



Coping Skills and Reframing Failure

Perfectionists Anonymous

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“HI, MY NAME IS ELAINE and I am a recovering perfectionist.” I now know that failure is as excellent a teacher as success, but gaining that knowledge took a lot more than twelve steps.

I was raised as part of the achievement elite, with Ivy-League expectations provided in utero and ambition deeply ingrained. Ambivalent about anything average, one thing was always clear: failure was not an option.

On the surface, the “achievement establishment” worked for me. I looked great on paper, a high achiever with academic success and post-graduate honors.

Yet I had an inauthentic relationship with success. Avoidance of failure governed my decision-making. I never did anything I didn't do well. I limited opportunities that wouldn't maximize achievement, choosing only those challenges I had a strong chance to win.

While there is something to be said for taking a strength-based approach to life, the truth is that I let fear of striking out prevent me from playing the game.

I would likely have continued on that course, unabated, passing those achievement expectations down to the next generation, had I not been gifted with a child who was challenged by the complexities of life and learning.

My daughter's path was destined to depart from mine. She has been my greatest teacher, despite my initial reluctance to be her student.

For years, I danced around the edges of my child's challenges, buying therapies to enable her to fit into my vision of what it meant for a "smart kid" to be successful. Her failure to thrive in school reflected my failure as a parent, and that was not acceptable.

I thought I was leading her—albeit dragging her, kicking and screaming—to her own success. But no matter how hard I tried, it wasn't her path. And yet, all I could see was my own "failure" to produce a carbon copy of myself, to produce the next generation's agent for the achievement elite.

At some point during her elementary school years, I learned the most powerful lesson of my life: to be "successful" as her parent, I had to stop trying to "fix" her so that she could meet my expectations. She wasn't, in fact, broken. I had to let her follow her own path and stop forcing her to try to excel on mine.

That meant redefining success based on her gifts and talents, and adjusting my expectations based on what was important for her.

It's empowering to strive for excellence, and that is a value I continue to hold and teach my children. But to expect excellence in all aspects of life, with little or no room for failure, is perfectionism. And that takes a psychic toll on any human existence.

As parents, the best way we can support our kids is by accepting them and empowering them to embrace and accept themselves. We do not serve them by letting them feel broken if they do not achieve everything they attempt. When we teach them to avoid failures, we teach them not to take risks. We teach them to be less than human—because we humans spend a lot more time making mistakes than we do being perfect.

To embrace, and accept, and truly be okay with all that it means to be human, we must teach our children to "fail forward" in life and to learn from mistakes as part of their human experience.

Failure gets a bad rap. We don't walk without falling, or talk without babbling. And yet somehow, we teach our youth to avoid mistakes at all costs.

What if we actually embraced our moments of human frailty as an opportunity for growth, instead of fighting them? What if we saw as much opportunity in failure as we do in success?

Researchers tell us that resilience is a stronger predictor of “success” than many other expected factors (like opportunity). But how does one learn resilience? We experience failure, and we learn to deal with it. In other words, the secret to success is in failure.

The time has come to redefine what success looks like, to renegotiate our relationship with perfection, and reacquaint ourselves with “good enough.”

And what does it look like to redefine success?

... pursuing excellence, not perfection

... embracing “good enough,” and

... selecting where to put our attention, instead of assuming we should pay attention to everything—and then chiding ourselves for falling short.

Ultimately, redefining success means setting our own expectations instead of looking to the outside world to define them for us. And it means basing those expectations on our values and our passions rather than on some prescribed societal norms that tell us what we are “supposed” to do.

I’m a recovering perfectionist. There is a part of me that will always be tempted by perfection, but every day, I make the effort to redefine success in terms that makes sense for me and my family.

Instead of expecting excellence in every aspect of life:

- I encourage my dyslexic daughter to be proud of a B on a Lit paper.
- I remind my husband, who judges his own performance too harshly, that a 90 is still an A.
- I own my mistakes vocally, and I forgive myself ... a lot.

And that little girl who taught me so much?

She is an independent young woman now, pursuing her dream to be an actor. She is wildly successful by any standards we might use to evaluate. It’s not the plan I would have laid out for her. In truth, it is better than anything I ever could have imagined. She is happy, healthy, and passionately pursuing her dreams.

That is what I call success.

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Group Discussion/Self-Reflection Questions

- 1) How did perfectionism get in the way of Elaine's personal life and her relationship with her family?
- 2) How could she have coped better/healthier with everything not being her idea of “successful” or “perfect”?

- 3) What are some unhealthy ways you have coped in the past? How might you be able to replace it with something more positive, productive or healthy?
- 4) What are some healthy ways you cope (i.e. running, talking, crafting, singing, working out)?
- 5) What time of the day can you find a little time for you for praying, meditating, or being at peace?
- 6) What are some things you can say to yourself inside your head in terms of healthy self-talk (i.e. when something goes wrong or someone makes you feel small, what can you say to yourself to negate or lessen the blow)?