

Mistakes: Experiences from which to Learn or Feel Defeated? Part III

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In my last two newsletters I discussed the role that parents, teachers, and other adults can assume to help children deal more effectively with mistakes and setbacks. I emphasized the importance of this topic by noting that one of the main characteristics of successful people is the way in which they manage mistakes and failure. Children who grow up with a healthy attitude towards mistakes and who recognize that mistakes are experiences from which to learn are children who are willing to take realistic risks in meeting life's challenges.

Adults will be better equipped to nurture this attitude in children if they themselves are not burdened by unrealistic fears of making mistakes. Children are astute observers of how their parents and other caregivers respond to setbacks. Day in and day out we serve as models for how to react to mistakes. Given this responsibility, those of us in the position of raising and interacting with children must strive to develop a positive perspective about obstacles and setbacks. Even if we are not raising children, achieving this positive perspective is important for our own emotional and physical well-being.

In reflecting upon my career as a clinical psychologist and therapist I have recognized that a major issue for many of my child and adult patients has been their struggle to cope with actual failure or the fear of possible failure. I offered several examples in my October column, including a woman who turned down a request to speak to a local organization because of her fear that she might look foolish and a man who held back from pursuing a new job even though he was not happy with his current position. He told me, "I may not enjoy my present job but at least I know I can handle it. I hate to admit it but I'm worried that I might screw up in this other job."

This month's newsletter will be devoted to what each one of us can do in both our personal and professional lives to manage the fear of failure. Once again I will use attribution theory, the framework described in my previous two columns, as a guidepost to help explain the assumptions

that individuals make about the factors that contribute to successes and setbacks in their lives.

When confident people fail at a task that they judge to be realistically achievable, they attribute their setback to factors that are within their control to change. For example, they assume that if they adopt a different approach or different strategy or expend more energy in practicing the task, they will eventually succeed. In contrast, individuals who lack confidence are apt to feel that they cannot improve, that they are destined to continue to fail. Pessimism rather than optimism dominates their life.

The woman who retreated from an invitation to give a talk believed that she was not capable of making a successful presentation and would be embarrassed if she attempted to do so. Given this belief her style of coping was to avoid the situation rather than face the possibility of feeling humiliated. Similarly, the man who was fearful of changing jobs also retreated from a new challenge, hesitant to leave his comfort zone although his comfort zone provided him little, if any, satisfaction.

While flights from challenges may afford relief, the relief is often brief at best, quickly replaced by feelings of low self-esteem and a heightened sense of failure. I have worked with many adults who as they reflect upon their lives are saddened by the energy they have expended to avoid possible failure rather than engage in new tasks. As one man in his 50s poignantly told me, "I have lived my life behind a fortress of constant safety but at a great cost. I have experienced little enjoyment or satisfaction." His use of the word "fortress" was powerful.

What can we do to venture forth from any fortress we may have created and overcome the fear of failure? I believe there are several reasonable steps we can take or guidelines we can follow. While at first glance these steps may appear easy to achieve, they require thought and effort. Change takes time, especially if we are accustomed to remaining in our comfort zones and avoiding challenges. Let's look at some of these guidelines. As the name guideline implies, they are not cast in stone and should be used in ways that are most in accord with your personality. They parallel the steps I articulated in my January, 2000 newsletter about changing "negative scripts."

Take a Snapshot of Your Life from a Helicopter. In my clinical practice I often suggest to patients the usefulness of taking a "helicopter" perspective of their lives as an exercise to help them to assess and define the issues they have faced and continue to face. I ask my patients to imagine that they are in a helicopter from which they can survey their past, their present, and where they would like to be in the future. From this perspective I recommend that they consider a number of questions, including the following ones pertaining to mistakes and failure (as you read them, think about the answers you would give):

Do you find yourself avoiding situations for fear that you might make mistakes? Has this behavior occurred on many occasions? When was the last time it happened?

What activities do you especially avoid? What activities are you least likely to avoid? What distinguishes these two kinds of activities?

How do you feel when you have avoided engaging in a certain task? How do you feel when you have not avoided a difficult task even if you were not successful?

What is one of the worst mistakes you have made? What happened after you made that mistake?

Responses to these questions provide a portrait of the role that mistakes and setbacks play in a person's life. As some individuals reflected upon their answers they were dismayed and embarrassed by how often they retreated from situations that they judged had a strong possibility of producing a negative outcome. In contrast, others have been pleasantly surprised by the frequency with which they had confronted challenges. In addition, answering these questions assisted many people to become increasingly aware of those activities that are most problematic for them and those activities that bring them satisfaction.

As an example, one woman feared going to social events since she felt she had "nothing to say and everyone else seemed more knowledgeable." She told me, "I feel that if I open my mouth to comment on current events, people will see how shallow I am." Initially she also reported that she was hesitant to engage in almost any activity in which risk was involved and which left her vulnerable to being judged.

Yet, in our discussions I discovered that she loved to bake different kinds of cake and had no hesitation bringing them to parties. When I said that some people would be anxious about others "judging" their cakes, she answered, "But that's different, I feel confident about my cakes." As she said this, it was as if a light went on inside her and she observed with a smile, "I guess there are some things that I am more confident about and less worried about making mistakes and looking foolish."

Helicopter views can be very revealing of our strengths and vulnerabilities and set the stage for changing our mindset about setbacks.

Don't Jump into 10 Feet of Water if You Can't Swim but You Can Start by Getting Your Ankles Wet. Once we have taken a helicopter view of both our past and present it is time to shift our focus to the future. Make a list of several things you would like to see changed in your life. Begin by selecting one of them that is important to you but that you have avoided and now wish to face. The selection of just one thing to change in your current life is what Bill O'Hanlon advocates in his thoughtful book "Do One Thing Different."

Once you have chosen the one thing to change, your next task is to define realistic expectations and goals for that change. For instance, the woman who was fearful of going to social gatherings set as her goal going to one such event during the next month, while the woman who refused an offer to speak at a local organization set as her goal calling that organization and offering to make a presentation. A man who was hesitant to go dancing with his wife because he felt "klutzy" set as his goal dancing with her at a friend's wedding.

While to some these may seem like small, even insignificant, goals, for the people involved they often represent major steps towards overcoming the fear of failure and looking foolish. I advocate small, realistic, achievable goals since each success serves as the foundation for future success. A basic mistake that many individuals make is to turn what should be a long-term goal into a short-term goal and expect unrealistic rapid change. When the change does not occur it often leaves people feeling more defeated and more afraid of taking risks for fear of continued failure.

Prepare and Rehearse. Upon defining your goal you want to maximize your chances for success. During this process, you may require some assistance from a friend, relative, or in some instances, a counselor. Basically, when we alter a "negative script" in our lives and replace it with a "positive script" we must not only have the goal in mind but also the preparation necessary to reach that goal. Just as actors rehearse a new script many times to learn their lines, so too is practice necessary in "real-life" to learn a new, more satisfying script.

The woman who was hesitant to attend social gatherings for fear she could not "keep up with the conversation about current events" discovered that reading a weekly magazine such as Newsweek or Time as well as the daily newspaper allowed her to become as well-versed in what was transpiring in the world as most other people. In therapy, we role-played discussions that might occur during social events. She also engaged in conversations with two trusted friends before moving, as she said, to "the big time."

The woman who turned down an invitation to speak at a local organization prepared her talk. She taped and listened to it. Upon hearing herself, her first reaction was to retract her offer to speak. However, she persisted, received feedback from her husband, and did a splendid job. She said, "That wasn't as tough as I thought it would be."

A man I knew who was overweight was warned by his doctor to cut down on his calorie intake and begin a regular exercise regime. He joined a fitness club and set aside regular times in his schedule to exercise. At his first visit to the club, he noticed that he was much heavier and out of shape than all of the other people. He said, "Everyone else looked as if they could be on the cover of a fitness magazine. Not only that, during every exercise I became quickly exhausted while everyone else was able to finish. I became so self-conscious about my appearance and condition. I felt worse than when I started. I felt like a real failure."

I empathized with this man but stressed that since he had the courage to begin to take action, he was not a failure. I noted, "People often feel more like a failure when they retreat from situations." I talked about the likelihood that he would feel self-conscious for a while but that if he continued to exercise, his stamina and physique were destined to improve. I also said in a humorous way that it seemed as if the other

people who were exercising were so involved in their own activities that I wasn't certain they were watching him much of the time. "And besides, some of these fit people might have been overweight and tired themselves at one time."

My message to this man may seem so obvious, but often people need such a message to recognize that it takes courage to change and that change takes time.

