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Failure is the condiment that gives success its flavour. — Truman Capote

THE ANATOMY OF FAILURE

USING EMOTIONS TO BOUNCE BACK FROM ADVERSITY AND DEVELOP RESILIENCE

THINK of a success story. This could be an autobiography of an entrepreneur, for instance, who realised their ambitions and dreams despite their humble, challenging beginnings. Such stories are enticing because they make us realise that these remarkable individuals have been beset by challenges and adversities before tasting success.

Importantly, they remind us that failure and success are oftentimes two sides of the same coin. It is when we overcome trials and tribulations that we experience that distinctive, rewarding sense of personal satisfaction that comes from our successes.

J. K. Rowling found success with Harry Potter after her stories were rejected by no less than nine different publishers. Her accomplishment is made more inspiring when she revealed that she battled depression and struggled with financial difficulties long before she saw her books line the shelves in stores worldwide.

The mercurial Steve Jobs was asked to leave Apple by the Board of Directors in 1985—from the very company whose fortunes he would dramatically reverse upon his return in 1997.

And Akio Morita, whose company once sold a rice cooker that had the tendency to overcook rice—decided that his company should focus on manufacturing electronics instead. A smart move, given that Morita's company, Sony, has since established itself as a household name and eventually expanded to related industries.

Failure is not the opposite to success, it's a stepping stone to success. —Arianna Huffington

THE EMOTIONS STEMMING FROM FAILURE TEACHES US RESILIENCE

Our experience of failure is often a negative one, and so, we avoid speaking about our own mistakes and errors altogether. Failing, however, teaches us valuable lessons, telling us where and how we can better

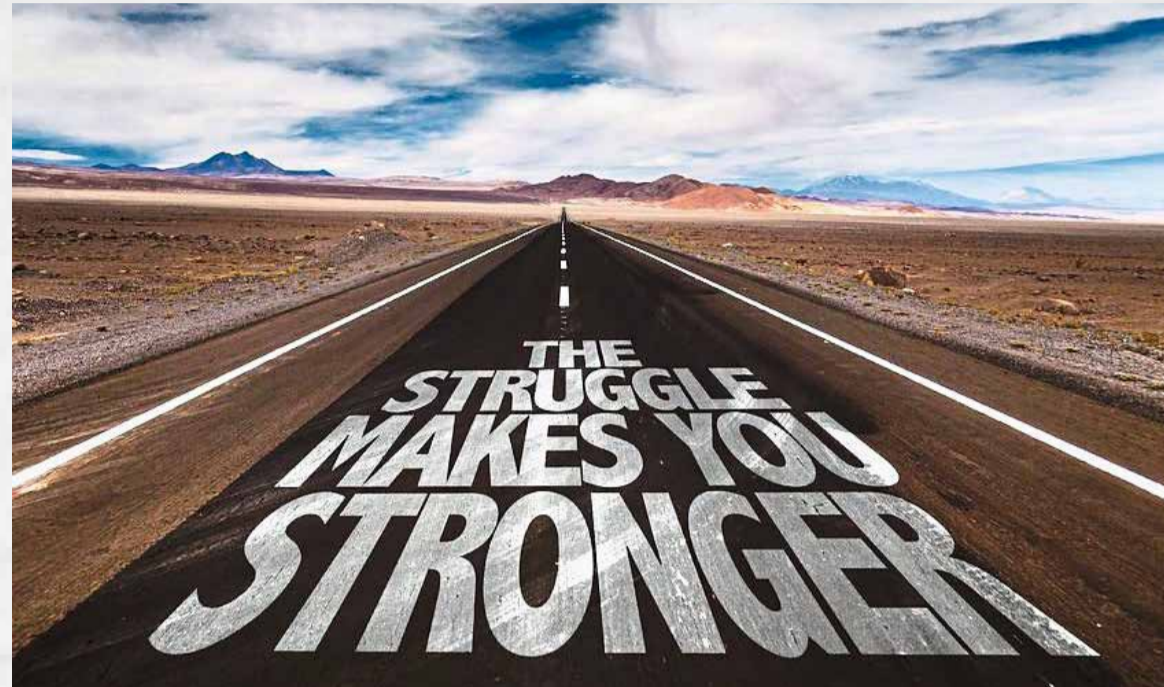


ourselves—should we decide to try again. Successful people, our role models included, are no different. It is their resilient attitude towards failures that sets them apart from those who never catch a glimpse of the finish line.

