

TACTIC 7

OPERATE FROM A ZONE OF PASSION

“The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want and if they can’t find them, they make them.”

— George Bernard Shaw

PT school can have an amazing, uncanny way of sucking out the very passion that made a student want to go through the program in the first place. Maybe it’s due to only a specific subset of the curricula that interests the student. Or perhaps it’s from the immense personal sacrifice they must continually endure by putting their life on hold for three years while taking out a ton of financial debt in order to make their dreams a reality.

Regardless, think it not strange if you find school to, at some point, to be sucking the life and passion out of you. I don’t believe it does so for every student, but in a certain regard, and to a certain extent, it certainly did for my closest peers, along with myself. For us, I believe it was because we all knew *exactly* what we wanted our PT careers to look like; we knew what specialty we were each interested in, the types of clinic owners and practitioners we saw ourselves becoming, and we knew that school wasn’t teaching us a ton of the materials and concepts we were ultimately interested in (or even believed to be overly relevant).

In that regard, I believe school can become especially draining for those who have a clear-cut vision of exactly what they’re after and how they’re planning to make it happen. The

more clearly you know what you want your future to consist of and ultimately look like, the more impatient you can find yourself becoming as you have to endure yet *another* course filled with material for which you don't have much passion. Therein exists a great (and often hidden) irony: the most passionate students are often the ones who become worn down the most in school; they are the ones who are most sensitive to feeling their time and energy forcibly being spent on subjects and topics that are not pertinent to their *true* passion.

When you're not passionate about *anything*, indifference builds within you to the point where it fills you entirely. The problem with this abundance of indifference is you might find yourself no longer knowing what you like or what fills you with satisfaction... and if you don't know what you like, it's hard to tell what you *don't* like.

For me personally, if I wasn't studying something pertaining directly to orthopedics or exercise physiology, I wasn't operating within my God-given zone of passion. I could study orthopedics, anatomy, physiology, and other such particular topics for hours and hours on end while feeling that I only spent a fraction of the energy doing so compared to spending a single hour studying other topics.

The problem for me (it always has been, and always will be) is that I love orthopedics along with strength & conditioning too much to be average at either of them, either as a student or as a professionally-licensed therapist. If you're a student who knows what your true passion is, don't be alarmed if you find it challenging to continually study materials and complete assignments pertaining to a realm of physical therapy that you're just not all that fired up with for learning. Now, this isn't an excuse to forego your best efforts as a student in learning the material, but it is a license to *acknowledge openly* to yourself that it's not what truly lights your fire. Pretending that every bit of the academic curricula or schooling process truly lights your fire isn't a healthy thing to do. There will be aspects you love and others that you don't. Don't lie to yourself. Seriously, it's not healthy. Give yourself permission to be honest about this, but then follow it up with an action plan that helps you to ensure you keep your passion flowing.

You can only go for so long when holding your breath

underwater before bad things start to happen. The same is true when it comes to operating outside of your zone of passion (be it in school or the clinic); you can do it intermittently when needed before “coming back up for air,” but if you go too long without breathing in your passion, your spirit for what you love winds up going unconscious. As someone who is in school to achieve great things academically and professionally, you cannot afford to let this happen to you. Regardless of how useless you may believe certain aspects of the curricula to be, when it comes to studying these topics, you must know how to endure them while simultaneously involving yourself in meaningful, passionate pursuits. The unpleasant aspects of school will drain your tank, so you must have fuel sources in place that will continually fill it, preventing it from running dry.

Pro tip: *You need to understand that PT school has to make sure you cover all the bases across the multiple disciplines and specialties of physical therapy. The goal of PT school is not to turn you into an expert in any one realm of physical therapy but rather to ensure you are competent enough not to hurt anyone you treat within any realm of physical therapy.*

There is a wide variety of multidisciplinary curricula to cover within the timeframe of a PT program. The unfortunate result is that students get spread extremely thin regarding knowledge across each of these domains. However, just so we’re clear about students learning the absolute basics across all physical therapy disciplines: I wholeheartedly support this and don’t want it to change. Each member within our profession needs to have baseline competency in all of these domains. The expectation is to specialize only after baseline proficiency across all domains has been achieved. After all, as the Hippocratic oath states, “above all else, do no harm.”

