

The new F word:

~~FAILURE~~



By Heather Holliday

Last year there was a firestorm around Yale professor Amy Chua's book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. In it, she details how she raised successful children. Among her rules: Her children never attended a sleepover, had a play date, performed in a school play, watched TV, or received a grade less than an 'A.' She also criticized her children if they didn't achieve.

Response to *Battle Hymn* ranged from venomous to awestruck. And an emotional debate erupted about what the best way is to achieve academic, professional and social success. In addition to this battle, Chua's book stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 11 weeks. Controversial parenting methods aside, it seems people were fascinated with the book—and the idea of achieving success at all costs.

After all, our culture appears to revere success, while failure has become taboo—it's almost a dirty word, for some.

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“OF COURSE, EVERYONE FEARS FAILURE. BUT THIS GENERATION FEARS FAILURE MORE. THEY SEE THINGS AS MORE HIGH STAKES. THEY OFTEN TELL ME THAT THINGS ARE MORE COMPETITIVE THAN FOR THEIR PARENTS’ GENERATION.”

—Jean Twenge, Professor of Psychology, San Diego State University

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Failure in today's context

“I think our culture fears failure,” says University of Phoenix faculty member Jean Coleman. Coleman teaches for the College of Social Sciences and is the subject matter expert for the University’s Positive Psychology workshop. “[Adults] swoop in before [kids] can make a mistake. [Kids] are being taught that a mistake is something to be avoided at all costs. Failure is not an option.”

Joseph Cuseo, professor Emeritus of Psychology at Marymount College, agrees that many in the younger generation have lived a life with safety nets, which does not allow room for failure. In such cases, the parents tend to make everything better for the kids. “So success is almost guaranteed,” he says. “The struggle is not there.” While this may feel good in the moment, it’s obviously not what life will deliver over the long haul. Which is why Cuseo says, “this group may need a wake-up call.”

Jean Twenge, Professor of Psychology at San Diego State University, also believes that the younger generation has a harder time with failure than previous generations did. “Of course, everyone fears failure,” Twenge explains. “But this generation fears failure more. They see things as more high stakes. They often tell me that things are more competitive than for their parents’ generation.” Twenge is also the author of *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before.*

The consequences of abundant praise

But where did this increased fear of failure come from? According to Twenge, at least some of it can be traced back to our culture’s increased focus on individualism in the 1970s. This cultural shift led to a ubiquitous effort to bolster people’s self-esteem in order to achieve greater success. So parents, teachers and coaches started to praise rather than criticize. And youth started being praised for nearly everything. Head to the local playground today and you’ll hear this cultural phenomenon at work. Johnny slid down the slide? “Good job, Johnny.” Emma swung the bat at a ball? “Good job, Emma.” Aiden ran in a circle? “Good job, Aiden.” In the workplace, managers are now coached to use a “criticism sandwich,” which cushions criticism between praise.

Abundant praise does seem like it would be helpful and encouraging—and would lead to greater success. But evidence shows the opposite may be true: It may actually discourage people from working and achieving. Children often stop trying because they’re so used to praise that they learn to not want to make mistakes or to fail. This research, conducted by Stanford Psychology Professor Carol Dweck and published in 2007, shows that praise can actually discourage motivation. Once this belief is learned, it can follow a person into adulthood, continuing to

discourage motivation and work in a professional setting. According to Dweck, ever-present praise doesn't work because it's not specific and it focuses on the end result rather than on effort.

Does high self-esteem equal better grades?

