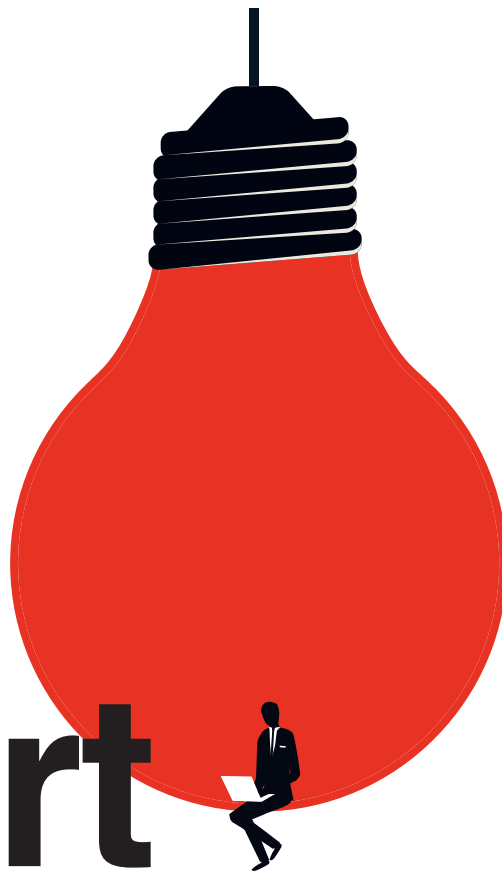


Is Failure Really That Bad?

Professor Keun-Hyang Kim
(Department of Psychology, Daegu University)



Expert Column

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Special Feature

<The Psychology of Failure >

The KAIST Center for Ambitious Failure plans to publish a series of expert columns titled 'The Psychology of Failure' in collaboration with the psychology journal 「Psychology in My Life: mind」. Written by psychology experts in various fields – learning and motivation, clinical research and counseling, social sciences and culture, industry and organizational studies – these special columns aim to convey a rich array of scientific knowledge and diverse perspectives that will give readers a deeper dive into various phenomena related to failure. This series will also be featured on the 「Psychology in My Life: mind」 website (<http://www.mind-journal.com/>).

**Professor Keun-Hyang Kim**

(Department of Psychology, Daegu University)



