

Why do we fear failure?

“Failure” is the word we give to an undesirable result of a process into which we put effort. When we fail, we tend to view it as a result of an intrinsic and personal quality. “I am a failure.” When we fail publicly, (No one fears failing in private) our social status deteriorates because we instinctively attribute more value to success than failure. Why? I think the reason we tend to feel this way is biological – it is an evolutionary instinct. For hunter-gatherer humans, all effort had a biological cost. Spending time and energy in search of food had to be successful, and individuals who possessed the best knowledge and expertise acquired the most resources. These individuals were rewarded with higher social status and more reproductive chances. Success was survival, and this crucible of evolution forged the social and biological instincts we still carry today.

For the last few centuries, however, our knowledge and expertise is no longer limited to discrete individuals. With writing, printing, and now the internet, such knowledge and expertise is contained outside of us. The biological resources of food, shelter, and companionship are essentially available to everyone in the developed world. Failure is now a luxury we all have access to, and there is no longer any survival value in avoiding it. Our attitudes, however, have only partially caught up.

There is some contradiction in the way we see failure today. It is a bit of a truism now to say that “failure leads to success.” Many successful inventors, business leaders, and political figures have provided variations on that statement, and when stated that way, I think most people would agree. However, in his 2016 book *Mad Genius: A Manifesto for Entrepreneurs*, Randy Page writes: “Ask any 100 people what the opposite of success is, and 99 of them will probably answer failure.” This is what he calls “The Big Lie.” He goes on to write that “the real opposite of success is not failure, but mediocrity. Not only is failure not the opposite of success, it’s actually an integral and necessary element of success.”

Our educational system, however, is still based, for the most part, on avoiding failures – success is defined within our current testing culture as filling in the correct bubble on a standardized test.

How can we modernize the way we look at failure?

In order to view failure in a more modern and useful way, we need to redefine it. Part of the problem with the way we view failure is the way the word has been used. Our connotations with the word are negative and permanent. So are all our synonyms: error, mistake, etc. I believe the best way to at least re-word the concept of failure in a way that is most friendly to learning is to instead refer to failures as “unexpected outcomes,” or perhaps more glibly, “surprises.” When an “unexpected outcome” occurs, the instinctive reaction is not ridicule or shame, but the question “why did that happen?” This allows us to shed any negative intrinsic qualities, and begin to explore. I believe that this simple step, if used deliberately and consistently in a learning environment, can go a long way toward making that environment more free and playful. I believe that students will be more likely to take risks if the worst thing that happens is an innocuous “unexpected outcome.”