

No shame in failing

Peter Tapsell

What is failure? And why do we fear it so much?

There is absolutely no shame in failure, and this is a point that often appears to be overlooked. We are encouraged to strive to be number one, to win, and remember those who are successful, but when they fail we are quick to criticise - failure is not an option! But failure is crucial to success, because without one we wouldn't be able to quantify the other.

Even more importantly, failure brings uncertainty and humility, two experiences which are crucial for growing into complete human beings.

Without a healthy dose of humility every now and then we run the risk of becoming overbearingly arrogant and self-centred. Without uncertainty our lives would become depressingly tedious, without the joy of anticipation of what may or may not happen in the future.

From a personal perspective, I would dread getting out of bed each morning if I knew what was going to happen each day; it would take so much of the enjoyment away.

Failure also helps us experience joy, by showing us what is at the opposite end of the scale. The unplanned piece of good luck, or a decision that unexpectedly goes our way can provide some of the most joyful experiences. Conversely, the unexpected loss can send us right down. But the monotony of always succeeding would be even worse, taking away the challenges from life, and it is the challenges that help shape and develop our character and gives us something to strive for.

I am concerned by way in which our society tries to shield children from failure, whereas perhaps a better way of educating children is that failure is a normal part of life that one needs to get used to. Successful people fail all the time, but they know how to deal with the situation and use it to learn and build for the future.

So, the earlier that we learn to deal with failure the easier our lives become. The trick is not to shield children from the spectre of failure out of some misguided attempt to improve their educational experience, but to actively teach how to handle the experience of an "F" grade from a very early age.

Failure also makes us confront our imperfections, another area that is becoming something to be reviled. There are numerous media forms that send us messages that we are too fat, too thin, too ugly, or too poor. We are bombarded with images that show us what a perfect life we could be living if we only had the right car, house, computer or any other accessory. This intensifies the feelings of failure among many, who are unable to reconcile that they are not living the "textbook" life.

It is another way in which society not only makes failure unpalatable, but also tries to define what we should consider as failure.

However, imperfection, like uncertainty, is something that makes the world an interesting place in which to live. If we were all the same, how boring would that be? Imperfection should be accepted and embraced. Imagine a world where everything was "perfect". It is the stuff of nightmares, a truly horrifying place where there is no uncertainty, and therefore no joy because nobody knows anything else. There would be no prospect of any texture to life. By this definition I could argue that a world full of imperfection is, in fact, a form of perfection from my perspective. But I digress.

So how should we deal with failure? Failure could be considered an opportunity. It is an opportunity to try again, or to improve. It is an opportunity to change direction in some instances when the realisation hits that we might not be suited to a particular activity.

Some people don't even notice that they have failed, because they don't see it that way. Failure is, after all, only a perception. Who decides what is, or is not, good enough to be considered a success? Sometimes it is, for instance, the education system (which endeavours to make us all literate and numerate among other things), and in many other instances it is ourselves. We are often our own harshest critics, and while this can be useful, how often do we base these judgments on the standards of others?

Once we learn to define failure as an opportunity to learn, or an opportunity to better define our path in life, instead of a reason to hide or be ashamed, the better our lives will be.

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