



A Space to talk about ...

Failure as an Opportunity for Learning

The letters spelling out the word 'fail' are often used to describe what it means:

First **A**ttempt **I**n **L**earning

Research tells us that all learning from academic through to social or emotional learning involves trial and error. This makes sense – we can't know something or 'get it right' before we've learned it! Another way of thinking about this is that we haven't succeeded yet! We all tend to view personal failures with a degree of embarrassment, even shame. Of course, failing does hurt as it temporarily affects our self-image and can dent our confidence. It helps if we accept that failing is really an opportunity to learn from experience.

Failing to 'make the grade'

When it comes to school-based experiences, there are different kinds of so-called failures.

.... Give a few examples of common failures.

You may have come up with experiences such as giving the wrong answer when speaking out in class, getting disappointing results in an assessment or exam, failing to 'make the grade' for a sports team, being unsuccessful following an audition for a part in a play or missing out on a much-wanted opportunity for a college or university place or an apprenticeship.

.... What helps us to let go and move on from failures?

Even if we're confident and doing well, we might worry about being ranked lower than our peers and may see this as a kind of 'failure.' For instance, if we were one of only a few pupils at the top of the class at the end of primary school, we may discover that many Year 7 students are also achieving well or even better than us. Or perhaps we've always been 'average' or found ourselves further down the academic scale. Once we start secondary school, we might find we are placed in lower sets for some lessons. We may have to work hard just to keep up. Even as adults, some of us might carry memories of childhood 'failures' such as these which can stop us from trying again.

.... What personal qualities are needed if we are to keep on trying even though it can feel hard to do so?

Differences in learning styles

Everyone learns new things at their own pace. If we need to take our time, this is something we can practice accepting without labelling ourselves negatively. It helps if we don't compare ourselves to everyone else but instead set goals and track our progress according to them, and not to how everyone else is doing. We may imagine that some of our peers never experience failures or setbacks, but no one is successful at everything all the time. Now and again, everyone must deal with the range of uncomfortable feelings and thoughts that come with failing at something.

.... Give some examples of what we can feel and think when we've failed.

If we don't 'make the grade' when we thought we would or we unexpectedly fail an exam, we can feel shocked and even humiliated. Any failure, big or small, can have an impact depending on how we've learned to view them. A failure can seem very exposing, as if everyone is looking at us and judging us. Or the opposite – if, for instance, we anticipated doing badly, we might see a low grade or a fail as 'proof' that we're somehow inadequate. Regret, disappointment, anger, blaming others, self-blame and despair can come up. Even if it's a 'little failure' as opposed to a more significant one, it can still puncture our confidence and affect how we see our self. If we've learned to harden ourselves in order to survive life's challenges and setbacks, we may resort to 'numbing out' and dismissing failures.

.... Do you recognise any of these responses to failing? If so, can you re-frame failure so that it isn't so self-defeating and can instead be motivating?

Tolerating difficult feelings

All learning depends on being able to manage the feelings brought up by *not* knowing or *not* understanding, and being able to turn to, and depend upon, teachers, parents and perhaps older siblings for support. These others have already developed the knowledge and skills we hope to acquire and can help us. We also need to learn to tolerate the very painful feelings that come up when we face setbacks and failure, ensuring that we don't let these feelings take root and colour our mood or damage our sense of self in the longer term. We can all benefit from building up our emotional 'muscle' just as we might put time into working out to improve our physical strength. This means having the ability to bear painful feelings, think about them and then being able to move on. Of course, we will all be bruised and shaken by failure but we don't have to be permanently scarred by it.

.... How might we build our emotional stamina so that we can cope better with failing and learn from it?

Reflecting on perfectionism

Most successful people do not aim to be perfect. Nor do they punish themselves and make themselves feel bad if they don't succeed every single time in the way they'd hoped they would. Those who achieve have learned to practise being more flexible and adaptable, knowing that they'll get things wrong or fail along the way.

.... Give some examples that illustrate a flexible and adaptable attitude to learning.

