

Personal Development E-Book 11: Dealing with Setbacks



By The American Institute of Health Care Professionals, Inc.

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Dealing With Setbacks, Not Failure

Failure. It's an ominous word.

It's a word loaded with negative connotations and concepts. It's a word that people fear. So much so, that many people allow their fear of failure to prevent them from achieving success.

As crazy as it sounds, they embrace what they fear most to avoid the embrace of their fear.

We are conditioned, for various reasons, to view failure not only as a bad thing, but also as a personal flaw. We are taught a narrative where only winners have worth. The winners are the good guys. Because of this innate goodness, they deserve to win. Winning is their reward for doing all the right stuff.

On the other hand, this same story tells us that if you fail, there must be something wrong with you. Failure is a personal judgement. It's the antithesis of winning. If you fail, the story goes, you must have done something to deserve that failure. You must not be good enough to succeed.

Even though this story that we're all taught is just that, a story, many people adopt it as truth. Their inner voice repeats this story to them each time they step into a new situation. Over time, this repetition gives what is, essentially, propaganda a patina of truth. When you hear a lie enough, from yourself and from those around you, it's easier to believe it's true.

However, in the end, failure is just a word. It is powerless unless and until we give it power. In the end, the story we've all been taught about winners and losers is a lie. It only becomes the truth if and when we give it belief. It's time to put a stake through this heart of darkness and end its ability to influence action and direction.

Because, in truth, there is no failure. It is failure, as we've been taught to understand it, that is the lie. There are no failures in life. There are only setbacks.

And because there is no real failure, no individual can be a personal failure. There are only individuals experiencing setbacks and all of us, at one time or another, have faced a setback.

You can detoxify the lie of failure and deal with setbacks. It's a learnable skillset. It's also an extremely important skillset because, in the end learning how to handle setbacks is one of the keys to achieving real success in all areas of your life.

Blame Is A Mistake

A setback is just that - you get set back.

A setback keeps you from moving forward. It temporarily stops you from achieving your goals. It's an inconvenience. It's a problem, and it very likely ticks you off.

Anger is a common reaction to many setbacks. A natural reaction to anger is to look for something or somebody to blame for the situation you find yourself in. This knee jerk reaction to look for the root of a problem has its roots in evolution. If there is an issue that threatens your survival, it makes sense that you figure out the cause of the issue and take action. However, things in modern society are rarely as cut and dried as they were on the African savanna that was our ancestral home. This means that despite the natural nature of our reaction to a setback, blame is often a mistake - one that can cost you dearly.

It's useful to remember that the roots of blame lie deep within us. Most, if not all of us, do not make a conscious decision to place blame for any problem on others. Instead, in the heat of the moment, when we are most vulnerable, this unconscious tendency to look for a solution to a problem allows us to point fingers without thinking.

A solution to this problem is not to try and stop the blame game through empty promises. That would be a mistake. It's genetic roots run too deep within us to withstand a promise. Promising yourself to stop blaming is like promising yourself that you won't flinch when something comes close to your face. You simply can't help it. It's a reaction programmed inside of you because of who you are and where you come from.

A better solution is to accept the blame reaction for what it is - a genetic holdover that may or may not have served its course. Once you accept this fact, you can then more easily recognize the things that trigger your instinct to blame. Also, don't forget that you can blame yourself as easily as you blame others, and with just as much groundlessness and error.

In some sense, self blame is even more destructive when it comes to achieving your goals, since it produces guilt as a side effect. This guilt can effectively pull you up short. This, in turn, produces more anger, more blame and more guilt. Break the cycle by understanding blame for what it is and moving on.

Be Positively Successful

One important aspect of learning how to deal with setbacks is to how to deal with them positively. That statement may, at first blush, seem counterintuitive. Nevertheless, the act of learning to remain positive in the face of a setback, in any area of life, is the first step to actually beginning to successfully deal with the fact that setbacks happen.

In fact, developing a positive attitude is the surest way to put any issue behind you so that you are able to continue forward towards your goal.

A positive attitude is a learned behavior. It's not about smiling in the face of adversity, turning that frown upside down and being endlessly cheerful. Instead, learning positivity is a serious business. It's a matter of training yourself to react to negative events in a way that puts those events into the proper context. It's rewiring behaviors that allow you to exaggerate the size of the current negative conditions, at the expense of the positive conditions to come. It's about not getting stuck in the moment, accepting that setbacks happen and using this knowledge to move forward.