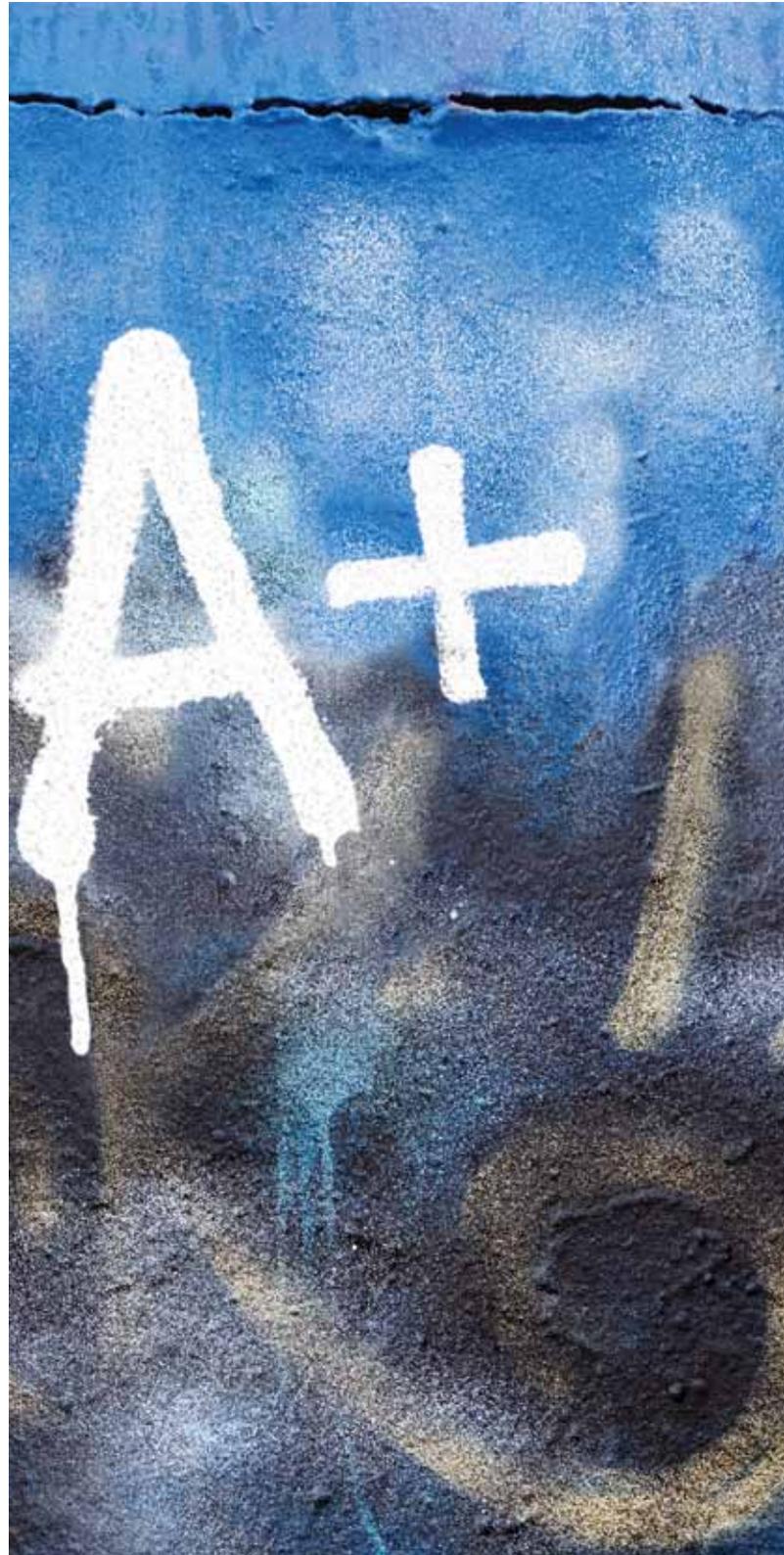
If all this praise hasn't led to the desired results, at least people's self-esteem is bolstered, right? Not so fast. Self-esteem boosting also may not have achieved the intended consequences.

