

Chapter 26

Prepare for Setbacks

You have now acquired a substantial number of skills to build self-esteem. Regardless of how secure one's self-esteem, there is still the possibility that it can be "blown away" by a salient "failure" or unfortunate event. So it is imperative to develop skill for riding out "failures"—for keeping self-esteem strong and secure during the storms of life that will inevitably come. In some ways, this activity is a review. Let's first preassess:

1. What are things at which people (including yourself) fail?
2. What does "failure" mean?
3. What has worked to help you cope with "failure" during, before, and after?

At what do people "fail"? Here are a few of the answers that adults have mentioned:

- jobs
- marriages
- parenting
- school
- reaching ideal weight
- smoking cessation
- keeping moral standards
- making time for fun
- reaching goals

Did you think of others?

What does "failure" mean? Some answers that adults have given include:

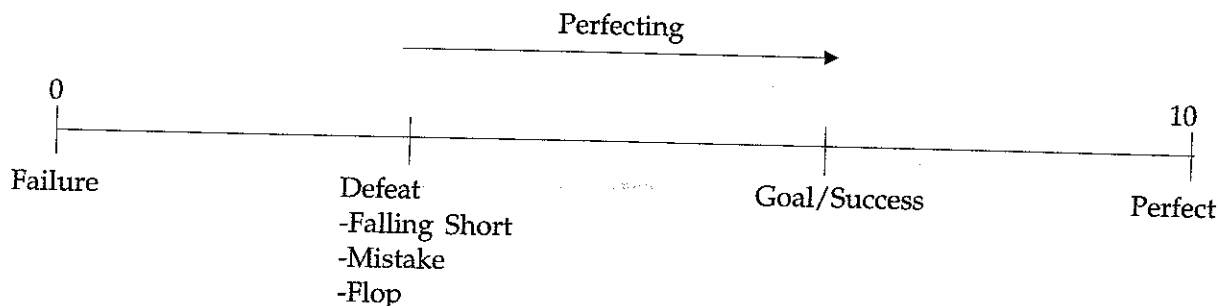
- Nobody loves you
- Rejection
- I'm no good
- Not maintaining my self-esteem
- I'm human

What has worked to help you cope with "failure" in the past? Some have mentioned talking it over, giving oneself permission to fail, forgiving oneself, realizing that it won't matter too much years from now, and changing course.

Are you getting the idea that people vary greatly in how they view failure and in their abilities to cope with it?

Approaching Perfection

Let's take a look at "failure" in a way that expands some of the concepts previously explored.



Perfection means completed, finished, without defect or flaw. Since humans are fallible, we only can approach perfection. A *goal/success* refers to attaining something we want for happiness, comfort, or growth. Because humans are always in the process of becoming, a goal is placed somewhat to the left of perfection. You might argue that you could set a goal to save 5 percent of your income and meet that goal perfectly. But aside from simply quantifiable endeavors, goals are generally imperfectly met. That is, improvements could ideally be made no matter how well one performs. *Perfecting* means making more nearly perfect. This can occur as one attempts to reach a goal or after meeting a goal.

People imprecisely say, "I'm a failure" (which means "I always and in every way fail"), when they mean to say, "I failed to reach my goal; I fell short of my goal; I made a mistake, etc." To slightly alter Hubert H. Humphrey's quotation to improve our understanding, "There's a big difference between failure and defeat. Failure is when you are defeated and [never] learn nor contribute anything."

Handling Flops

Rather than using the label failure, I prefer the word "flop" to refer to unfortunate events/behaviors, falling short, mistakes, etc. Flop sounds less serious and less permanent than failure, and it refers to an external, not the core.

One more concept is worth reiterating before moving to the skill-building activity. Research demonstrated that a pessimistic thinking style held by men in their twenties predicted poor physical health when those men reached their forties and fifties (Peterson, Seligman, and Vaillant 1988). When an unfortunate event occurred, the pessimistic men tended to fully fault themselves, believe that they would never improve, and believe that misfortune would spill over into all areas of life. For example, after failing a math test, a pessimist would think, "It's me—I'm a failure; I always mess math tests up; I just am unlucky when things really matter." Optimists, on the other hand, who fared better years later in their physical health, might think, "I wasn't up to par physically that day; it's a one-time thing; this won't ruin my life." Similar thinking styles tend to distinguish drug addicts who relapse after slipping from those who rebound from similar setbacks.