To a great extent, a positive attitude is an attitude of growth. The concept of positivity is based on the idea that, in life, change is the only reality. We are all constantly evolving and nothing stays the same.

This concept can unsettle some people because we are taught that stability is security. In reality, there is no stability. Whether we like it or not, we are always moving from one state to another. Negativity is simply the resistance to change or, perhaps, the fear of what change will bring. Giving into this fear means that you drown out the larger picture of who you truly are, where you are really going and what you really are capable of. Positivity, and the success that springs from having a positive attitude, is simply learning to adopt a realistic view of life and reacting accordingly.

Metaphorically, if life is a highway then positivity is learning how to focus on the road and not on the potholes. When you focus on the potholes, you begin to enjoy the trip you're on less and less. You also begin to slow down and this, in turn, means that it takes longer and longer to reach your destination. Setbacks, like those metaphorical potholes, happen. Accepting this fact leads to the ability of shrugging off the jolt when the next one occurs.

A Back-Up Plan Is Your Best Friend

We all set out with the best of intentions. We decide where we want to go. We decide how we want to get there. We set off on the journey.

...Yet, everyone is human. We all can make mistakes, despite the best laid plans. When you plan the path you want to take in life, you are, essentially, planning a journey through a country you've never seen in order to get to place you've never been.

It's no wonder that unexpected things happen along the way. We simply cannot see all the angles, all the potential pitfalls, from the vantage point of where we start. There is no blame in this. It simply is the way things are.

To a large extent, this element of the unknown is why stuff happens in life. When you can't anticipate every eventuality, stuff is bound to happen. It's a natural result of the future being uncertain, not of poor planning or personal inadequacy. The best way to deal with the setbacks that happen as a result of this uncertainty is to embrace the ambiguity that all future plans contain. Realize that your original plan is fraught with peril and will, in all likelihood, fail miserably. It's ok to expect to fail. It's even better when you plan to fail.

You might be saying to yourself right now "plan to fail"? Why would you ever plan to go down in flames? Well, it's not that you specifically plan to lose. It's that you have a contingency plan in place when you know that the chances of losing are high. None of us can predict the future. It's this inability to prognosticate that dictates we all need to have a "Plan B".

When you have a back-up plan in life, you have an almost instantaneous way around any obstacle the future may put in your way. Also, when you expect a setback, you are better able to recover and move forward when the expected catastrophe occurs. The worst possible scenario is to be hit with a setback because you never considered the possibility that one could occur. In such a case, you're without a back-up plan just when you need one most. These are the types of setbacks that stop people cold in their tracks, some never to move forward again. This is not to say that when you expect to fail, you see all the possibilities ahead of time. It only means that when you anticipate failure as a part of your original plan, you are better able to deal with it when it does happen.

A Setback Is An Opportunity In Disguise

Setbacks are a fact of life. If you're not planning for them, then you're not thinking realistically about where you're going.

A sure way to handle any setback, is to accept that they happen, as well as to let them happen. While this might seem to be ridiculous or even dangerous advice, the fact remains that setbacks are how we learn, or at least how we should be learning. As odd as it may seem, when you allow setbacks to occur, you prevent future setbacks by learning to avoid them.

Think about the last time you learned any new skill. Better yet, think about learning how to ride a bike, or ski or skate. The first time you attempted any of these things you were awful at it. In fact, you were probably awful at any of them for quite some time. You were also very likely afraid, not only before and during your initial attempt, but also before and during each subsequent attempt, again for quite some time. You probably fell down, a lot. You also probably hurt yourself, perhaps seriously. If you think back on it honestly, learning any or all of these new skills was, in the beginning, a series of setbacks.

Then, probably quite suddenly, something unexpected happened. You started to learn the skill. Perhaps in an instant, you went from being stumbling, awkward and injury prone to being graceful and swift. It's likely you laughed or smiled. It's probable that you felt exhilarated. It's certain that you succeeded.

This process of going from a series of setbacks to a moment of success is a perfect example of how any setback is actually an opportunity to succeed. If you had let your fear, awkwardness, embarrassment or injuries stop you back when you were learning how to ride a bike, you would have given up on the success you ultimately did achieve. Instead, what you did was persevere. You learned from the mistakes you made and you became more skillful at avoiding those same mistakes. You learned to treat your setbacks as opportunities to succeed.

If you bring that same mindset to any adversity you currently face, you will continue your record of success. Every experience, new or familiar, comes with the potential for error. When you see that the mistakes you make are actually signposts on the road to success, you become unstoppable.