Roy F. Baumeister, psychology professor at Florida State University, retracted many assumed benefits of nurturing self-esteem in a 2005 *Los Angeles Times* commentary. He explains that the American Psychological Society commissioned him and other experts to review published self-esteem research. "Here are some of our disappointing findings," he writes. "High self-esteem in schoolchildren does not produce better grades. ... In fact, according to a study by Donald Forsyth at Virginia Commonwealth University, college students with mediocre grades who got regular self-esteem strokes from their professors ended up doing worse on final exams than students who were told to suck it up and try harder."

Does high self-esteem equal better job performance?

Self-esteem also doesn't make adults perform better at their jobs. Baumeister notes that people with high self-esteem report that their performance is better. They even say that they are smarter and better looking than those who have low self-esteem do. "[B]ut neither objective tests nor impartial raters can detect any difference in the quality of work," he writes.

Neither does self-esteem predict who will make a good leader. According to an article by Robert Hogan and Robert B. Kaiser published in the *Review of General Psychology* in 2005, incompetent managers have a variety of personality characteristics, including that they are overly self-confident. Such a trait does make a good impression in the short run, according to the authors. For instance, those who score highly in narcissism initially seem confident and charismatic. "Over time, however, these features turn into a sense of entitlement and an inability to learn from mistakes," write the authors. On the other hand, the authors found that humility rather than self-esteem seems to be a key trait of successful leaders.



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This brings us back to the heart of the matter. Why all the talk about kids and children who were praised and stroked their whole life? They become your students, your colleagues and sometimes even the boss.

Consequences of fearing failure

While focusing on praise and self-esteem has not increased academic or professional success, it has bolstered the idea that we should feel good about ourselves all the time—for no particular reason, says San Diego State's Twenge.

But when the goal is simply to feel good about yourself, the costs are high, according to an article published by University of Michigan's Jennifer Crocker in *Psychological Inquiry An International Journal for the Advancement of Psychological Theory* in 2003. When a person's motivation is simply to feel good and prove one's worth, that person starts to fear becoming a failure. Driven by these fears, she writes, "people will go to many lengths to succeed, including arguing, scheming and cheating," even if these behaviors stop you from accomplishing another goal, such as making a contribution to the workplace.

In short, protecting self-esteem becomes the primary goal. And when faced with failure, rather than "realistically confronting our shortcomings and mistakes" they may find excuses for it, they may blame others, or they may dismiss the task's importance.

So, while abundant praise isn't something we encounter in higher education or in boardrooms—we are not praised for stapling

well or for doing lackluster work—the ramifications live on. On the one hand, innovation can suffer in the workplace. After all, if people don't want to fail, there is the risk that they won't put forward unique ideas.

This doesn't mean that low self-esteem is the answer, though. We need to have enough self-esteem so that we can work toward goals despite having self-doubt, fears of failure or feelings of worthlessness, Crocker writes. She adds that if self-esteem is bolstered as a result, that is an added bonus.

Failure is essential to success

Another problematic issue of mainly pursuing self-esteem is that the learning process itself is put at risk. "When our goal is self-esteem, we are focused on what we are now, not what we need to become," Crocker writes. "And because we want to feel worthy, we are not realistic about our strengths and weaknesses, where we need to improve, what we have accomplished and what we still need to accomplish." High or low self-esteem aside, failure, it turns out, is central to the possibility of true learning.

Marymount College's Cuseo points out, "you never develop resilience if you don't have a setback. You never have the opportunity to develop that skill. Failure gives anyone the ability to say, 'What if I tried harder, smarter, or used other resources?'"

University of Phoenix faculty member Coleman agrees. "Failure is essential to success. I don't think there are very many people who succeed who haven't failed first."

Helping students better define failure

Of course, failure for different people means different things. Some consider getting a 'B' to be a failure. For others, getting a 'D' or 'F' means failure. While the definition varies, as a faculty member, handling perceived failure is almost always sticky.

