Coping Mechanisms to Failure and Adversity

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Coping with Failure

Two years ago, I applied for a program at the Marriott School. I reviewed my applications with mentors and even went over everything with one of the former heads of the department, who expressed his confidence in my experience and confidence that I would be accepted to the program. By all accounts, I should have gotten in. You can imagine my surprise and disappointment when I learned that I was not accepted to the program. I was frustrated and demoralized, and I even equated the rejection to mean that I was personally inadequate. After a few days, I decided that rather than mope and stew over my disappointment, I would spend the next year building my résumé and growing myself, so that I would be as ideal a candidate as I possibly could be the next year. I spent that year excelling academically, taking all of the classes in the business school I could, participating in extracurriculars, and growing personally.

I was eventually accepted into another program in the business school. During my first semester, I took a couple of classes in the program that I previously wasn’t accepted into. I hated them. They were not at all what I thought they would be. Furthermore, the program that I had enrolled in was engaging, fascinating, and made me feel like I was not only adequate, but that I could thrive. I realized that oftentimes, failures are there for our benefit. Our responses to those situations are what define our future.

I have learned that we often impose much higher expectations on ourselves than is necessary, productive, or even healthy. For some reason, be it social media or popular culture, it is being ingrained in our minds to associate our self-worth with our achievements, GPAs, physical appearance, or even relationships. I would argue that we are the most socially prescribed, perfectionist generation that has ever existed. But sometimes things just don’t work out. We fail. We struggle. We don’t get the job. We don’t get into the program we wanted. Nonetheless, failures—or perceived failures—are a necessary part of growing and changing. Adversity breeds resilience and grit. These “failures” represent a unique opportunity to have honest self-assessment and to improve ourselves. Unfortunately, we often let these failures impact our self-image. Instead of viewing these failures as motivating catalysts for change, they become dehumanizing stumbling blocks in our pathway to success. Students and professionals alike should develop healthy and productive coping mechanisms that will enable them to take these failures and turn them into empowering opportunities for growth and fulfillment. In this paper, I will examine different coping mechanisms and their effectiveness in both bringing about change and emotional utility.

Coping mechanisms for failure can be largely grouped into three categories: (1) proactive, (2) reactive, and (3) suppressive. In this paper, I will discuss these different coping mechanisms and how they can apply to each of us. Certain people with different personality types will be more successful with different coping mechanisms. Having self-awareness and a knowledge of our emotional tendencies will help us recognize these patterns in our life and know how we can apply these different mechanisms in the way that is most effective for us.

**Proactive Coping**

As previously stated, rejection and failure have the opportunity to serve as catalysts for growth, albeit uncomfortable growth. Studies have shown that the most productive method of coping is to take a second to analyze what happened, have honest self-assessment, and set goals to improve in the future. This is so successful for coping because it places control back in the hands of the individual. Instead of reacting to external stimuli, the individual can grab it by the horns and say, “This is how I’m going to make sure that this doesn’t happen again,” or “This is how I can refine my goal and attain it.”

For example, a research study determined that in a sales atmosphere, both experienced and inexperienced salespeople who believe that their failed sales call resulted from using the incorrect strategy are likely to intend to change their strategy in future similar calls. Salespeople who attribute failures to lack of ability are likely to seek help.

**Reactive Coping**

I was a very intense little child—so much so that, when I turned five years old, my mom took me to the pediatrician to discuss my intense emotions and behavior. He told her that in order to help diffuse my inner frustrations and tension, she should buy me a punching bag; when
I was feeling angry, I could take it out on the punching bag. Reactive coping is very similar to this, typically taking the form of emotional catharsis: venting, talking with somebody, yelling in frustration, or even hitting a punching bag. Reactive coping can have a positive effect in reducing fear and anxiety.

While there is a place for reactive or cathartic coping and recognizing the need for cathartic outlets, strictly focusing on these emotional responses can actually trigger more unhealthy coping mechanisms in your life moving forward. This is especially prevalent in adolescents and students. There is a danger that these emotional responses do nothing to fix the problem; only release inner tension and can actually be counterproductive, compounding emotional frustration when done excessively.

**SUPPRESSIVE COPING**

The third, most prevalent category of coping is suppressive coping. Oftentimes, when we face adversity or rejection, we prefer to deflect and move on without truly recognizing or giving ourselves time to healthily cope. This mechanism has proved to be the least effective method of coping for many reasons. First, the emotional responses that rejection can incur are left undealt with, and suppressing negative emotions does nothing to relieve feelings. There is no internal resolution, which can cause issues in moving forward. Second, ignoring and moving on does nothing to initiate personal development. Instead of honestly assessing the situation with self-awareness, apathy sets up a pattern of stagnant complacency that can be crippling in the future.

**MOVING FORWARD**

Because of my initial failure, doors have opened, giving me opportunities that I never would have had otherwise. I’m in a program that I am passionate about. I have been able to conduct research on subjects that interest me. I’ve accepted a full-time offer at a company that I love and am excited to help grow. I’ve even been able to help publish articles like this one as part of the Marriott Student Review. A failure that seemed like a disaster, and could have been had I let it define me, has transformed into one of the most impactful and catalyzing events of my academic and professional careers.

In my life, I have learned that my failures have often been some of the greatest blessings in my life. They have been the best teachers and refiners and have helped me keep a perspective of what is truly important. As I have developed different ways to cope or respond to failures, I have grown as a person. So when it feels like everything is crashing down, or that your plans are falling to pieces, don’t forget what is important. These experiences are the ones that will provide the most enlightenment. When dealt with appropriately, failure is not failure; it is a tool to reach our potential.

Notes


Gross & Levenson “Hiding Feelings: The acute effects of inhibiting negative and positive emotion.”