The Tree That Bends Does Not Break

When it comes to dealing with setbacks, it's important to remember that no one approach is a cure-all. Every situation is different and every person facing a situation is different. A one size fits all approach won't work for all of the individual circumstances that occur along the road to success. Because we are all individuals, it's important to remember that each specific problem may require a specific cure. Having said that, it's still useful to review the various techniques that are available to an individual looking to deal with a setback.

First of all, remember that a positive attitude is one of the surefire ways of overcoming a setback and achieving success. This positivism is not based on sunshine and roses. Instead, it depends upon a realistic appraisal of the situation and the steps needed to cure the problem. The positive attitude derives from an individual assurance that any problem can be dealt with in a successful manner.

Next, remember that setbacks will happen. In fact, in order to be prepared, you must plan for them. When you do so, you begin to see that what was once an obstacle is actually an opportunity. Planning to fail actually insures that you will survive any unforeseen setback and carry on.

You also need to realize that you are not alone on the road to success. Many successful people have walked the same path that you currently are walking. They have experience in dealing with the setbacks you may now be experiencing. They can also educate you about the setbacks you have yet to experience. These elders are an invaluable resource to people seeking to gain more experience. Use them when the opportunity arises.

Remember to take care of your physical and mental health. Exercise and proper nutrition sometimes can spell the difference between success and failure on the path of life. Take care to care for yourself. At the same time, also watch out for the ego. There is a fine line between self care and narcissism. Many people misinterpret their urge for instant gratification for actual motivation.

Realistically assess what you can do well and separate those abilities from the abilities you wish you could do well. Also know those things that you have no aptitude for whatsoever. Know the difference between all of them and never let delusion guide the decisions you make.

Finally, allow yourself the room to make mistakes. Don't blame yourself or others when mistakes do occur. Often blame is a survival mechanism which is poorly adapted to modern life.

If you adopt a position of resilience. If you bend, but don't break, when facing setback. If you're flexible enough to change, but intelligent enough to know when to stay the course, you will deal with any setback and achieve your goals.

Stealing From The Thieves - Copying Success

When faced with a setback, or other adversity in life, many people are hard pressed to find a way to pick themselves up, dust themselves off and start all over again. Conversely, after achieving a level of success, many people begin to worry about how to keep their momentum going. A big part of both these problems is that most people think that the path around adversity, or towards continued success, is one they alone have to blaze. They fail to realize that they are far from being alone on the path they've chosen. If they look around, they will realize that the path they're on has been trod by many feet and is, in fact, already blazed.

It's true that there is no one path to success. At the same time, it's also true that there are no completely new paths to success. When you find yourself facing a setback, you don't have to invent a completely new and unique workaround. Someone else has gone this way before you, has probably run into the same obstacle you now face and has overcome that obstacle and moved forward. Instead of trying to reinvent the wheel, consider looking to that person for advice. It's the easiest way to get yourself in gear again.

The term "stealing from the thieves" simply means that everything that seems new in the world is old, recycled or repurposed. In some sense, there are no new ideas. There are only old ideas that have been rediscovered. If you think about it, nothing is innovative. It's simply been co-opted. This is an idea that got a start in the arts, but is applicable to the human urge for self-improvement, as well.

It's been said that in rock and roll there are only three chords, everything else is window dressing. This holds true in life as well. No matter the path you've chosen in life, no matter the setback you're facing, there are only a few proven ways to overcome what is stopping you. Everything else is smoke and shadows. So, if you look to people you know, people you admire, or people you'd like to emulate, you'll likely find not only a potential solution to your current problem, but also the inspiration to continue on towards your goal. In other words, find someone who is successful and copy their methods for success. In all likelihood, you will find yourself succeeding too.

Set Realistic Goals

All of us desire success. We want fulfillment. Some of us want fame. Others want money. A few desire spiritual happiness. There may be some who want a little of everything, the fabled well-lived life.

In short, we all want our dreams to come true.

The problem is that if our dreams are not grounded in reality they are simply fantasies, not achievable goals. That difference is often a fatal blow to many dreams. It also proves to be a major setback to those not prepared for the result of their lack of foresight.

It's ok to dream. Dreaming provides an acceptable outlet for our desires, our wishes and our needs. Dreaming is also a form of hope and hope is what makes us human. The ability to picture a reality different from the one we currently inhabit is an ability, as far as we know, unique to our species. The danger in dreaming arises when we allow some of our hopes to be mistaken for realistic goals. We are all more than capable of lying to ourselves, especially to save an especially treasured fantasy from the cold grasp of reality. If this type of lie is carried to its logical extreme, the result is disaster. The only thing worse than an impossible dream is an impossible dream revealed for what it is. Delusions are not achievable.