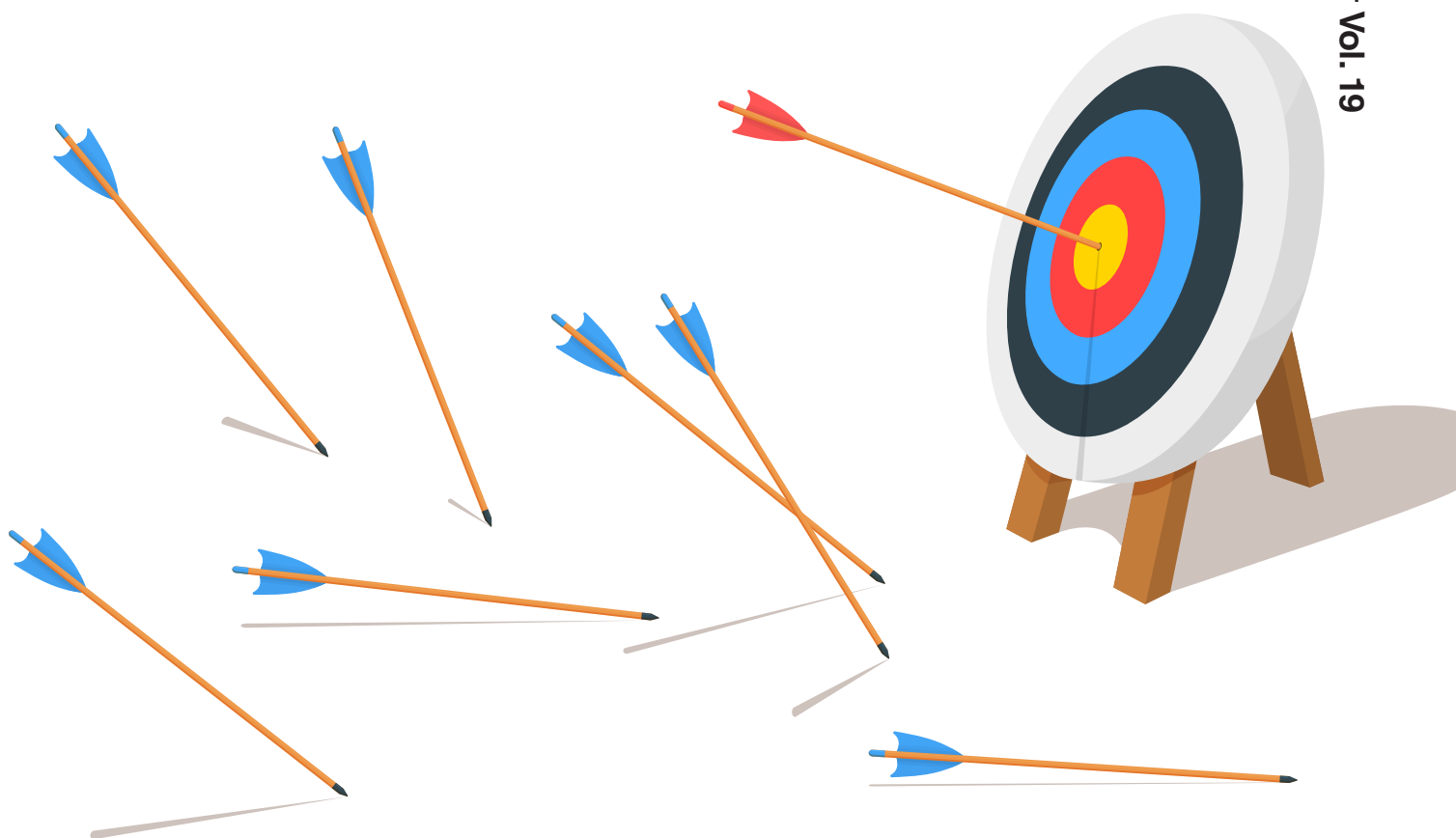
Ever since I made my choice to become a psychology expert at a young age, I have followed this path without question. I have experienced numerous failures throughout my journey, but I tend to get over them quickly since I have a somewhat adaptive defense mechanism where I easily forget bad memories. Now, I am reaching an age where I am becoming deaf to criticism toward myself but more vocal when it comes to critiquing others. Regardless, even though I still feel both apprehension (anxiety) and excitement (anticipation) before starting a task, I strive to do my best in all my endeavors. After earning a Ph.D. in Clinical and Counseling Psychology from the Department of Psychology at Korea University, I worked as a clinical psychologist in the Department of Psychiatry at the CHA University Bundang Medical Center. Now, I am part of the faculty of Daegu University's Department of Psychology.

Is Failure Really That Bad?

Keun-Hyang Kim
(Department of Psychology, Daegu University)

“Do you think success is that easy?” “Is failure really that bad?” These are lines that parody off a rambling conversation between the main characters of the film <Decision to Leave>. My answer to both questions is “no” – success is definitely not easy, nor is failure that bad. However, it seems like there are plenty of people throughout the world who have achieved the difficult goal of success. Well, that is what it seems like on social media platforms like Instagram. On the other hand, even though failure is not as bad as we think, it still is not something people brag about, nor does it make us feel better. Because of these reasons, people who fail tend to avoid the spotlight and attention from others.

The saying “people learn from their failures” has become so stale that people do not even bother to search for the lessons presented to them. Of course, not all life episodes have a clear-cut lesson on the surface, but they all can provide us with valuable insights if we look deeper; it is up to each individual to find and recognize them. You only live once, so rather than leaving our failures as painful and bitter memories, it would be better if we could slightly change our perspective (if it is difficult to transform a failure into something brighter, then at least try to change your mindset toward it – Koreans refer to this as a ‘mental victory’) to find silver linings in bad situations, which will help us recover psychologically and become more positive in life. With this in mind, I will give you list I made of some reasons why failure is not really that bad. Take note that my list does not consider the subject of the failure or the type of failure (e.g., breakups, loss of job, etc.).



Why Failure is Not That Bad, Reason No. 1:

Number of Attempts before Succeeding - 1 = Number of Failures

If we assume that the law of 'our chances at success increase proportionally with the number of instances we fail' holds true, then failure is a signal that success is imminent. In other words, the number of times we fail is one attempt less than the number of attempts we need to achieve success. Of course, not everything in reality follows a linear (continuous, dimensional) relationship. Some life phenomena are more stepwise (non-continuous, categorical) in nature, yet some people blindly leap into action assuming that success is proportional to the number of attempts they take and the time and effort they invest. For example, this mindset can be found in people who are still trying to pass a test they failed multiple times. However, even if you know this law (and many never do), the only way forward is to try again if you do not want to give up. At least you will not live with the regret of not trying. Moreover, trying again is the only way to escape the grip of failure and join the category of success (which is usually the case for passing tests and exams). All in all, failure is the precursor of success.