One of the best ways for faculty to handle student failure is to help students get over their fear of it. Rather than stressing the need to succeed at all costs, students may do better in school if they are taught that failure is just part of learning, according to research by Frederique Autin and Jean-Claude Croizet, with the University of Poitiers and the National Center for Scientific Research in France.



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—Joseph Cuseo, professor Emeritus of Psychology, Marymount College

When students are fixated on success, they become afraid to fail and don't want the challenge of mastering new material. The authors, then, suggest that rather than focusing on grades and test scores, focus on progress—rewarding each step in the learning process.

Richard Ryan, Professor of Psychology, Psychiatry, & Education at the University of Rochester agrees that grades and test scores are not motivating. “[Being grade-focused] can take away from the interest and excitement and growth that comes from learning itself,” Ryan says. “Our job is to inspire and instill the joy of discovery, not just weigh, assess and evaluate.”

When people run into challenges, they need support, not labels, he adds. “The semantics of the term failure are so absolute,” says Ryan. “But looking at the ways that you can improve your performance is very different than whether you have failed or not.” Likewise, he says, a good manager isn't one who wields rewards and punishments, but is one who finds out what the issue is and how they can help with that. He says that assessment both in schools and in the workplace should be used to gather information and learn where there is room for growth.

A safe place to fail

In addition to shifting to assessment rather than focusing on failure versus success, another tool for dealing with failure is to create a safe learning environment. “I try to give the students a safe place to fail,” Coleman says. “I let them know that you are not going to be judged on your failures. We are going to look at mistakes or failures as, ‘How are we going to equip you to be more successful next time?’”

For Cuseo, feedback is essential. “Feedback has to come early and students need to know how to improve,” he says. “That’s often lacking where there is [only] a midterm and a final. You need to give opportunities to improve.” This way, students learn how to work harder and smarter to turn a failure into a success.

Twenge agrees. It is important to emphasize that this is an opportunity to do better next to time and to learn from it, she says.

Of course, no matter how she handles a student's perceived failure, there are the occasional requests for a grade change or a second chance. Her answer is almost always ‘No.’ “I ask myself, in five years, when they are in a job, what would a manager think of that request?” If missing an exam is comparable to missing a presentation, asking for an exception is “not going to go over well,” she says.

Better equipped to fail

And that is why it matters whether our culture is increasingly inexperienced with handling failure. If it is true that many a person has been protected from setbacks, disappointments and failures, then there are real concerns about how that person is going to adjust to juggling the everyday complications of jobs and families. We learn from mistakes—at least we can if we acknowledge them. ●

your voice

we asked, you answered

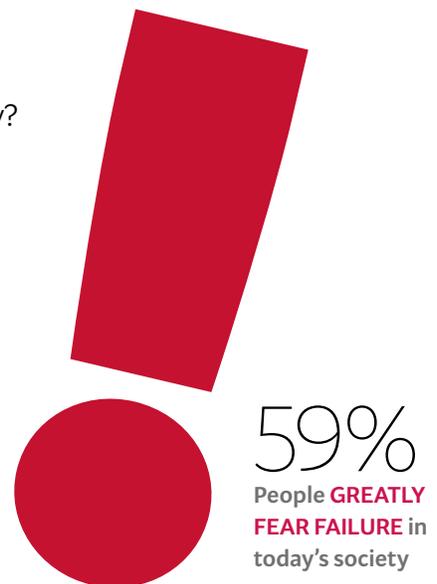
The path to success?

In April of 2012, *Faculty Matters* sent an electronic survey to all active University of Phoenix faculty members asking for opinions on the topic of failure. Much thanks to everyone who completed the survey—and to all who found one of our questions flawed, we heard you and appreciate the feedback. Read on for some intriguing statistics, offered as food for thought. For a glimpse at the 2,397 responses we received, turn to page 36.

