

Fear of failure

Fear of failure is pervasive. It affects everyone to varying degrees and in different ways. While most of us recognise our fear, few of us understand just how limiting this fear can be, or what we can do to prevent and overcome its adverse effects.

This post on fear of failure is in two parts. Part 1 explains how fear of failure manifests, the situations where it occurs, and its causes. Part 2 shows how to deal with the adverse and positive aspects of fear of failure in practical ways.

Recognising the signs

It's normal that you think and feel the things in the list below, at least to some degree. But, when you think and feel one or more of them repeatedly, and when they interfere with your ability to perform, or to step out of your comfort zone when opportunities present, you have fear of failure of a severity that hampers your work, sporting and social activities. Here's a list of possible signs.

Do you:

- ✓ Question just how smart or capable you are
- ✓ Ask yourself whether you are good enough
- ✓ Feel anxious about disappointing or being shown as not up to it in front of others whose opinions matter to you, especially those in seniority positions
- ✓ Worry about what others think of you, especially whether they are questioning your competence
- ✓ Feel uneasy that other people will discount or ridicule you
- ✓ Lower your own and others' expectations of you by telling them you don't expect to succeed
- ✓ Worry about your ability to achieve your goals and pursue the future you want for yourself
- ✓ Avoid situations that are outside your comfort zone by unconsciously getting distracted by things that prevent you from participating
- ✓ Generalise failing in one situation to failing in many others
- ✓ Procrastinate and run out of time to prepare adequately, so setting yourself up to fail and confirming your belief you are not up to it
- ✓ Suffer physical symptoms like last minute migraine, that gives you an excuse not to engage
- ✓ Pass an opportunity on to someone else to avoid exposing yourself.

The common denominator in all of these examples are situations where you are judging yourself and/or feel you are being judged by others. You are your own harshest critic. You don't accept yourself. You lack confidence in your ability and project this into how you perceive others see you. The way you feel about yourself determines your behaviour and the way you encourage others to treat you. If you allow it to begin, it becomes a vicious cycle.

Put another way, as Buddha says: "*The mind is everything. What you think, you become.*" Viewed this way, understanding *your* definitions of failure and managing *your* reactions to failing are crucial to your happiness and success.

These manifestations raise the question of what 'failure' means in practice. Each of us has our own definition. How *you* define it, depends on *your* standards, values and beliefs. For example, being unsuccessful in a job application:

- may to one person, be shrugged off as testing their marketability, or not being the right job anyway,
- to another, have been an opportunity to learn to do better next time, and
- to a third who sees losing as a serious matter, be a reason to worry that they will not get another opportunity, or that you let themselves down badly and ruminate for days on the negative outcome.

Consequences of fear of failure

Small amounts of this fear are motivational. The signs are akin to the twinge of anxiety that occurred just before the curtain went up in the school play, or when you are making your first Board presentation. The body's fight or flight burst of adrenalin in these situations puts you on your toes and maximises your preparedness to perform at your best.

But too much fear is detrimental. Equally, avoiding putting yourself in positions where you may fail is also harmful. Here's why.

- When long-held worrisome thoughts about your capability remain tightly lodged in your head your hopes, dreams and aspirations will be compromised, even fatally undermined at times.
- Your motivation is severely diminished when deep-down you believe you can't succeed. Without the conviction that the effort will reap a result you will probably fall short of your goals.
- The profoundly pessimistic (self-sabotaging) voice in your head dissipates your confidence and blocks out the healthier voice of your aspirations – you become unwilling to even try.
- The underlying ambivalence that leads to procrastination, applying the brakes with one foot while pressing on the accelerator with the other creates internal conflict and distress – you are at war with yourself.
- When you discount your capabilities, you shut down your creativity.
- You fear trying something new or taking a risk that might exacerbate painful feelings of doubt and insecurity. This subsides when you decide to postpone or reject stepping out of your comfort zone. By backing out or lowering the bar you further lower your self-esteem; it becomes a downward spiral.

Some failure is inevitable

In all walks of life, some failure is inevitable. But avoidance like that described above only enables you to escape temporarily from the anxiety and self-doubt. In doing so you deprive yourself of the opportunity to succeed and thereby begin to reduce and remove the unwarranted, chronically negative assumptions you hold about yourself.



If you so very cautious that you try to avoid failure altogether, you will never stretch yourself or move to the edges of your comfort zone. You'll not reach your full potential. And you'll miss opportunities that were right in front of you. Or you might make decisions you later regret.

As the quote from the Buddha above reminds us, how you see the possibility – or the fact – of failure is up to you. You can

embrace failure as the learning that gives you the opportunity to try again and improve.

Thomas Edison, the great inventor, wrote "*I failed my way to success.*" It's hard to imagine our world without the profound benefits from the thousands of patents that Edison held (think electric light bulbs, motion pictures, sound recording). To be so diverse and prolific meant Edison had to fail much more often than he succeeded. p

Causes of fear of failure

Let's be clear, fear of failure is not a personality trait. It's not something you are born with, and stuck with.

The cause of fear of failure is the same, whether it occurred in childhood or is triggered by unhappy experiences in our adult lives. Over time this fear tends to become unconscious and automatic. It controls us from the shadows. Like an invisible puppet.

The cause is a pessimistic and self-sabotaging voice inside you that says, '*you can't do this*' or '*you're not good enough to succeed*'. In childhood, because your parent/s didn't fully encourage and support you, your adult self-confidence and determination lack the drive and depth to achieve in particular situations. Your ability to hear the healthy voices of encouragement is drowned out, your creativity is restricted and your willingness to take risks is diminished, often to the point of immobilisation. In psychological terms, if you weren't positively given the confidence '*to try, and try again*' until you learned to succeed, then the fear of failure voice in your head is trying to protect you from the emotional pain of failure you experienced as a child.

As some parents do to their children, so some adults do to themselves by taking on the role of being the critical parent. You have the control and power over your reactions to the disappointment of failing at something. If as an adult, rather than saying to yourself '*I'll try again*', you give up, thinking '*I'm not good enough*', '*This is not my bag*', and '*I can't see myself ever succeeding*', you create the same reasons that cause fear of failure in your child years.

To be clear, fearing failure is normal. The person who is *not* compromised by lack of childhood support, overcomes their initial and natural anxiety and has go. But the others are pushed to say to themselves '*I can't do this*'. They hold back, or withdraw.

In these people, the seeds sown in childhood, bear disabling fruit in adulthood – unless, as I shall show in Part 2 – you learn to overcome the negative script your childhood.

More on this subject

- (1) [10 Signs That You Might Have Fear of Failure](#) by Guy Winch PhD (2013)
- (2) [Anxiety and Self-Doubt: Perfect Recipe for Underachievement](#) by Leon Seltzer PhD (May 2015)