From such research, we can form certain guidelines for handling setbacks:

1. Admit mistakes. Don't deny responsibility, but focus on remedial action: what you need to *do*.
2. Reframe the event. Instead of condemning the self, which erodes self-esteem and saps motivation, focus on externals. For example, instead of thinking, "What's wrong with me?" (The answer is easy: We're imperfect!), focus on externals (fatigue, incomplete preparation, too little experience, etc.).

Instead of considering something a total failure, remind yourself that there will probably be other opportunities. After experiencing a "flop," ask yourself the following questions:

- Did certain things go well?
- What are the advantages of not getting what I wanted?
- What coping skills could I learn from this?
- Were there signs of an impending crisis that I did not heed?
- If a similar event occurs again, what could I do to attend to such signs earlier?

Flop Inoculation: An Exercise

Guidelines, such as those above, can be helpful. Let's put them into practice now. The following exercise derives from Stress Inoculation, developed by psychologist Donald Meichenbaum (1985). He states that people can prepare for stress by practicing what they will think and do before, during, and after encountering a stressful event. Exposure to small and safe doses of imaginary stress can "inoculate" us just as a small injection can inoculate us against disease. Here, the stressful event is the prospect of "flopping" (e.g., falling short of a goal, making a mistake, performing poorly, or forgetting to use your self-esteem skills when criticized).

Step One

Put a check by any statements that would have meaning for you if chosen as part of your coping repertoire relative to mistakes/setbacks.

Before

- _____ It will be fun to succeed, but not the end of the world if I don't.
- _____ I'm new at this, so I'll be a little extra careful until I get the hang of it.
- _____ I see this as a new challenge, not a problem or threat.
- _____ This is a gift (opportunity, adventure, or challenge), not a problem. (Mother Teresa)
- _____ I'll approach this with curiosity, not fear or self-doubt.
- _____ I'll aim to do a good job. I won't ruin the experience with perfectionism.
- _____ I have as much right as anyone to try my hand at this.
- _____ I'll look for success in little steps and ways. I'll dismiss all-or-nothing demands of myself.
- _____ I am embarking without absolute certainty of all the facts and outcomes, and that's okay.
- _____ I have the right to decide what's best for me and to implement my decisions with confidence and without apology.
- _____ I calmly examine the probable outcomes of my actions.
- _____ If I'm not uptight about mistakes, I'll also be more creative.
- _____ My focus is development, not mistakes.
- _____ It's okay to try and to "flop."
- _____ I'll choose the course that seems best.
- _____ I'll relax and consider different approaches and their probable consequences ... Then I'll make the best choice I can.
- _____ I'm optimistic and open to all possibilities.
- _____ What will this challenge require of me? What can I realistically give?
- _____ I don't have to be perfect to do well.
- _____ It could be fun to try and stretch in the process.
- _____ I'm not afraid to risk and fall short because my worth comes from within.
- _____ What's the worst that could happen?

During

- _____ This is difficult. Relax and focus on the task.
- _____ Take it step by step. Feel good about little successes.
- _____ It's too bad things aren't perfect, but they're not a catastrophe.
- _____ Everyone makes mistakes and has rough edges. Why should I assume I don't?
- _____ My quest to transcend and shape these imperfections is important.
- _____ Relax and enjoy the process, glitches and all.
- _____ I'm not Deity. I'm human. It's okay to be imperfect. I'll do my best.
- _____ I focus on the process. The outcome will take care of itself.
- _____ I'll take it one step at a time.
- _____ Remember humor. It reminds me I'm neither as great as I wish I were, nor as bad as a lot of people might think.
- _____ This informs me about my present limitations.

