

Coping with Failure

What to Know

Everyone fails at some point, but how failure is perceived determines outcomes. Failure is not a permanent state of being, and it is not a world-ending event. Failure simply means you tried and did not achieve success, or you were unable to meet an expectation.

Perhaps you set a goal with the best of intentions, but you fail to achieve what you set out to do. Your choices and actions did not support achievement of the goal, or other factors contributed to your lack of success. Perhaps you felt badly about yourself and believed the failure was a clear indicator of who you are as a person, that it somehow tarnished your character.

True failure happens when you give up. Failure is sometimes part of success, but it may indicate your goals are not aligned with who you want to be or what you want in life. Maybe there were obstacles and challenges that were insurmountable. You might need to make changes to make things work. In any case, there is a learning opportunity to be had that will propel your life forward and enhance it. So, what should you do when you fail? Here are seven steps you can take.

Step 1. Acceptance. Most people experience significant failures in their lives. This is what being human is all about! Move past denial and accept that it happened. Accept responsibility and understand this incident does not define you. How you handle the situation shows your true character, and you can use this information to empower you.

Step 2. Identify what went wrong. Analyze and reflect as you ask yourself the following questions:

- What caused me to fail?
- What went well?
- How can I improve the areas where I fell short?
- Who or what can support me in the future? Are there untapped resources I can utilize?
- Is this actually a goal I want to achieve?

If this is a goal you want to achieve, create a plan to address the issues and challenges you faced. If you decide to let go of the goal, define what you want your future life to look like. Create goals around that vision.

Tip: Be mindful and honest but avoid self-blame. Take responsibility where you need to and try not to blame external sources for your failure.

Step 3. Learn from your experience. Focus on the lesson to ensure you do not repeat mistakes. View this “failure” as a learning opportunity to broaden your perspective, grow, and improve.

Step 4. Let it go. Self-hatred or other unhealthy emotions are not helping you. It is important to be realistic and identify your mistakes, but it is not useful to berate and criticize yourself. Let the negativity go.

Step 5. Ask for feedback. If you are unsure what to do, it might help to ask for a trusted person’s perspective. Ask a colleague, mentor, or loved one for their opinion or advice. Sometimes, when you feel badly about yourself, it can be difficult to view a situation objectively.

Step 6. Plan. Now that you are aware whether you want to pursue the goal again (or have other goals in mind), the next step is to make a plan. Define what it will take to achieve what you want. Break your vision or goal down into small, realistic, and achievable steps.

Step 7. Act. Your plan is in place, so now it is time to take the first step.

Failure is not the end, and for many people, it sparks the beginning of something great. So, take this failure, learn from it, move forward, and thrive.

What to Do

This exercise will help you complete the above seven steps. First, describe your “failure.” Be very specific and as honest as possible.

Step 1 – What can you do to accept what happened? Do you need to accept responsibility for certain elements of this experience? What can you do to manage the situation with grace? Describe.

Step 2 – Identify what went wrong.

What caused you to fail? _____

What went well? _____

How can you improve the areas where you fell short? _____

Who or what can support you in the future? _____

Are there untapped resources you can utilize? If yes, describe. _____

Is this actually a goal you want to achieve? Why or why not? _____

Step 3 – What did you learn from this experience? Be specific.

List your strengths and weaknesses.

Which of your strengths can help you? What can you do to manage weaknesses?

Step 4 – Are you holding on to damaging or unhealthy emotions? If yes, describe them.

What can you do to “let go” of negativity?

Step 5 – Is there someone you can request feedback from? Whom? Write down 2-3 names.

Step 6 – What are the steps to achieve what you want? Use the chart below to break your vision or goal into small, realistic, and achievable steps. Use another piece of paper if you require more space.

Step 1	Break it down a. b. c. d
Step 2	Break it down a. b. c. d
Step 3	Break it down a. b. c. d
Step 4	Break it down a. b. c. d

Step 7 – Your plan is in place, so now it is time to take the first step. What will you do and when will you do it?

What obstacles or challenges might impact your plan? Be specific and write down some ways you can manage these issues.

Reflections on This Exercise

Was there anything that surprised you during this exercise?

What did you find challenging about this exercise?

What did you find most helpful?

What will you do the next time you fail?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