The way to avoid this pitfall is to set goals that are both realistic and achievable. In order to do this, you have to be able to take an honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses. You need to be able to actually identify the areas in which you excel, not the areas in which you think you excel or wish you excelled. You also have to accurately be able to identify the areas where you have less, or little, talent. You have to be clear about which is which. You might even have to abandon some cherished lies that you have told yourself for years.

The result of this process is that you free yourself to be yourself. You allow yourself to become the person you truly are, as opposed to the person you wished you were. You let go of delusion and replace that delusion with truth. Once you possess this clarity about who you are, and what you do best, you become a juggernaut. The setbacks and obstacles that plagued you disappear and, perhaps for the first time in your life, you see light at the end of the tunnel.

Love Yourself First

No one is going to get you to where you want to be but you. If you don't do it, nobody else will. Yes, these are both cliches, but cliches often contain important truths. In this case, the important truth is that if you fail to take care of yourself, both physically and mentally, you may find yourself facing an insurmountable setback.

What if you were unable to reach your goals because of your physical or mental condition? It's something to consider.

Like many things, we tend to take good health for granted. It's the kind of thing that's there, until it's not. Few people consider the prospect of reduced capacity brought about by poor health. Yet, it's one of the most common impediments to achieving success. It goes without saying that if you can't perform at full capacity, you can't reasonably expect to reach your full potential. While overcoming the setback of poor health is difficult, preventing it from occurring is easy.

One of the best ways to achieve long lasting good health is through program of regular exercise. Conversely, one of easiest ways to ruin your health is to neglect your body's need to move. Getting enough exercise isn't difficult. It's simply a matter of making it a priority and setting aside the time. If you can't find a half hour every day to exercise then you are essentially saying that you can't find a half hour every day to succeed. You also don't need fancy equipment or a gym to meet your fitness needs. Oftentimes, a simple vigorous walk will clear your head for the tasks at hand, as well as giving you the exercise you need.

Another way to take care of yourself and avoid the pitfall of poor health is through proper diet. Eating correctly is just as important to your well being as exercise. A first step to improving your diet would be to avoid all fast food.

Fast food often contains high amounts of fat and sodium, things you should be trying to eliminate from your diet. It is also very dense calorically. The average fast food meal is giving you way more calories than you need, unless you're training for a marathon. (Even then, there are healthier sources of caloric energy.)

Another step would be to switch out processed foods for fresh foods. Instead of opening a can, reach for something natural. Fresh fruits and vegetables are a perfect choice.

The takeaway here is that health problems are preventable. Because these problems may represent the ultimate setback you will face on the road to success, why not start taking steps today to avoid them while you still can.

Instant Gratification Is Your Greatest Enemy

Sometimes, you cannot force a good result. Sometimes, there is a need to take your time. Nowhere is this more true than when on the road to success.

This is a road with a fairly strict speed limit, one which is strictly enforced. When you break that speed limit, you pay the fine. In this case, the fine is frustration, anger and, often, despair. The thing is, there is no need for this rush. The perceived need for speed is self imposed and it will only result in disappointment.

We live in a fast paced world. Nothing ever stops. Nothing ever closes. All the information we need is at our fingertips, as well as all the entertainment. It's a world of instant gratification. We have become somewhat addicted to having our needs met immediately. However, there are still areas in life where the need for instant gratification is a liability, instead of an asset. Achieving your goals by successfully dealing with setbacks is one of these areas.

In order to understand why the urge for instant gratification can be so hazardous to your goal-oriented health, let's take a look at an example:

Let's say, you enjoy cooking. You're a pretty good cook with some talent. You decide to take your cooking to the next level by attending culinary school. You apply to the school of your choice, are accepted and begin classwork. The first thing on the curriculum is cooking basics. During the first week of class, instead of completing the assigned work, you decide to skip ahead to an advanced class in French cooking technique. Why? Because you're in a hurry to be a professional chef. You sneak into the class and promptly screw things up royally, destroying hundreds of dollars of food in the process. You are promptly expelled from the school.

You could say that this was an example of a setback caused by a lack of patience and a need for instant gratification. You'd be right. The easiest way to derail your ambitions, to set yourself back, is to rush a result before its time. The edifice of success needs to be built brick by brick. Each step you take prepares you for the next step you need to take. When you skip a step you simply increase the chances of falling on your face. Practice patience along the road and you will get to where you need to be.



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