Some of us have taken in messages very early on from home and/or at school that 'failing' or getting things wrong means we're not worthy of love or attention. As these so-called 'messages' are 'absorbed' by us from an early age, they can often become exaggerated. Maybe a parent or teacher corrected us and we experienced it as a criticism or as being told off when it really wasn't meant that way. We can all be sensitive to such feedback. If this is the kind of message we've taken in, we might believe the only way to be loved and to feel positive about ourselves is by trying to be perfect all the time.

.... What are some of the signs of perfectionism?

Recognising perfectionism

The main characteristics of perfectionism are listed below. You may recognise some or all of them:

- a tendency to set unrealistic goals that we cannot possibly achieve
- never fully acknowledging and enjoying our achievements as we keep setting the bar higher and higher
- being unwilling to take risks due to fear of failure, therefore having very few opportunities to learn how to deal with life's challenges and disappointments
- a deep desire to secure the approval of others by always succeeding and 'winning' (e.g. wishing to please parents, teachers and peers or even relative strangers on social media and perhaps fearing their rejection or disapproval if perfection cannot be demonstrated all the time)
- trying to be perfect in every way, all of the time, focusing on personal flaws or failures and criticising ourselves harshly for even for the slightest 'imperfection' or the smallest failure.

Some of us find that, over time, we can slip into perfectionism without really noticing. It is important to remember to check in with ourselves to see if we are developing perfectionist habits and stop ourselves from drifting into this kind of damaging behaviour. This is very different from trying our best and aiming to achieve realistic goals. Perfectionism can make us miserable because it is impossible to be perfect.

Healthy competition

During our school years, and in our working life, competition with peers is always in the mix and can fuel perfectionism if we are not careful. Healthy competition is necessary. It means that we spur each other on, bringing out the best in everyone. We can accept it when we don't do quite as well as others and also the opposite – if we do come out on top, we can react with good grace, bearing in mind the feelings of others.

.... What does unhealthy competition look like?

Competition gets out of hand when we feel intensely rivalrous or when we imagine we have been brought right down by the success of others. If, for instance, some of our peers do very well in their exams or get a wished-for place on a school team, we can feel hurt, angry, left out, left behind and even like giving up altogether especially if we feel too humiliated. It takes time to adjust to what can seem like bad news. Usually, we can find other ways to achieve, perhaps through extra effort, training or trying again at the next opportunity. For some of us, comparing ourselves with our siblings can also get in the way of moving on. Perhaps we have an older brother or sister who is seen as the high achiever and we've been given a different label such as the less academic one. Instead of trying, we identify with this label and never do that well at school.

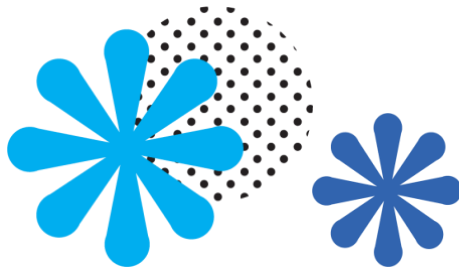
.... We might have 'labelled' ourselves or been given labels in our family. What are some examples of this and how can these labels be changed so they don't work against us but for us?

When applying for a Sixth Form place, or when moving on to college or university, or interviewing for jobs, the final offer might not have been our first choice. It can take mental and emotional work to process a disappointment like this and then move on to focus on what we can make of the opportunity we've been offered, even though it's not what we'd hoped for. Those who have been able to do this have found that it's worked out well in the end, and in some cases, even better than if they'd been offered what they'd set their sights on. This is because we can't know beforehand what kinds of possibilities might arise when we start a new chapter.

Dealing with setbacks

Life includes setbacks and disappointments for everyone. Even having to wait for an opportunity or taking longer than we'd hope to finally achieve a goal can feel tough. However, we can hold in mind that how we react to setbacks and disappointments is what makes all the difference. We have a choice in how we manage them and this matters greatly: the ability to keep going is what distinguishes the successful from the less successful. If we don't get what we most wanted, we can acknowledge the loss, feel the feelings, and then let them go, turning our attention to what we are offered. This can sound easy – it's not – but many have walked this path and come out stronger, and even more successful, as a result of coping with their first big challenges in life.