The challenge with this often arises when a student has a strong interest in one particular domain right from the start of their academic journey; it creates a situation in which the majority of time studying other realms is done so with little or no particular interest. I am the poster child of this situation, which I constantly endured throughout my program. My love is orthopedics and physical exercise. I’m obsessed with it, and

I always want to become more knowledgeable and proficient with my skills. Naturally, I wasn't in the greatest of moods when I had to spend hours studying topics that didn't directly tie themselves into orthopedics, exercise physiology or therapeutic rehab. But thankfully, there's a way around this issue should you run into it; you simply have to place yourself within what I call a "zone of passion."

But what is a zone of passion, and how do you know when you're within one? It's, in fact, incredibly simple to describe what these zones are, and it's arguably even more straightforward to understand when you're inside one and operating from within its confines.

A zone of passion is a realm in which the concepts, materials, ideas, or offerings within are what you innately feel drawn to and desire to utilize. I essentially view them as God-given desires that have been graciously placed within us. When you fixate on these zones that you find fascinating and life-giving, your mind (and I believe your spirit, too) moves into them. Everything existing within one of these zones is a medium that you can use to make the world a better place, but you have to be within it if you are to use it. You'll know that you're operating from within one when you feel passion or joy building up within you at a rate quicker than it can flow outwards into the activity or event you're immersed within.

So, how does one remain in a zone of passion when forced to study topics and materials while going through various aspects of a program that they're not truly passionate about? Here are the steps to take to make sure that you're continually operating out of a zone of passion:

STEP 1: *Find enjoyment in the process if you can't find enjoyment in the material*

Start by bringing it all back to knowing and remembering what you signed up for when heading into your PT program. You didn't sign up for perfect scenarios; you signed up for personal and professional growth. Growth from either of these two domains doesn't occur without some form of resistance. Accept it, as doing so will ground you in the ability to act through a mindset that allows you to, in a sense, redirect your passion or at

least focus on one of its different aspects. More specifically, part of your passion needs to be rooted in the actual learning process.

Note: I did not say that your passion needs to be rooted exclusively in *what* you learn. Rather, you would be wise to strive to find ways to be passionate about the *process* of learning itself. Why is this so important? I would contend that there are two fundamental reasons:

The first reason is that being passionate about the actual learning process, regardless of the material you're studying, means you will undoubtedly become incredibly proficient and optimized when it comes to having an intimate understanding of your specific learning style. You become much more in tune with knowing what works for you and what doesn't, and you also gain critical awareness of how you can tweak individual study habits to reap much greater rewards. All of this leads to a sense of confidence that develops within you, allowing you to innately know why you're having a hard time digesting and memorizing material and what exactly you can do about it.

The second reason this is so important pertains to finding personal *fulfillment* in the actual process itself. This means that the material you study is largely irrelevant when finding meaning and enjoyment in what you're doing. Sure, the material itself may not be that interesting or practical (in which case, your passion may not want to show up to the party). But if you can fall in love with the *process*, well, that's a party that passion not only wants to show up for but one that it also wants to be the life of as well.

It will look a bit different for practically every student. For me, it often looked something like this: I would bemoan the thought of having to spend hours on learning material that I knew I'd never use after graduation. It felt like a lot of wasted time that I could have spent studying within the realms that truly lit my fire. Naturally, since it felt like a forfeiture of time and effort, getting psyched up to spend precious time and energy on such topics drained my spirits. It's important to be honest with oneself, and that's precisely what I had to do. I couldn't lie to myself and pretend to convince myself otherwise. It just wasn't a healthy thing to do.

There was no way I could fall in love with the content itself, but I could fall in love with the *process* of studying it if I could find a way to make the process enjoyable. So, the trick for me became to turn the studying of this material into a sort of game, one where I would ask myself how I could make the study session itself a bit more efficient than from the previous week; how I could learn the material a bit quicker than from the last unit; how I could consolidate my notes filled with such boring content into a more practical layout, etc.

This very process would shift my attention away from the academic material itself and draw me into a fascination with building or assembling a sort of tool, if you will, that would help me achieve the objective of becoming better at the actual process. Of course, I was, in fact, studying the academic material throughout the process. Still, with a mindset so heavily fixated on wanting to optimize the learning process of this material (as a means to become more efficient), I would, in a sense, find myself actually looking forward to learning anything I didn't enjoy to determine if my study methods and pursuits were working. It didn't make study sessions feel as if they were sunshine and rainbows, but it always gave me a sense of reward when I knew that I had found one or more ways to optimize my study habits and techniques.

What made this all so rewarding is this process wasn't confined to merely one unit of material or one single course; I could continue to perfect this technique as I carried the entire process forward to the next unit of that course and into other courses altogether. Every semester would see me enter it with a "carry over" effect from the previous one. Wherever I left off from the previous semester would essentially be right where I picked back up in the one that followed.

So, when the material itself is draining you in spirit, look for ways to turn the study process into some sort of game or event in which you can use to make the actual study process more enjoyable, and thus, more rewarding.

STEP 2: Create the opportunities to fill your tank if there are none to currently be found

Since school consists of more than just studying, it's

essential to take the tactics from the first step and apply them in a way that expands beyond the study process itself. The zones of passion that you must strive to continuously operate from expand far beyond studying the didactic material itself and into the remainder of your time and pursuits within your program.

You've already accepted the unpleasantness and challenge that will come your way when studying material that does not light the fire within you. However, you must also look for and find ways to give your passion the constant and life-giving oxygen it requires to stay healthy at all other points in time. Let me first expand on this a bit. Then, from there, I will provide you with specific actions I took during my days as a PT student in which I actively sought and created opportunities that allowed my passion to take center stage. The result was passion operating uninterrupted during those moments, allowing my spirits to fill back up in ways that were beyond refreshing.

Pro tip: *If school isn't providing you with the zones that allow you to fully operate out of your passions, you need to find ways to create them. Not only is this healthy for you as an individual, but it also creates opportunities for you to continually learn, grow and perfect the craft for which you're so passionate.*

Having a passion that wells up within you yet does not have a continual outlet where it can flow out unobstructed into the world is a crime and a shame. It's a crime in that it robs the lives of yourself and others of the experiences and ways in which meaningful and enriching events occur. These events are ones that could otherwise change lives for the better. It's a shame since the unique gift of passion stored up within you and waiting to flow out of you is resigned to instead sit on the shelf in darkness, collecting the metaphorical dust of apathy.

At its best, it serves as the signature that locks you into a contract of mediocrity, while at its worst, strips you of the meaning and direction that your life is meant to have.

But don't expect school to give you such opportunities to find zones that you're meant to be within. It may afford you some, but you'll likely feel that there are other zones you have for which there are no opportunities to operate within. When this happens, you need to look around and ask yourself how to

create them.

Why is this so important to do? Because as mentioned at the start of this chapter, it's entirely possible that you may find school itself to suck your passion from you – the same passion that led you to want to become a physical therapist in the first place. It happens more than you might think.

Using myself as an example

My passion is for all things strength & conditioning, along with orthopedics. I feel a massive gap exists in the healthcare realm between the point where patients are healthy enough to be discharged from a clinic and the point where they have the complete confidence and knowledge required for to continue making their bodies more robust and resilient following their injury. I absolutely bleed passion for the moments when I help someone realize how much their body is genuinely capable of, enlightening them with what it feels like to have complete confidence in their pursuit of strength.

Watching the joy on their face and hearing the excitement in their voice as they discover for the first time how strong their body is, and how far they've come, is something that winds my clock in ways I can't describe. My life's meaning just makes more sense to me *every single time* I can help someone overcome the fears, confusion, or obstacles they have with the pursuit of physical strength. My life's mission is not just to help others get out of pain, nor is it just to help them move better, but also to help them become physically stronger while learning how the *process* can change multiple domains of their life for the better.

Now, let's be honest here, PT school doesn't exactly present one with many opportunities to do such things. I realized this about two semesters into my program, as I found myself *greatly* missing my days of personal training where I routinely got to do those very things. When I trained others, it didn't matter who they were or what their physical abilities were. I worked with everyone, ranging from those who had never worked out a day in their life up to professional and Olympic athletes. If they had a genuine interest in using strength training and physical conditioning to improve some aspect of their life,

I was committed to helping them achieve what they were after.

I never wanted to give up the aspect of training others; I only wanted to serve others better with an additional skill set that would provide me with advanced knowledge and the scope of practice to treat them hands-on when needed. Pursuing my physical therapy degree was the way I felt called to bridge this gap.

My longing to help others learn more about movement, strength, conditioning, and the pursuit of building an overall more injury-resilient body was at an all-time high during those initial semesters, and I knew that no longer working with such individuals was hurting my spirits.

Naturally, it wasn't too long after this that I began looking for ways to fill this void, or as I like to say, create a zone of passion from which I could operate. It started by taking various classmates to the gym after our lectures or labs were done for the day. From there, I could show them exercises and concepts we were going over in class and how modifying these basic principles yielded changes in movement intensity, muscle recruitment, etc. Then I found myself getting back in touch with my roots through writing strength and conditioning programs for certain classmates.

For other classmates, it was through showing them how fun it is and how good it feels (while simultaneously relieving stress) to learn how to do basic striking workouts. These were sessions in the gym where I had them put on wrist wraps and gloves and then throw different punches and kicks into pads that I would hold for them. It became a regular thing, and a new appreciation was learned for the movement requirements of the skill itself, what their bodies were capable of, and just how tiring (but fun) it can be!

These actions were *exactly* what my spirits needed. Every activity session put fuel back into the tank in a beautiful way. As a result, school became more enjoyable and meaningful to me; each day now became an opportunity to help classmates learn powerful principles of physical activity while advancing my own skill set.

This made me realize that whenever I saw an opportunity come up where I could hop into a zone of passion, I needed to do my best to make it happen, knowing full well it would benefit

others along with myself. That's the beautiful thing about these zones – they tend to benefit others as much as they benefit you.

This pursuit of hunting down opportunities even included one lecture in our therapeutic exercise rehab course, where our professor allowed me to present a curricular topic to my classmates that I had extensive experience within the past. Life's a funny thing; one moment you're getting rejected from every DPT program you're applying to, and the next, your professor is asking you to take the reins on presenting a topic that is required to be taught in one of your courses.

These opportunities were what my spirit craved, *but they were ones I had to hunt down for myself*. In doing so, it kept me grounded to the underlying reason that I wanted to become a physical therapist in the first place, which was to help people come back stronger from their pain and injuries to then discover just how rewarding the pursuit of strength & conditioning can be.

Take time to ask yourself how you can create your own zones as you head into your program

It's beautiful enough that we're all passionate about specific, unique things in life. However, what's even more beautiful is how our own passion is still uniquely flavored compared to those of others who might have a passion that overlaps or seems identical to ours. You could also think of them as fingers and fingerprints; fingers can look the same from one person to the next, but no two people have the same fingerprints. Fingerprints are how others can identify a person, and passion is no different. If you let your passion flow, people will be able to identify (and remember you) based on the unique markings of your passion.

I cannot stress enough the importance of taking some time to ask yourself how you could potentially create, and then tap into, the zones that will keep your passion flowing and your spirits in good health as you continually tackle the requirements of your PT program. Even if they are subjects or pursuits outside of the realm of physical therapy itself, tapping into a zone or two from which you then expend your energy will serve as nutrition for the soul.

If you pay attention to other students (within and outside

your cohort) as you make your way through school, you will likely gain a sense of who has found a way to operate from zones of passion and who could likely benefit from discovering and then spending some time within these metaphorical fuel stations.

Start to develop ideas about how you can find and utilize these zones before your tank is running on empty. You don't need exact action plans right away, just ideas that you can continually hone in on as you embark on your academic journey. If you keep your eyes peeled, you'll find and create the opportunities your passion craves, which will keep your spirits in good health.

Passion is a gamechanger, but only if it's not forced to take a seat and remain quiet. Give it the opportunities it craves by finding ways to put it to use. If you do, your grades, your peers, and your spirit will all thank you.