Successful people are resilient towards failures—they don't avoid or shy away from failing. Rather, they use failures to propel themselves closer to their eventual success. Resilience is a skill that can be developed, but usually not through advice that take the tone of, "get over it." To be resilient, we need to understand the components of failure.

Failure arouses emotions—negative emotions that diminish our determination and damage our self-esteem. Think of the last time you failed at something. You may have made a bad business or personal decision, acted impulsively, spoken too hastily, or messed up a project. Think about how you felt during those incidents. It probably wouldn't be too difficult to list emotions such as anger, sadness, shame, disappointment or regret.

Realising that our emotions are at the root of our failure experiences is an important first step towards developing resilience towards them.



Negative emotions tell us, "You tried, failed, and that hurt. Don't try that again." Different negative emotions have the same way of conveying this message.

Anger

Anger stems from the impression that one has been unfairly treated, unfairly judged, or simply offended. Anger experienced from failures may be due to the perception that the failure was caused by external parties or factors. As such, anger often encourages blaming and fault-finding, along with hostile responses to people who we think are responsible for contributing to our failings.

Sadness

Failures often involve the experience of losing something of value—finances, reputation or time, perhaps. We feel sadness upon the realisation that what we have lost is difficult to reclaim. We respond to prevent further losses by shutting down and deciding not to try again. Sadness effectively weakens our willpower and persistence.

Self-anger and self-pity

We may even direct feelings of anger and sadness toward ourselves. In the case of self-anger, we blame ourselves, pondering our actions and the decisions we should have made instead. When we experience self-pity, we think of ourselves as being the victim of unfavourable circumstances, seeing forces beyond our

control as continuously being obstacles to our success.

Shame

Shame is felt when we judge ourselves to have fallen short by our standards and expectations. We wish to see ourselves as being capable, success-worthy individuals—but our experience of shame during failure

casts doubt on this. Shame tells us, "You're not good at this anyway." Giving up seems a lot easier and safer than subjecting further challenges to your self-esteem.

Regret

The decisions we make have the possibility of coming back to haunt us. Regret is the emotion we feel when we make decisions that have led to our failings. Regret causes us to question our own choices, and inflicts distrust on our ability to make good decisions.

What then, do resilient individuals do differently in the face of failures and such distressing emotions?

Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy, authors of *Bounce: Why Things Bounce Back*, highlight that resilience is determined strongly by mindset, particularly how one sees the need for change and persistence of ambiguity in today's environment. It helps to look at the flipside of failure, and the emotions associated with success—to understand what drives resilience.

Resilient individuals are those who are able to learn from unpleasant emotions resulting from failure. At the same time, these resilient individuals cultivate powerful, positive emotions that help them move past their failings. Feeling good is not just a pleasant experience. Positive emotions can help restore our sense of self-worth and confidence when we are beset by failure. Resilient people learn from negative emotions, and use positive emotions to recover from failures.

Some of these positive emotions include:

Passion

The dogged determinism that embodies resilient people comes from a deeply ingrained sense of purpose, and seeing one's role as meaningful and significant. Reflecting and remembering why we do what we do energises our intention to try again. Resilient people have an inner conviction and belief rooted in passion, fueling their courage to face current, and future adversities.

Pride

Pride is experienced when we accomplish something noteworthy and are recognised for it. In a sense, pride works to counteract shame, by reminding us that we have qualities that are recognised and appreciated. Pride also tells us that our failures are not caused solely by our inadequacies. Pride picks us up when we fall, assuring us in our abilities and potential for future success.

Self-compassion

Self-compassion refers to a kind, non-judgemental assessment of ourselves. Often, however, we find it easier to impart kindness to others than toward ourselves. Perhaps we think that being self-compassionate is a sure-fire way to complacency. In fact, being self-compassionate provides the necessary emotional first aid when we experience failure. By being self-compassionate, we are reminded that everyone, even our role models, have faced failure. We can then choose to stop criticising ourselves, and be more encouraging of our subsequent efforts.

Hope

Hope thrives during adversity, challenges, and during failure experiences. Indeed, adversity and challenges are needed for hope to arise. Hope is the perennial positive emotion—it endures in difficult situations because it first tells us that there is a way out of this difficult situation, and second, that one has the capacity to overcome one's failures. Hope gives us the way, and the willpower to overcome our failures.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

At any point in time in our lives, we will face some form of failure. Business leaders make decisions that result in financial and reputational losses, the recruitment officer makes a failure of judgement on a new hire, and the fund manager makes a short-sighted and inaccurate projection of short-term financial trends.