.... Give some examples of common challenges and how we could make the most of them.



Tips for Coping with Setbacks

Managing our self-talk when confronting failures

When we feel as if we've failed to meet our own expectations or those of others, it's easy to overlook times when we've done well. Bringing to mind our past achievements and remembering to take a realistic and balanced view of our missteps or failures can make a difference when we're feeling impacted by setbacks. The surest way to recover is to manage our self-talk. Examples of NATs, which stands for 'negative automatic self-talk', are as follows:

- *I should have done better. How did this happen?*
- *I knew all along that I was a failure – this proves it.*
- *I'll never be able to achieve what I'd hoped to. No matter what I do, I just can't seem to get there. I always let myself and others down.*
- *I should be ashamed of myself - I've had many opportunities and look where I've ended up!*
- *I know everyone will be disappointed in me. How could I be such a failure?*

If we learn to observe our thoughts, we can stop the negative ones in their tracks. Here is an example:

Replace "*I should have done better. How did this happen?*" with something more encouraging such as, "*Perhaps I could have done better if I had given myself more time to revise and prepare. I have the potential to achieve more. I am going to commit to improving my learning habits and get help with this if I need to.*"

.... Try changing the NATs listed above to more balanced self-talk or create your own examples.

Tried and tested ways to cope with failure

The advice below may not be easy to follow but it is important to try:

Stay in touch with reality: Don't deny your own role in your failure but don't exaggerate it or judge it either. Even an impactful failure such as doing poorly in a test or an exam or not being offered a place at a

preferred Sixth Form, college or university doesn't mean the end of opportunities. There are always other ways to progress in life.

Face what has happened as truthfully as you can. Be honest about what happened and make a commitment to learning from the experience. This will help ensure that you don't end up in the same place again.

Practice acceptance. Accept it if there was nothing else you could've done to achieve the hoped-for outcome. For instance, even with good grades and an interview that goes well, an offer from a preferred university may not result. Instead of seeing every other option as second best and carrying around a permanent sense of how much better things could've been if only the preferred offer had come through, let go and move on.

Give yourself time to recover. Usually, we need to go through the same thoughts and feelings associated with facing up to a setback a number of times. It takes courage to experience the hurt of failure, but it's difficult to recover from it if we block the feelings. Talking it through with someone who understands and, in the process, owning and sharing our emotional responses always helps.

Be open to re-framing the situation. Looking at setbacks or failures from new perspectives is key to recovering from them. This process can be both humbling and informative.

Read about successful people and be inspired!

There are many very successful individuals who achieved their goals despite having first failed in significant ways or who have had obstacles to overcome. Reading about the lives of others can give us hope and encourage us to pick ourselves up and try again when we've had to confront our limitations. Some examples taken from biographies published on Wikipedia are included below:

Greta Thunberg, Environmental Activist

Greta Thunberg is known for challenging world leaders to take immediate action to reverse climate change. She was diagnosed at an early age with Autism and struggled with depression for almost four years before she began her school strike campaign for which became internationally known. Thunberg has spoken at international conferences and to politicians since 2018. She hasn't let her own struggles with mental health dent her confidence or stop her from her social activism.

JK Rowling, author of all the Harry Potter books

JK Rowling never gave up on her aspirations although every major publisher rejected her first Harry Potter book before Bloomsbury finally gave her a chance. Due to doubts about its potential for success, only 1,000 copies were initially printed with 500 going straight to libraries before it took off and became an international bestseller!

American rapper, producer and entrepreneur known as Jay-Z

Jay-Z came from a disadvantaged background and had to hold onto hope even when the going got very tough. When he first tried to get a record deal, no one would sign him to their label. This led him to form his own company called Roc-a-fella Records. He met with further disappointments in later years but kept on trying, making him one of the most successful artists of his generation.

