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Class: _____

The best way to deal with failure

By Selin Malkoc

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Chances are you've failed at something in your life. But that doesn't mean it has to be for nothing. In this informational text, Selin Malkoc explores the best way to deal with failures and benefit from them. As you read, take notes on the different ways people can think about their failures.

- [1] Failure is a part of life, and we make mistakes pretty much every day. How do we cope?¹ Or better yet, how should we cope?

Academics and the mainstream media tend to offer a simple solution: Don't let it get to you and think about how things could have been worse.

These self-protective thoughts usually make you feel better. You move on.

But is it possible that popular wisdom is missing a bit of the puzzle? Does setting aside the negative emotions make you any less likely to repeat the mistake? Noelle Nelson, Baba Shiv and I decided to explore possible upsides of feeling bad about failure.



"Laptop, book, pen and desk HD photo" by Estée Janssens is licensed under CC0.

Feeling the pain

- [5] Even though they're unpleasant, we feel negative emotions for a reason: They likely played an important role in human evolution and survival.

Negative emotions tell us to pay attention, signaling that something's wrong — with our body, with our environment, with our relationships.

So if you avoid negative emotions, you also might be avoiding the thing that needs your attention. Could deciding to focus on the negative emotions associated with failure lead to thoughts about self-improvement — and, with time, actual improvement?

We designed a series of experiments to test this question.

1. **Cope** (*verb*) to deal with something difficult in a successful way

In the studies, we used something called a two-stage paradigm²: First participants attempted a task in which they failed; then — after series of unrelated tasks — they would have the opportunity to redeem³ themselves.

- [10] In one, we asked our participants to search the internet for the lowest price for a particular blender brand and model (with the possibility of winning a cash prize if they were successful). In reality, the task was rigged. At the end, the participants were simply told that the lowest price was US\$3.27 less than what they had found. We then asked half the participants to focus on their emotional response to having failed, while the other half were instructed to focus on their thoughts about how they did. Then we asked them to reflect, in writing, on how they felt.

After a few unrelated tasks, we gave the participants a chance to redeem themselves. In this seemingly unrelated task, we told participants to imagine that they were going to the birthday of a friend who wanted a book as a gift. We also told them that the book they find should be a bargain.

We found that participants who were previously instructed to focus on the negative emotions following their failure in the blender task spent nearly 25 percent more time searching for a low-priced book than those who had been instructed to focus on their thoughts.

When we examined the written responses, we also found some important differences.

Those who had focused on their failure — rather than dwelling on how they felt — tended to have defensive responses: “I didn’t care much about this anyway”; “It would have been impossible to find that price.”

- [15] In contrast, the participants who had spent time parsing⁴ their emotions produced thoughts oriented toward self-improvement: “If I’d only searched longer, I would have found that price”; “I gave up too quickly.”

Not all mistakes are the same

It appears that focusing on the emotions of failure can trigger different thoughts and behaviors. Perhaps when you reflect on how bad you feel after failing, it motivates you to avoid experiencing that feeling again.

But could this improvement migrate into other endeavors — for tasks unrelated to the original?

To test this question, we added a variation of the second gift scenario. Instead of telling the participants to find an affordable book (which involved a price search like the original task), we asked them to find a book that they thought their friend would like. In this case, it didn’t matter whether participants had focused on their emotions or thoughts after the first task; they spent similar times searching for the best gift. It seems as though the improvement only happens if the second task is somewhat similar to the original, failed one.

While “feeling your failure” can be a good thing, it doesn’t change the fact that this can hurt. There’s a reason

2. experimental design
3. **Redeem** (*verb*) to make up for a poor performance
4. **Parse** (*verb*) to analyze something to uncover a deeper meaning

people tend to instinctively rationalize or have self-protective thoughts after they've made a mistake.

- [20] It would be debilitating⁵ if you were to focus on how bad you felt after each failure, big and small. So it's up to you to decide which failures to try to improve upon, and which failures to shield yourself from. Clearly, one-off events or inconsequential⁶ mistakes — taking the wrong turn in a foreign city or being late to a party with friends — don't make the best candidates (hence the saying "don't sweat the small stuff").

But if you've failed at something that you know you're going to have to confront in the future — say, a task for a new role at work — pause and feel the pain. Use it to fuel improvement. If you focus on how bad you feel, you'll probably work harder to ensure you don't make a same mistake again.

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5. **Debilitate** (*verb*) to make someone weak
6. **Inconsequential** (*adjective*) not important; insignificant

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

5. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text?
- A. Focusing on the negative emotions of failures can help you make better decisions in tasks related and unrelated to the original failed task.
 - B. It's important to embrace the negative emotions that come with certain failures, as this could help you do better in the future and avoid additional failures.
 - C. It's better to focus on how you can improve in the future than the negative emotions associated with a perceived failure.
 - D. People who avoid focusing on the negative emotions associated with failure report being happier overall, but tend not to learn from their mistakes.
6. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "Academics and the mainstream media tend to offer a simple solution: Don't let it get to you and think about how things could have been worse." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "Those who had focused on their failure — rather than dwelling on how they felt — tended to have defensive responses: 'I didn't care much about this anyway'" (Paragraph 14)
 - C. "Perhaps when you reflect on how bad you feel after failing, it motivates you to avoid experiencing that feeling again." (Paragraph 16)
 - D. "Clearly, one-off events or inconsequential mistakes — taking the wrong turn in a foreign city or being late to a party with friends — don't make the best candidates (hence the saying 'don't sweat the small stuff')." (Paragraph 20)
7. How does the introduction of the text contribute to our understanding of failure (Paragraphs 1-4)?
- A. They explore why people often don't learn from the mistakes that they make.
 - B. They discuss the benefits of remaining positive in the face of failure.
 - C. They explore how people are typically encouraged to deal with failure.
 - D. They emphasize how normal it is to experience failure at some point in your life.
8. What is the relationship between how a person thinks about negative emotions and their actions?
- A. Focusing on negative emotions can encourage someone to do what's necessary to avoid feeling that way again.
 - B. Acknowledging negative emotions can make someone more upset and act more impulsively.
 - C. Avoiding negative emotions makes people feel better about themselves and helps them make better decisions.
 - D. Thinking about negative emotions or experiences as an opportunity for growth helps people perform better in tasks.