Why Failure is Not That Bad,
Reason No. 2

The Order is Important – Not Success to Failure, but Failure to Success

I disagree with the proverb jo-sam-mo-sa (朝三暮四, 'three in the morning, four in the evening,' refers to situations where a short-sighted individual is so focused on their present needs that they become blind to the fact that the end result is the same). While it is an oversimplification, which is better: failure followed by success or success followed by failure? I think people tend to prefer concluding with success, since we value happy endings and good luck in our later years. When we look at people who achieved success very early at a remarkably young age (especially those who earned significant wealth and fame), regardless of the reason why they succeeded or the precursors of their success, we often hear stories about how such individuals end up failing spectacularly. The current trend is sustainability. However, if we cannot maintain success or failure forever, then is it not preferable to follow the order of failure-success than success-failure? Between our failures and successes are numerous small successes, and between them are even more failures. What we need is resilience. The fact that the English word has the prefix 're-' (meaning 'again') and the Korean translation includes the word 'recovery' suggests that a prerequisite of resilience is to already be in a state of failure (Juhwan Kim, 2011). Resilience comes in various forms, including the ability to analyze situations, having strong relationships, and maintaining a positive attitude. The key is to become like a ball filled with air so that we can bounce back from our failures; a flat ball just falls deflated on the ground.

Why Failure is Not That Bad,
Reason No. 3

Training Yourself to Lower Your IU **(Intolerance of Uncertainty)**

It is not easy trying to predict a future full of uncertainty. Faced with this reality, people who cannot tolerate such uncertainty experience emotions like worry and anxiety. Conversely, people with a high tolerance of uncertainty can avoid wasting their energy on unnecessary concerns. We cannot know if a success will give birth to another triumph or an abrupt downfall, nor can we know if a failure will lead to another shortfall or an unexpected victory. There are simply too many variables involved. You need to persevere onward if you hope to taste success. When we fail, we begin to view our future through a lens of pessimism, and the likelihood of success becomes even more uncertain. We are forced to tolerate a greater degree of uncertainty of the future the more we fail. In some sense, it is a way to develop our ability to tolerate uncertainty. I think it is interesting that the term IU refers to the 'intolerance of uncertainty' rather than the 'tolerance of uncertainty.' This shows us that most people are intolerant by default. Through repeated failures, one can develop a greater tolerance of uncertainty to the point where the anxiety and fear of facing an uncertain future will diminish.

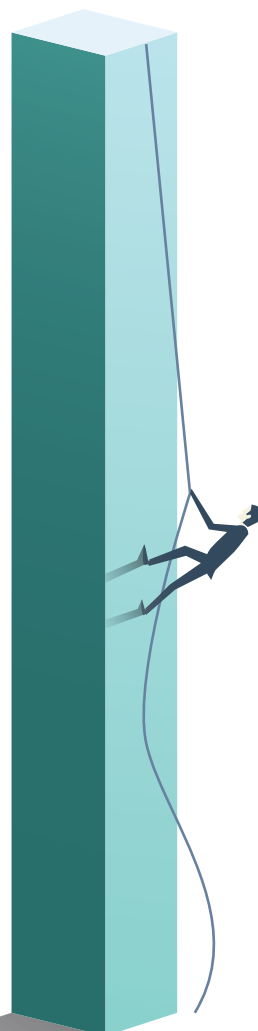
Intolerance
of
Resilience

Why Failure is Not That Bad, Reason No. 4

Boosting Your Drive to Succeed and Ability to Exercise Control

What if you are experiencing an ongoing failure? Although we may want to avoid thinking about them, in such situations, most people experience a surge of motivation in moments like these. This is likely due to a burst of adrenaline that fuels our competitive drive. Regardless of how each person achieves success, it is clear that our desire to achieve success increases, which could be seen as a defense mechanism to compensate for our failure and protect our jeopardized self-esteem (Fenichel, 1945). Considering how difficult it is to motivate people to do something, this speaks volumes to the capacity of failure to increase a person's drive to achieve success. According to Henry Murray, a noteworthy figure in the field of motivational psychology, humans experience four types of motivations. Among these is the need for social power (Murray, 1938), which refers to the desire to influence others. Exerting one's influence on others does not necessarily imply forceful control: it can also involve the desire to be known and have an unblemished identity. For example, people often restrict their behavior out of fear of being criticized by others or repeating a failure. These behaviors stem from our need for power. Every time we experience a failure, we are given an opportunity to boost our drive to succeed and improve our self-control skills, allowing us to better protect our precious self-esteem.