In all these instances, failures are accompanied by unpleasant emotions that serve to tell us honestly yet painfully, that we could have done better. Being resilient consists of two important halves—by first learning from our negative emotions, and second, by cultivating more positivity in our professional and personal lives.

The best among us have failed, but have managed to stay resilient because of how they've chosen to view, understand, and respond to the emotions that arise during failure.

TOP 10

WAYS TO BE A RESILIENT LEADER



The season of failure is the best time for sowing the seeds of success. —Paramahansa Yogananda

1 TREAT FAILURES AS LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

The next time you experience failure, try treating them as opportunities to better yourself. Failures are part of your unique success story. Remind yourself that every failure is a step forward towards eventual success, and can be faced in the spirit of inquisitiveness and courage. What went wrong and what can I learn from this all?

2 SEE NEGATIVE EMOTIONS EXPERIENCED FROM FAILURE AS NORMAL

Negative emotions serve to protect us from trying things that may cause us to experience more distress. Seeing negative emotions as a normal response to failure helps cultivate a healthy attitude towards them. Negative emotions make great disciplinary teachers but terrible motivational speakers.

3 SEE POSITIVE EMOTIONS AS AN ANTIDOTE TO OVERCOMING FAILURE

Positive emotions encourage, empower and re-energise our efforts. Treat positive emotions as antidotes to negative emotions experienced from failure, and cultivate ways to experience them more frequently in your life. Positive emotions also have a restorative effect on our health. Developing resilience by cultivating positive emotions is beneficial for our mental and psychological well-being.

4 KNOW WHEN TO STEP BACK AND RECHARGE

Failures can be overwhelming, and each of us have different limits on how much we can take when faced with failure. Know what your limits are—recognise when you are making impulsive, spur-of-the-moment decisions and actions, and take time to recharge. You will be in a clearer state of mind to respond to, rather than simply reacting to your negative emotions.

5 SEEK SOCIAL SUPPORT

You probably have a network of friends, or family members that you can relate to, who trust and accept you as you are. Asking for support during instances of failure is not a weakness—your emotions are telling you that you could use help recovering from failure by connecting with those who are genuinely concerned for you.

6 REMEMBER THAT VERY SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE FAIL TOO

A success story that includes instances of failure is going to sell better than one where very little mention of adversity or challenges are made. Read the autobiography of someone you consider a role model or wish to emulate. Doing so helps you recognise that failures are normal—and necessary experiences on the road to success. Good autobiographies also elicit inspiration—another powerful positive emotion to help you build resilience in the face of failures.

7 REIGNITE YOUR PASSION

Reflect on your role and responsibilities. Why do you persist in doing what you do? Thinking about the core meaning and significance of one's job, role and responsibilities helps remind us of what we are passionate about. Such self-reflection questions may even trigger an impulse to seek out and explore passions closer to your interests.

8 TAKE PRIDE IN YOUR SKILLS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In the face of failure, it is easy to fixate on our deficiencies and weaknesses. Try listing out your strengths and successes that have led you to this point, and remind yourself that one failure is not a generalised, negative judgement about you as an individual.

9 BE SELF-COMPASSIONATE WHEN EXPERIENCING FAILURE

Part of being self-compassionate is to recognise that other people also fail, have bad days, and are more likely to exaggerate their accomplishments than advertise their failures. Treat yourself to a pick-me-up after experiencing failure, recognising that you have done all that you could, and that you will live to try to again another day.

10 STAY HOPEFUL

Think of helpful and encouraging responses to your failure experience. Generate an action plan that helps you overcome this failure, or to learn from it. When you have a plan, carry it out. Your action plan can give you that hope to bounce back from failures, since you have created the means and kick-started your motivation to overcome your setback.

The best among us have failed, but have managed to stay resilient because of how they've chosen to view, understand, and respond to the emotions that arise during failure.

■ Dr Eugene Y.J. Tee is currently Senior Lecturer at the Department of Psychology, HELP University. He teaches and conducts research in the area of emotions, especially where it concerns organisational performance. Eugene's folder of rejected academic manuscripts, more than 50 of them, reminds him that failure is a necessary part of continuous, lifelong learning. It also makes every accepted manuscript a reason for throwing a party for his colleagues. He tweets at @eugene_tee

