

# Getting Up from Failure

*Almost everyone, especially successful people, have experienced major failure - failure is universal, a part of the human experience.*

**Risk implies failure** - if you dare new things (changing a job, falling in love) you risk failure. It is implicit in striving for success. Some individuals try to minimize or avoid failure by remaining fixed where they are. However, in our changing world the only security is knowing you can cope with insecurity.

**Failure is not so terrible.** It can provide an opportunity to reassess one's life and move forward with greater clarity. Not only does failure mean some loss, it can also mean some gain, usually wisdom.

## What is Failure?

Failure is short-hand for an event such as losing your job. More importantly, it is a **judgement** you make about yourself - in that failure may also mean not living up to your own expectations. Failure usually presumes a loss of self-esteem, social status, etc. If there is no perceived loss, you usually do not experience the event as failure. It can represent a loss of your very sense of self. The closer you identify with the event, the greater the loss.

How well you cope with that event in large part determines what kind of person you become. The point to remember is that it is the way you cope with failure that shapes you, not the failure itself.

## Reactions to Failure

Failure seems to trigger a series of reactions - negative in that they are painful, tumultuous, and seemingly unhelpful. However, they actually perform a positive function in that they force you to accept your loss and prepare for the task of rebuilding. Some predictable reactions people experience are -

- **Disbelief** There is an initial reaction of numbness and shock. There may even be denial that the failure has occurred.
- **Anxiety** There can be fear and a sense of desolation. In your pain, uncertainty of the future and loneliness can be overwhelming.
- **Anger & Blame** Blame helps distract you from looking at your own faults. Revenge fantasies are common.
- **Shame** When you translate the failure to mean you are inherently inferior or inadequate, you add more injury to the original failure.



Not only are these reactions predictable, they are survivable. Everyone experiences them and although uncomfortable, they are not permanent. What is important is to let them happen and run their course. The only real danger is getting stuck in a reaction, remaining so fixated on disbelief, anxiety, anger, blame, or shame that you do not get on with rebuilding your life.

The stress of failure can drive away spouses, make children behave strangely, affect your health and threaten friendships. But not if you are aware of what is going on. If you are self-aware, you can monitor your own behaviour and communicate honestly with others. Failure need not be so painful.

## Taking Stock of Yourself

*Taking stock of yourself* is the process of discovering that you have options, deciding what you want to do and having the courage to work toward these goals. It is the process of taking control of your life again. Here is a five stage process suggested by Carole Hyatt and Linda Gottlieb -

### Analyze what went wrong

In order to avoid repeating the same mistake you analyze what went wrong. Just as there are patterns for success, there are patterns for failure. The patterns include - poor interpersonal skills, wrong environment, value system or co-workers, half-hearted effort or lack of commitment, bad luck, self destructive behaviour, sexism, ageism, etc.

### Reinterpret your story

If you do not face your past and determine what really happened, your assumptions about the future may be wrong. If failure is a judgement, and if you are the judge, then you have the power to alter your judgement. Negative interpretation can cripple you. Positive interpretation can give you energy to go on with your life. Sometimes casting events in a different light causes you to rethink your values and make major changes.

### Re-label yourself

Examine 'who you are', the label you have been using, and decide if it is still appropriate. By changing your label you can change your self-perception and your behaviour. Give yourself credit for your successes.

### Seek support

Talk to people, meet with others in similar situations, inquire about available resources (support groups). Too often you feel alone or 'abnormal' or embarrassed to openly discuss your failure.

### Expand your options

Maybe you have defined your options too narrowly. Consider other types of jobs, or other types of relationships. Successful recovery from a failed marriage does not mean you have to re-marry. A fired salesman may successfully return as a happier cook, accountant, etc.

## Hallmarks of all Successful Failures

Failure can lead to -

- the ability to adapt to changing circumstances
- the willingness to take responsibility for your own mistakes, and
- the refusal to be a victim.

True success can only be built upon a solid sense of self. It comes from striking a balance between who you are and what you do, from establishing an inner sense of values so that you yourself and not others judge your behaviour and worth, and from learning to take joy in the process of what you do rather than its outcome.

## Lessons of Failure

From failure you learn compassion and humility (failure is a great leveller), a new attitude toward risk, and a reaffirmed sense of inner power. When you stand back and observe your progress and appreciate how you have met challenges and prevailed against obstacles, you are then infused with a renewed sense of self respect and confidence.