

How Your Biggest Failure Can Lead to Your Success

There's been a lot written on the theme of failure and how integral it is to success. In a world where peoples' value is all too often determined by lists of accomplishments and tangible success, failing feels dangerous. Who has time to fail? We feel we're supposed to have graduated from an Ivy League college, started our own businesses, earned our first million, and/or won American Idol by the time we're about twenty-three years old. If we're already over thirty and haven't yet done any of these things (or something similar) we start to get that sneaky feeling that we might just be failing.

In school, where we learn the "F" word, failure packs such a wallop because it seems to be the end of the story. That letter was our grade, our identity. Some of us never outgrow that notion. The mere fear of failure can stop people from taking risks that might lead to success and triumph.

---In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.

----Albert Einstein

Heidi Grant Halvorson, psychologist and author of the well-researched book *Succeed: How We Can Reach Our Goals*, believes that there really is no such thing as failure, because the truth is that certain successes—be they personal or professional—can only grow out of failure, if not multiple failures, as long we understand how to use these so-called setbacks. What we perceive as a failure may simply be our inner being's way of telling us that we are ready to move to a new level of growth. Hundreds of psychological studies have been done on this kind of achievement, says Halvorson—and they all end up with the same findings: Much of success is dependent not on talent but on learning from your mistakes.

About half the people in the world believe that ability in any area—be it creative or social skill, math or knitting—is innate. You arrive on the earth with a skill; you do not learn it. When these people fail, they will often say, "I'm just not a born knitter," or "I'm not a natural math person." Inherent ability (or lack of it) is their explanation for success (or a lack of it).

The other half believe instead that someone might have a preference or propensity for something—say painting or speaking foreign languages—but that this ability can be improved through practice or training. When they bomb a task, they do not say, "I'm just not good at painting." Instead, they say, "Maybe I should have asked for help from an art teacher." Or, "Maybe I was too over committed to really pay attention to my artwork." Or, "Maybe I didn't try hard enough."

It's almost impossible to think rationally while yelling at yourself, "I'm a failure," or "There's something wrong with me." But when you shift your thinking, you make it possible to see what you can control—your behavior, your planning, your reactions—and change those things. The troubleshooting skills that you gain in the process are what you

need to reach your goals.

The primary difference between successful people and unsuccessful people is that the successful people fail more. If you see failure as a monster stalking you, or one that has already ruined your life, take another look. That monster can become a benevolent teacher, opening your mind to successes you cannot now imagine.

Success is as scary as failure," said Lao-tzu, and any life coach knows this is true. I can't count the number of times people have told me, "I hate the job I'm doing, but I'm good at it. To do what I want, I'd have to start at zero and I might fail." Dwelling on failure can make us miserable, but dwelling on success can turn us into galley slaves, bound to our wretched benches solely by the thought, "I hate this, but at least I'm good at it." This is especially ironic because researchers report that satisfaction thrives on challenge. Think about it: A computer game you can always win is boring; one you can win sometimes, and with considerable effort, is fun.

---You have to make mistakes to find out who you aren't. You take the action, and the insight follows: You don't think your way into becoming yourself.

----Anne Lamott

There are other types of achievements, of course: the "I made it to Friday" feat, the "I survived a 5K and will never do it again" victory. Although those successes are untouched by flat-out failure, they aren't of the soul-lifting variety either: the dazzling job, the perfect relationship, the happiness-inducing hobby. In pursuit of those inspirational successes, we do a lot of starting, working and failing. Sometimes the failure is meant to expose areas where we need a skills improvement. Sometimes, as the failure is a brick wall to test how committed we are, and how very much we want it. But occasionally, the failure is a big honking sign to change direction.

So how to know which is which? There is a way to distinguish whether a failure is a signal to double down or walk away, says Halvorson. If, when things get rough, you remain committed and even entranced by your goal, you should keep going. If what you're doing is costing you too much time and energy or the process isn't what you thought it would be or it's *not bringing you joy* or you find yourself emailing kitten photos, you need to get out and...get a new goal.

Replacing your old dream with a new one is imperative, says Halvorson. Otherwise, you'll sit around and stew in your previous failure when you could and should be asking yourself, "Hey, what do I want to do now? What are my strengths? What would make me happy if I were doing it for the next 20 or 30 years?"

It is not what happens to us that influences our motivation so much as our *perceptions* of what happens and the manner in which we choose to act in response. In terms of thought transformation, perpetual victims see life in terms of "Why me?" and "I can't, because..." whereas recovering victims see life in terms of "What can I do with

this?" Unhappiness and discomfort can be calls to action and give us the motivation to move forward.

Furthermore, significant emotional events often are able to change our behavior (or motivate us to act) more than insight or any other thought. For example, a man has known for a long time that he should write a living will. Yet he puts it off until he is almost killed in a car accident.

Life is like driving down a long, winding road. You never know what the next curve will bring – a beautiful view or a dangerous pothole. One thing is certain though. As long as you're alive, you're still moving forward and eventually you'll leave the obstacles behind. Unwelcome detours finally do end, and easier stretches lie ahead. You eventually do get to your destination. And you will have learned more from your journeys than from lying around safely at home.

----To be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed.

----Booker T. Washington