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Title: Embrace failure

Author: Sarah Gathro

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Steven Spielberg was a repeated failure. He received unimpressive grades in high school, and was rejected three times — yes, three — from the University of Southern California. Yet Spielberg went on to direct 51 films, win 3 Oscars and amass a wealth upward of $3 billion.

It is no coincidence that before succeeding, Spielberg failed — and failed often. Becoming comfortable with failure — as opposed to avoiding failure at all costs — can actively contribute to success.

Unfortunately, failure isn’t readily accepted in many circles. As a freshman at Yale, the idea of failure was unthinkable for me. “Success or nothing” seemed to be everyone’s mantra, and so I adopted it. I spent three years of my undergraduate career petrified of failing. I was even terrified of getting a B.

And so I worked my tail off to make sure I succeeded. Yet to my surprise, I found I was never satisfied with my efforts. There was always something that wasn’t perfect, somebody’s expectations I wasn’t meeting, something I should have done but didn’t. It was an endless hamster wheel of should haves.

It wasn’t until my senior year of college that I finally discovered the empowerment that comes when you stop fearing failure. On hardly more than a whim, I attended a series of wellness trainings. I took the practices I learned to heart, and began to see big changes in my happiness and well-being. Wellness became a larger priority, and slowly my fear of failure began to lessen.

As I became more comfortable with failure, I discovered greater perseverance. Research shows that those who embrace failure are more likely to persevere in the face of challenges, partly because they are more self-compassionate.

I found I was more willing to take risks. Those who are comfortable with failure are more likely to take risks needed for successful decision-making. Those who fear failure, in contrast, are more likely to lose their nerve during tough situations.

I felt empowered with increased creativity. Without anxiety about possible failure, I was more willing to think outside the box and try creative solutions that challenged the status quo.

And while I still have some time before I witness this benefit, research also promises that those who embrace failure are able to adapt to changing circumstances more easily.

Let me be clear: Becoming comfortable with failure does not mean becoming comfortable with mediocrity. It doesn’t mean you don’t strive for success. What it does mean is responding in a healthy way when you do your best and things don’t work out — which I’ve found happens often, even when you give it your all.

In my experience, becoming comfortable with failure is definitely worth it. Adaptability, creativity, perseverance, willingness to take risks — these are all things that come when we allow ourselves to learn from failure. In short, success isn’t about avoiding failure — it is about becoming comfortable learning from failure.

Still, becoming comfortable with failure is easier said than done. Here are four steps that helped me in my journey to become comfortable with failure.

First, talk to yourself like you would talk to a friend. When you notice negative self-talk, replace it with a positive perspective. When I catch myself thinking “I can’t believe I just did that! That was so stupid!” I stop and replace it with, “We all have slip-ups. My mistake doesn’t define my abilities — it is just a part of being human. It’s OK.”

Second, learn to love a challenge. Perceive failure as a natural part of learning instead of an obstacle to learning. Next time you find yourself at a roadblock, list all the things you have learned because things have gone wrong. Recognize the value that comes from challenge, and embrace it.

Third, cultivate a mindful perspective. Instead of getting absorbed in feelings of anger or frustration when you fail, observe your feelings and choose to react with patience and openness. Cultivating mindfulness can help reduce fear of failure and increase self-compassion, which in turn reduces anxiety.

Fourth, develop an attitude of gratitude. At the end of each day, make a list of three things you are grateful for. This could include gratitude for personal qualities, lessons learned or others who helped you throughout the day. Developing an attitude of gratitude can help promote good decision-making, increased willpower and greater positivity.

As the semester draws to a close, many Yale students will face the possibility of failure, be it in a final exam, a board election for an extracurricular or in getting into a senior society. Don’t avoid failure in order to succeed. Embrace failure so success will be possible.

Sarah Gathro is a senior in Trumbull College. Contact her at sarah.a.brownlee@yale.edu