After

- _____ I had a weakness. That was then. This is now.
- _____ I'm just a beginner at this, and beginners have to expect mistakes now and then.
- _____ This isn't a signpost to the rest of my life.
- _____ I am hopeful.
- _____ I take responsibility for understanding the situation, but not necessarily taking the blame, and never condemning myself.
- _____ My judgment and behavior were bad, but *I* am not bad.
- _____ Okay, now what? What are my options now?
- _____ This revealed a weakness. This is part of me, not all of me.
- _____ The weak parts are rough edges. At the core I am worthwhile.
- _____ I love myself for this.
- _____ I am still here for myself, to be a friend through this period.
- _____ I have the courage to love myself when I'm imperfect (this is my foundation for growth).

- _____ No matter what happened, I am still worthwhile, precious, and unique.
- _____ I admit sometimes I'm this way. It disappoints me. I can do something about this.
- _____ I accept the way I sometimes am, and I love those imperfect parts of me, too. This love gives me the security to grow in those areas.
- _____ No matter how bad it seemed, certain things went okay. I've gained wisdom and experience.
- _____ I'll change my course so I can be happier.
- _____ I am teachable. I can change and grow.
- _____ I can shape my future.
- _____ I can use experiences from the past and convert them to strengths.
- _____ I have the right to improve and develop each day.
- _____ I have the right to make mistakes. I am adequate to admit them and repair them as much as humanly possible.
- _____ This will pass.
- _____ This will help me be better, wiser, stronger.
- _____ I have the right to correct my course.
- _____ This mistake is a way to look at what I'm doing and see what I want to correct.
- _____ This is not really a failure, but efforts toward success. (Babe Ruth)
- _____ Instead of "failure," think: Bad choice, bad judgment, missteps, false start, momentary loss of my way, blip, or falling short.
- _____ I'm adequate to learn from this and improve next time.
- _____ Mistakes show me what I want to improve/correct/what's not working.
- _____ I'll be wiser next time.
- _____ Mistakes make me human and fallible, just like everyone else.
- _____ Okay, I botched that; if at first you don't succeed . . .
- _____ Okay, so I mess up 10 percent of the time. The rest of the time I do pretty well.
- _____ There's a bright side to this even if I don't see it yet.
- _____ Isn't it great that I can do such a ridiculous thing, and still have hope?

_____ Isn't it interesting that I sometimes condemn myself overall for a weakness or imperfection?

_____ I made a mistake. I am not a mistake.

_____ I am more than my mistake. There is more to my life history than this.

_____ I erred; now I'm returning to my good patterns right away.

_____ I did it before. I'll do it again.

_____ I believe things will improve.

_____ Okay, I handled this. I can handle other challenges, too.

_____ This is not the end of the world.

_____ My downfall isn't the end of me.

_____ The sun will come up tomorrow.

_____ No use crying over spilled milk; it's water under the bridge.

_____ No one is a "failure" until he gives up altogether.

_____ I'll not be defeated twice: once by circumstances and once by myself. (Lowell Bennion)

_____ Eventually I'll improve. There will be another chance.

_____ This was a difficult and complex task. It was made more difficult by _____ (my inexperience, lack of guidance or help, noise, weather, temperature, interruptions, my not feeling up to it, or any other accurate factor).

_____ What will I learn for the next time?

_____ I can't possibly control everything.

_____ Failure is an event, never a person. (Dr. William D. Brown)

_____ Oh, boy! Now I'm really going to learn something. (Harold "Doc" Edgerton)

_____ Failure isn't final. Start again.

_____ Years from now, will anyone really care about this?

Step Two

Below, write fifteen statements you would most like to remember to tell yourself before, during, and after times when your behavior falls short of your goals (five for before; five for during; and five for after). Statements need not come from the above list.

"Before" Statements

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

"During" Statements

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

"After" Statements

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

During each of the next three days select an event with "flop potential." Spend fifteen minutes mentally rehearsing what you will think before, during, and after the "flop."

For a most amusing and profound treatment of realistic optimism and dealing with failure read Dr. Seuss's *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* (1990).