as if it were a muscle? As Gerard has pointed out, if we know how to increase our resilience, then new worlds that once were unavailable suddenly start opening up to us.

At that time, there was not yet accurate technology to establish whether my tenacity was innate or learnt. Instinctively, I had always assumed it to be the latter: endurance and resilience can be developed and grown. A decade later in 2021, with the tools available to do so, Gerard decided to look in further depth into this question using the best contemporary science at his disposal. To do this, he examined my genetic profile, analysing the genetic variations in my DNA called single nucleotide polymorphisms, known as SNPs or "snips". The specific report he used was called DNAlysis Mind, which looks at a number of genes and their SNPs relevant to psychological traits. This type of analysis opens up ways to deliver personalised or precision medicine to individuals, and is likely to be a staple of future healthcare. For now, though, it's cutting-edge, and my report required the interpretive skills of the clinical head of Functional Medicine Associates in London, Pete Williams, to unlock it.

Pete W immediately focused on the gene involved in the action of oxytocin. Oxytocin is known as the "love drug"

because it is linked to social bonding, sexual activity, reproduction, empathy and trust. Pete W explained that I had the version that expresses these attributes most effectively. "For the psychologists and HR professionals out there, his highest score on the Big Five personality scale is agreeableness," added Gerard.

Next came the gene COMT, which affects the levels of neurotransmitters such as dopamine and norepinephrine in the brain. There are "slow" and "fast" versions of COMT, which respectively cause higher and lower levels of dopamine. The more dopamine in your system, the better you can concentrate and focus in the short term, but the more prone you will be to anxiety under prolonged conditions of pressure. The converse is true with less dopamine in your system, which means people with fast COMT tend to operate well under prolonged pressure. "Some call this the worrier/warrior hypothesis," says Gerard, the "worrier" being the slow version and the "warrior" the fast version. There are pros and cons to both: Olympic swimmers, for example, tend to have the worrier version, while Olympic wrestlers have the warrior version.

"Pete has the slow version, and this almost certainly correlates with the busy brain syndrome described earlier. For the neurophysiologists out there, his ERP P1 was 104ms against an age-related norm of 156ms."

Pete W went on to note that my body is prone to inflammation, which is not ideal for coping with prolonged periods of extreme exercise: it creates the obvious problems of inhibiting physical recovery, and

can contribute to low moods. A further gene, 1AHTR1A, would also likely contribute to low moods, inhibiting the behaviour of serotonin, while the FKBP5 gene tends to create a heightened stress response. Yet another gene, DRD1, inclines me towards a "glass is never quite full" feeling.

So my genetics had revealed that I have good concentration but am susceptible to anxiety under pressure, low moods and negative thoughts – not exactly ideal for resilience!

In summary, Pete W did not think I was "naturally resilient", although this was compensated for by my life-loving oxytocin gene and ability to concentrate, and – importantly – by my healthy lifestyle and passion for the outdoors.

As it happened, the team at DNAlysis Biotechnology in Johannesburg were in the process of developing another report called Resilience. The timing was ideal, and Gerard was fortunate to be able to discuss my results with Helen Gautschi, co-creator of the report. Helen explained that resilience, as defined by the test, should not be seen narrowly as "just endurance"; it is the ability to overcome adversity or trauma in a positive way. (This is one reason why I differentiate the two in my passion-endurance-resilience cycle.)

The report included a number of the genes discussed with Pete W, and then added several more. One additional positive to emerge was that I possess a favourable norepinephrine gene that yields endurance and coping mechanisms, especially during times of adversity.

But after that, my genetic indicators for resilience looked decidedly dodgy.

The SNP on my neuropeptide Y and BDNF genes were further indicators of potential for anxiety and low mood, while the CRHR gene would enact a disproportionately high response to stress. Overall, the genes controlling the behaviour of my serotonin might also predispose me to stress and low mood.

The outcome was far from convincing for my choice of professional endeavour! As Gerard puts it, "The Resilience report politely found that Pete only has 'moderate' levels of resilience."

And here comes the crux of it all, which Helen was at pains to point out: we can negate or reverse the effects of our genetic predisposition in the way we interact with our environment. Indeed, this is at the core of genetic testing of this nature: identifying problems so that we can counteract them. The reality, then, is neither nature nor nurture that makes us who we are; it is both – that is, the interaction of your genes with your environment.

"It is true you can't change your genes," says Gerard, "but you can certainly affect the way they express by way of lifestyle and nutritional choices." This is the essence of genetic testing, and a DNAlysis report should certainly tell you in detail how you might do that.

In my case, I am not "naturally" predisposed to rowing across oceans on my own, or mountain biking through deserts for days on end; it's not "in my DNA". But the lifestyle I have chosen to lead means my genes express themselves in a way that does indeed predispose me to

these ends, allowing me to become obsessive about certain things and refuse to give up – so much so that my anterior cingulate issue (which could well have been a negative) has been turned instead into a decided advantage.

Gerard summarises the findings like this:

> "Thanks to his privileged, healthy, outdoor lifestyle, plenty of exercise, prosocial attitudes, rich family life and wholesome food, Pete has been able to transcend what might have caused things to go in another direction altogether. Even though this is a single case study (n=1), it provides quite compelling evidence that resilience can be developed."

And the new science of epigenetics – literally "above genetics", which studies how we change as a result of the "expression" of our genes rather than due to the genetic code itself – suggests there is some evidence that this pattern can even be transgenerational. In other words, if you manage to express your genes in a certain way, this change may persist across generations. How's that for a thought?

This is indeed good news – for me and for everyone. Understanding the potential of epigenetics opens up horizons and possibilities for everyone. In my take, if I can learn to express the genes for resilience, then endurance is not far off – and why not passion too? And if I can do it, then anyone can!

* * * *

In this book, I'll be taking you on a journey of adventure and discovery – from man-hauling to the South Pole to dog sledding in the Arctic; from sand, sweat and tears in the Namib Desert to navigating otherworldly forests in central Africa; from the pain and suffering of adventure racing to – of course – the pain and suffering of rowing oceans.

Together, we'll explore the crucial elements that I believe we all need to build to become more passionate, and ultimately more successful, humans. Altogether, there are 16, and we'll uncover them as we move between expeditions, including the older ones I have revisited with the benefit of more hindsight, and the more recent ones that always seem to reveal something new to be learnt.

Throughout the journey there is a key realisation to hold in place: whatever our levels of passion, endurance and resilience right now, we can all actively develop and build these fundamental pillars of success in our lives as we move into the future. Their presence in our character and day-to-day life is not merely the result of a DNA lottery ticket. With the right processes in place, anyone can become more passionate, enduring and resilient, and therefore more successful in whatever they set out to do.