



## DEALING WITH FAILURE

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*'I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.'* — Thomas A. Edison

From cradle to grave we learn from our failures. It is ubiquitous in human development, from learning how to walk, catch a ball or something more complex such as telling a funny joke. Although failure is a good teacher, we also learn to fear failure.

In simple terms failure can be defined as “lack of success”<sup>1</sup>. For some, this perceived lack of success will be enough to promote a fear of failure. For others it may be the deeply painful feelings it is associated with. Our bodies' response to failure can be so extreme that it mimics physical pain<sup>2</sup>.

It became clear when writing this article that failure is big business. There are enumerable podcasts, TED talks, YouTube videos, books, articles and blogs on the topic. Almost all of them tell us that failure is a part of life and it will make you stronger. Despite inherent wisdom in this message, this may provide little comfort, as when one perceives failure the experience can be incredibly personal and debilitating.

Whether it may be making a medical error, failing an exam, not getting a job, the end of a relationship or many others where we think we have failed, the embarrassment and blow to your self-esteem can manifest in many ways. How different people cope with failure can make a difference to happiness<sup>3,4</sup> and also in future success<sup>5</sup>. It's inevitable that at times in our life we will all feel the sense of failure. We hope this short article can give you a starting point to help you through your own individual experience.

*'I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.'* — Michael Jordan

### **Talk about it**

After a medical error or failing an exam it can be nerve-racking to initiate a conversation about what happened with a colleague or your boss, particularly if you are in the early stage of your career. But, in talking with people you will find that you are not alone and even your most respected role model will have had struggles and hardships.

They may share insights into their experience and what helped them to succeed.

'I believe that almost everyone can benefit from sharing and hearing another perspective,' said Tasha Eurich, a Denver-based organizational psychologist. 'It's healthy to ask what went wrong....'

### **Accept How You Feel**

When we fail at something important to us it inevitably hurts, sometimes a lot. It's ok to be upset and it is useful to acknowledge those feelings. Some distraction might be ok, but don't completely ignore how you feel, and work through the pain. Similar to grief, there are

recognized emotional stages after failure; shock and surprise, denial, anger and blame, depression, acceptance and finally insight and change<sup>6</sup>. By accepting those emotions and dealing with the feeling – this might make the process go faster and be less painful overall<sup>5</sup>.

### **Be kind to yourself**

Allow yourself some time to reflect. This may even mean taking some time off. Although alcohol might be tempting – try to practice healthy coping skills instead. Call a friend or family member, go for a walk, eat well, practice mindfulness, and try to do something fun that you know gives you pleasure – play with your children, read a book, play sport, watch a movie, or spend some time with your pet. Engaging with other areas of our life strengthens our identity outside the career and helps to keep things in perspective.

### **Don't take it Personally**

Although a level of self-reflection can aid learning, don't blame yourself unnecessarily. Failing today doesn't mean you will fail tomorrow. Failure is not an identity. Try not to think – "I am a failure".

### **Examine the truth and learn from the situation**

We work in a scientific profession. Clinically, we need accurate information about the patient to examine the appropriate evidence and provide the best solution. When the dust settles, applying the same scientific rigor can help you make sense of things and recover. Blaming others is easy and being objective and transparent may be confronting. Sometimes this means some acknowledgement of our role. Striving for objectivity may be the best way to learn from our mistakes.

### **Some questions to ask yourself;**

- How can I adjust what I am doing to prevent this happening again?
- What is one thing I can do differently next time?
- What might have produced a better outcome?
- Was the failure completely beyond my control?
- How can I move forward from here?

After gathering the facts, step back and ask yourself, what did I learn from this? You can think about how you will apply this newfound insight moving forward.

**Sometimes, failure can be debilitating. If you are struggling to get through it or are not functioning as well as you normally should or do, seek professional help. A good place to start is Converge International – a free service offered through the College of Intensive Care Medicine for Trainees and Fellows. There are many other professional services that can help. Please seek help and assistance. Remember – you are not alone in your experience of failure.**



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