

Fear of Failure

During the Coronavirus lockdown I was asked to contribute to a series of webinars for the South African equestrian community. My topic was leadership in equestrian coaching and the question came up: “how do you handle fear of failure? What if that gets in your way?” When we are assessing senior executives we pick up fear of failure as a major limitation to realizing their full potential. Fear of failure is a massive barrier to success.

Causes of Fear of Failure

Why is fear of failure so debilitating and why does it run so deep that even the most successful people you see around you may find themselves hampered by it?

Some answers may be provided by research in neuroscience and behavioural economics. Humans have evolved to have a freeze, flight or flight mechanism. We react violently to the bad things that happen to us, to the extent that we apply fear to harmless situations. If we've been affected by PTSD or other anxiety disorders, fear can become completely paralyzing.

Another human characteristic is loss aversion, as described by Daniel Kahneman. Once we possess something, we are extremely adverse to losing it, even if it was something we didn't particularly care about in the first place. Being unable to try something new can come from the fear that we might lose what we have.

Perfectionists are often paralysed by fear, which leads to procrastination. Procrastination is often the voice that tells us how the consequences of doing something may be worse than the consequences of doing nothing.

What can we do about fear of failure?

One of the best techniques is to redefine failure into learning opportunities. I love to do this. When I started my new business, I was frustrated by the number of business development calls that didn't translate into new business. I talked to my partner about it and we sat down and looked at the numbers. We realized that about one in four proposals were being accepted, which actually seemed like a good hit rate for a completely new business. The solution to growing the business? Get more new business meetings and get them to the point of asking for a proposal. We took what felt like failure and turned it into a growth strategy.

“Failure is just the price we pay for success.” John Maxwell, *Failing Forward*

The same applies to job-hunting. Sending out endless applications that result in a “no” or worse still, complete silence, can feel like a demoralizing failure. Going through interviews and not being offered the job feels the same. If you look at it differently: all the “nos” in the world serve you on the journey to “yes!”

Use the experience positively to adapt and refine your job search process. Spend your time researching job seeking strategies that work and applying those to your own search for a new job. Pivot the failures; turn them into learning.

As Robert Kiyosaki, author of *Rich Dad Poor Dad* and many other great books on personal finance says, "In my own life, I've noticed that winning usually follows losing."

This is also true in sport and the performing arts. I was watching a friend of mine give her little daughter a riding lesson the other day. Little Alice had fallen off her pony when she was learning to canter and now she was nervous. Learning to canter is a scary thing because you have to push the horse, or in this case pony, to go faster, to a point where you feel out of control. It's like learning to downhill ski – there's a moment when you have to embrace the loss of control in order to improve and enjoy it more. Facing down that fear is part of the exhilaration. Little Alice did just that. There were some tears and some "I don't want to" moments that broke her Mum's heart and made her want to stop pushing her child. But Mum is a very good rider and she knew that the joy of riding comes from breaking through those moments of fear and realizing the joy of greater speed and a different caliber of stride beneath you. That day Alice got it. A day later her Mum had to stop her from doing nothing but canter. Because she loved it so much. What a difference a day can make.

Thomas Edison believed, "Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up."

Most of us have a little child like Alice buried deep inside us. Even those whom you think of as brave and successful. There's an inner voice in most of us that says "What if it goes wrong", "What if I make a fool of myself" "What if they don't like me?" "What if I get hurt?" That voice makes us feel uncomfortable and stressed. It paralyses us.

Success, satisfaction, exhilaration and even joy lie beyond those feelings. There are some techniques you can use to help yourself face down the fears and move forward. I like Tim Ferris's approach, which he describes in his [Tedtalk](#). The Tedtalk is a short one, well worth watching. Essentially, it's about facing your fears head on by writing them down. Then thinking how bad it will be if it comes true and what you can do to mitigate that. Finally, what is the cost of not doing the thing you fear?

South African general Jan Smuts declared, "A man is not defeated by his opponents but by himself."

If any of this resonates with you, then put the effort into learning to think differently about failure, see it as no more than your opportunity to learn and to pivot to the next great thing in your life.

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