So What If It Doesn't Work. What's the Worse Thing that Can Happen? I have discovered that even thoughtful plans of action to overcome the fear of mistakes may not achieve success. The goals and/or the strategies to reach these goals may turn out to be unrealistic or contain unforeseen obstacles. Early in my career I witnessed how devastating it could be for some people to finally take a risk and face a situation they have feared only to experience further failure. When this occurred they felt even more defeated and retreated from future attempts, resigning themselves to the current situation.

Consequently, in my therapeutic repertoire I relied on the tenets of attribution theory and "built in" the possibility of certain steps not working. I said to my patients, "This sounds like a solid plan, but what if it doesn't work?" I did not intend this as a self-fulfilling prophecy for failure but rather to emphasize the message "if this plan doesn't work, we shouldn't get discouraged but learn from it." I would then engage patients in developing back-up plans should the first strategy prove ineffective.

As part of this kind of discussion I asked people to consider the worst thing that could happen if they attempted a task that resulted in failure. At first, many responded with images of very dire consequences. For example, the woman who was afraid to speak at the local community group said that if she did a poor job she would be constantly reminded of her failure since she saw many of the people in attendance on a weekly basis.

I wondered, "So they would remind you each time they saw you of what a poor job you had done?" She answered, "No, I'm certain they would be polite but I know that they would be thinking about it." In a caring and humorous way I asked, "So they wouldn't want to be with you or work with you?"

She smiled and responded, "No. I think I do a good job at work and I think people respect me. Okay, well maybe giving a poor speech wouldn't affect my relations with them but while I was speaking if I forgot what I wanted to say or seemed nervous, I would be very self-conscious."

We discussed what she could do to minimize this anxiety and what she could do if during her talk she lost her train of thought or made a mistake. She said that being as prepared as possible would help, prompting her to tape a rehearsal of her talk and obtaining her husband's feedback. We also considered what to do if she should forget something or appear nervous. We decided that since most people have the same worries that she had, using humor might be one way of lessening her fears.

I shared with her situations in which I had made mistakes during a presentation. For instance, I described one time when I had accidentally (I'm not sure if Freud would have said it was an accident) used an obscene word instead of the word I intended. I immediately realized what I had said and instead of avoiding the situation, I simply asked the audience, "Did I really say that?" People laughed and nodded. I responded, "Oh well, another couple of years of therapy to understand why that just happened." People continued to laugh with me. Later, the person who had invited me to speak made my day by saying, "People were impressed with how you used humor to handle that slip of the tongue."

I am not suggesting that it is always easy to use humor to deal with mistakes, especially when we are feeling self-conscious; however, being able to laugh at ourselves is a trait worth reinforcing.

We must remember that all people share anxieties about making mistakes and looking foolish and that it is important to focus on what we can learn from these mistakes. As we think about the worst thing that can happen if we fail, we often discover it is not as terrible as we initially envisioned.

How Will You Feel if You Don't Leave Your Comfort Zone? In considering the various guidelines I have outlined, keep in mind the question of how will you feel if you continue to stay in your fortress and don't leave your comfort zone. How will you feel if throughout your life

you expend most of your energy offering excuses for not engaging in certain challenges for fear of making mistakes rather than facing these challenges? As I noted earlier, it has been my experience that the temporary relief of avoiding possible failure is quickly replaced by feelings of weakness and regret.

Far too many people look back at their lives with sadness and a sense of low self-esteem as they recall lost opportunities. Steps to overcome the fear of failure can be thoughtful, realistic, and achievable and not endanger our sense of self-worth or dignity. The alternative of not taking these steps is often associated with increased pain and distress for not having the courage to leave one's comfort zone.

In this regard it may be helpful to consider the following observation about the role of mistakes that appeared in a report issued by the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility:

"Mistakes are a natural part of life. We learn by experimenting; mistakes and failure can be important parts of our learning process. Einstein flunked grade-school mathematics. Edison tried over 9,000 kinds of filaments before he found one that would work in a light bulb. Walt Disney went bankrupt five times before he built Disneyland. If we accept setbacks, we can continue to risk, learn, and move on with excitement and satisfaction."

Einstein, Edison, and Disney were highly successful, talented, creative people whose contributions to society are very noteworthy. Their success would not have taken place had they remained in an illusory fortress of security, avoiding possible failure and embarrassment. None of us truly knows what we are capable of accomplishing. However, we must realize that any possible success in both our personal and professional lives will be short-circuited unless we overcome the fear of mistakes and failure. I believe that overcoming this fear is one of the most vital goals for all of us to achieve.

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