Michael Jordan, Sports Personality

Michael Jordan is often named as the best basketball player of all time. However, he was actually cut from his high school team! Fortunately, he didn't let this stop him from playing. As he once said in a famous advertisement, "I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I have lost almost 300 games. On 26 occasions, I have been entrusted to take the game-winning shot, and I missed. I have failed over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

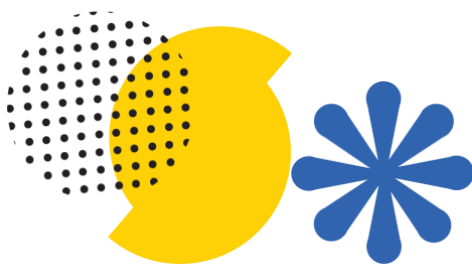
Katy Perry, Singer

Katy Perry had humble beginnings, starting as a gospel singer in 1999. Her first record was so unsuccessful that she was dropped from her label. Her next partnership with American record label Island Def Jam only lasted a year before she moved to Columbia Records and tried her luck as lead vocalist with The Matrix. Again, she was dropped, but she didn't give up. She ended up with Capitol Music Group who released her first hit single 'I Kissed a Girl' in 2006 which launched her musical career. It took her seven years to get started!

Marcus Rashford, footballer

Marcus Rashford, the famous footballer, was born in Manchester. His family faced many hurdles including food shortages in his early years. Despite these challenges, Rashford applied himself to sport and ensured he made the most of every opportunity that came his way. Success is never a straight line; he had to survive disappointments and setbacks. Yet he kept up his motivation and continued to give it his all. Now that Rashford is one of the best in the profession, he uses his position to try to make a difference. Rashford has openly discussed food poverty as this is something his own family experienced when he was young and he set up a campaign to give the homeless essential items. He also wrote an open letter to the UK government, emphasising the need to end child poverty, starting with extending free school meals over the summer holidays while the UK was in lockdown.

The above are powerful examples of how setbacks, disadvantages or differences can motivate us rather than stop us. Reaching our potential is always possible if we don't give up. Along the way, like Rashford, we can use our skills and talents to make a difference. Supporting and empowering others is one of the most meaningful and important achievements we can strive for.



Use your own research as inspiration

It can be helpful to do your own research. Search on the internet for inspirational quotes which you can read when you need a boost. Here are a few examples:

- ❖ Failure is not the opposite of success – it is part of it.
- ❖ The road to success and the road to failure are almost exactly the same.
- ❖ Success is experiencing failures without giving up.
- ❖ Failure is a bruise, not a tattoo.

Once you've created a list of quotes, select your favourites, or just pick one which speaks to you. Write down or print out the quote(s) and decorate the page. Tack it up on your wall and/or take a photo of it and keep it on your phone so that you can read it every day.

You may also find it helpful to look up successful individuals so that you can put their achievements into perspective. What they all have in common is self-discipline, doing the work required to overcome setbacks and learning important lessons from every failure. You'll find others with a story like Chinyere Nwanoku's.

Chinyere (known as "Chi-Chi") is of Nigerian and Irish descent. She was a talented athlete in training as a 100-metre sprinter, but her dreams came to an end following a knee injury. Although initially despairing, she faced up to reality and let go of her aim of becoming a world class athlete. Instead, she turned her focus onto improving her double bass playing, her second interest. She went on to set up **Chineke! Orchestra**. Chineke is an Igbo word meaning 'the spirit of creation'. It was the first professional orchestra and junior orchestra in Europe to be made up of a majority of Black, Asian and ethnically diverse musicians. Find out more on [Chineke! Orchestra – Chineke! Foundation](#)

Words do make a difference! Repeating inspirational quotes and positive statements called 'affirmations' (which you can research) is now known to re-wire our brains, creating a more optimistic outlook. Making a habit of observing our thinking and replacing negative self-talk with more balanced thinking can also restore hope when things are difficult. Finally, don't forget the following:

Success is not final, nor is failure fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts.