

## Achievement Addiction

### Sample Q&As for Interviews with Justine Toh:

#### **Q: What makes you an expert in achievement addiction?**

**A:** I'm an Australian-born Chinese migrant kid raised by tiger parents who wanted to do whatever they could to set their daughters up for life. They felt that a 'good education' was the way to do that, and so it really mattered to my parents that my sister and I attended a public selective school. My sister was accepted into one, but I wasn't. That experience left a huge impression on me and created this long-lasting dynamic where I knew I was 'ok' if I was doing well at school because academic achievement had been impressed upon me as all-important.

Aside from my own personal story, I think that an addiction to achievement is something that girls, especially, struggle with. Girls get socialised to be diligent and conscientious workers, to understand the rules and how to follow them. So when they do the right thing, and do it really well, they get praised for it. This has a formative effect on a girl's soul: she learns that this is how she gets recognised: for playing by the rules and satisfying external demands for validation. And even when you finish school where the benchmarks for success are very clear, life still has plenty of hoops for you to jump through: is your job both fulfilling and well-paid? Is there a path for promotion? Can you afford a house in a desirable suburb? Can you juggle a family and a career? And so on.

#### **Q: How would someone know that they're an achievement addict?**

**A:** If someone treats their identity as one with their achievements and their world falls apart when they lose their job, get a poor grade, blow the game, or just receive critical feedback, then that's a pretty big tell. Or, on the other hand, they're too over the moon when they achieve something. I'm not saying that it's not OK to be sad or happy if you fail or succeed. But there's a difference between acknowledging and experiencing those feelings and, on the other hand, bundling up your whole being in what you're happy or sad about. If your achievements become an index of your own self-worth, then it's likely that you don't

have great perspective on achievement. The highs you feel will be great, but the lows you experience will drag you too low.

I have felt incredibly anxious waiting for exam results to come back – it was as though my entire existence was on the line. I get why I felt like that, but really, that's just not the way it should be. At the other extreme, I remember that after writing an article that I thought was particularly good, I was on such a high that I began stumbling around my workplace like I was drunk. It was like that movie *Black Swan* when Natalie Portman's uptight ballerina character finally nailed the Black Swan performance. She thinks she's good, but she's actually unhinged. Both reactions are equally problematic.

**Q: Why is achievement addiction an issue for many of us - not just you?**

**A:** We live in a world where everything is reduced to metrics, or measured and assigned a numerical worth. The ATAR. The number of followers you have on social media. Salaries. KPIs. Billable hours. Best-seller lists. Box office figures and ticket sales. Property prices. Sports league tables. Auction prices. Australia's obsession with winning gold at the Olympics.

There doesn't have to be an explicit numerical worth involved, either: think of polite small talk where we ask someone what they do for a living, where they went to school, and where they live. These kinds of questions, and the more number-based measures of achievement already mentioned, are a way of 'rating' people and organising them into hierarchies of value.

We say that 'everyone is equal' but we're also embedded in systems that constantly put a price on our worth. More than that, everyone gets measured by the same system that determines whether we pass muster or we're found wanting – which can be especially brutal if you're assigned a 'low' value.

**Q: But don't we want people to try their hardest - and then honour them when they do well?**

**A:** Of course we want people to do well and strive to do their best. Achievement should be encouraged and praised. But my book is calling out the way that achievement and striving becomes overinvested with meaning. We think that having a good résumé is the same as being a good person. Or we think that we earn our success in life through hard work, which may mean we harshly judge those less successful than ourselves, and we become blind to all the good luck or providence that helped us along the way.

**Q: Who are you trying to reach with your book?**

**A:** I dedicated this book to 'pretty much every woman I know' so I hope they read it. Other than that, every Type-A person out there. Or teachers, students, parents, school principals should read the book. Anyone who was raised by a tiger parent or coach obsessed with academic or sporting success. People who work extremely hard for a desired outcome, and then when they achieve that goal, find themselves immediately on to the next project, the next pursuit. We all know people like that.