**Drive to
succeed**
tolerance
Uncertainty
ce



Why Failure is Not That Bad,
Reason No. 5

A Preview of the Bitter Taste of Failure, but it is Good for You.

Instead of asking people if they will give you a helping hand on your journey to success or sitting back and waiting for that person to appear, it is better to go around and actively ask people to give you bitter criticisms about your failed plans. For researchers, there is nothing more stressful than submitting your paper to a journal and opening the letter with the review results. Add a perfectionist mindset to the mix and you have a recipe for slow progress, lost time, and more stress. Regardless, if you managed to find the courage to submit your paper for review, the reviewers' sharp comments and criticisms will go a long way toward improving your paper so that your work will be recognized. This is especially true if your paper is reviewed by a trusted journal panel. Sure, your paper may end up being rejected and your submission may result in failure, but you will still gain something from the experience. With this in mind, if you are working on something but cannot make much progress (a form of failure in itself), are dissatisfied with what you have, and have a deadline soon approaching, one option could be to go and ask people to critique your work. In other words, you intentionally dive into failure. If you can open up about your less-than-ideal situation and ask people for the opportunity to fix your flaws in advance, then this intentional failure is not something to feel bad about – ultimately, it opens up a path to victory.

Why Failure is Not That Bad,
Reason No. 6

The Two Sides of Failure-Related Brain Response- Stress Hormones

You do not need to be an expert in brain science to know that we undergo physiological changes when we fail and that these changes are linked to our body's hormones. For simplicity, I will talk about three types of stress hormones that are related to failure. First, we have cortisol, which can cause psychological tension and anxiety during stressful situations caused by failure. Next, we have adrenaline, which increases our heart rate and blood pressure to maintain a tense state. Lastly, we have noradrenaline, which dampens our mood and keeps us alert. Cortisol is released in our bodies every day in the morning. The cortisol awakening response allows us to function properly in our daily lives. Likewise, adrenaline and noradrenaline both help to strengthen our stamina by increasing blood circulation, blood pressure, and heart rate. Adrenaline induces muscle contraction to improve reaction speed, while noradrenaline aids in improving our focus. Therefore, we should not consider these three stress hormones as bad substances that are released when we fail; rather, we should be grateful that they prepare us both physically and mentally so that we can overcome the failure. One thing to remember is to not draw things out for too long – always be swift in your response.

Why Failure Could be a Bad Thing: Regardless, Successful Failures are Possible

I respect people who can say “even if I fail, there is no giving up.” People naturally feel bad when they fail – some even experience depression. This is especially the case right after the failure occurs. While some individuals can get back on their feet right away, others can fall into a deep pit of depression and disappointment. No one can deny that failure sucks the life out of people. These experiences can bring down our self-esteem. This draining process accelerates with each repeated failure, leaving us literally without the energy necessary to try again. This is why failure is a bad thing. When we succeed, we experience an abundance of at least one of the four happiness hormones (dopamine, serotonin, endorphin, and oxytocin), making us feel good. On the other hand, it is necessary to have ways to deal with failure. Regardless of the type or magnitude of the failure, here are some suggestions for what to do when you experience a failure. Enjoy a tasty meal (it would be even better if it is someone else’s treat) and find someone you trust to support you (not someone who is objective, but someone who will stand by you no matter what), then get a good night’s sleep. You don’t need to go to an expensive restaurant – you can always just enjoy the classic pork belly BBQ or fried chicken. If you cannot find someone to lean on, then comforting yourself is also a good way to feel better. By doing these things, you will be able to recharge yourself so that you can try again in the near future.

I do not want to say that you have to ‘fail’ in order to ‘succeed.’ The important thing is to avoid being overly optimistic about your situation or too depressed by your failure that you sink into the ground – just focus on picking yourself up enough so that you can try again. In my opinion, our futures are not decided by our failures themselves, but rather by what we do after experiencing a failure.



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