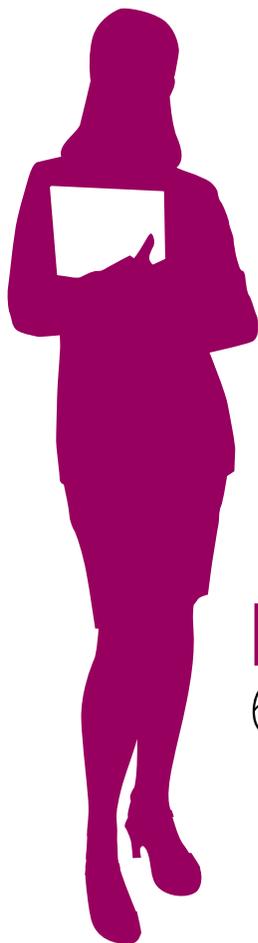
1. Is failure the opposite of success?



2. To what extent does a fear of failure exist in society today?



3. Do you think people who try new things and fail are viewed negatively?



NO
69%

YES
31%

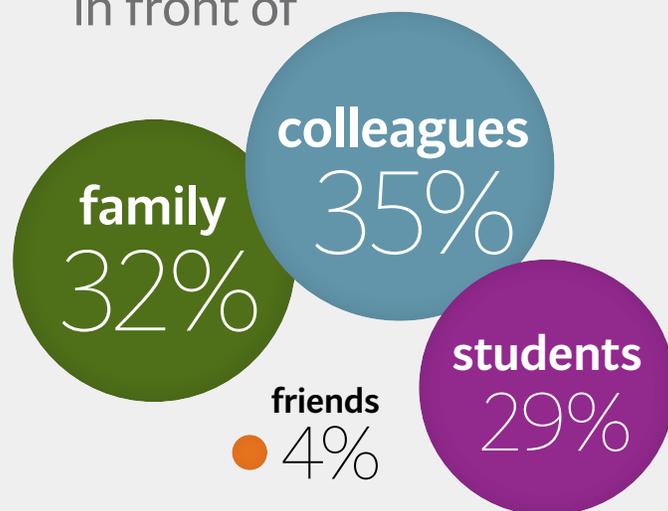


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Which of the following would concern you most?

*A number of faculty responded that this question was flawed, as it did not offer a 'None of the above' option. We have published the results in respect of the respondents who answered the question, but we appreciate these results would have been greatly different had there been an option e: other.

FAILING in front of



"I just finished the survey and find a major flaw in one of the questions. You give only four choices that are evaluated in our failure. You leave out the most important. Failure of our personal standards. I am far more concerned about failing myself than any of the four options your survey provides. The question implies that we are doing this for surface rewards and not self gratification. I could not do my best if my standards did not demand that of me. My primary concern is about my personal failure."

—Roger Pae, School of Business

"The 'forced choice' answer in number 5 is silly. None of them concern me."

—Charles Lawson, College of Education

"I would put NONE as my answer to who I would least want to fail in front of because I do not believe in 'failure.' However, that option was not given and I had to answer something. Should have a 'none' option."

—Joanna Bauer, College of Humanities

your
voice
we asked, you answered

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Is failure an option?

no
38%



yes
62%



“Yes. Failure is the nucleus of accomplishment.

The opposite of failure is discovery. Success is derived from managing failure.”

—Carl Mendoza, College of Humanities

“Yes. This question is for cheerleaders.”

—Anonymous

“No. When failure is an option, then there is no need to try. Trying leads to new beginnings and success.”

—Theron Simpson Jr., School of Business

“No. Failure is NOT an option for the student or the teacher. It is important for the faculty to remember that if the student hasn’t learned the faculty has not taught.”

—**Pamela Alexander**, College of Humanities

“Yes. Sometimes we learn from our failures better than our successes.”

—**Sandra Lavalley**, College of Information Systems & Technology

“Yes. Failure to me means the traditional meaning; one tries something, and can’t accomplish it. That happens to me often, perhaps because I set my goals high. However, even smaller goals, such as practicing my instrument daily, can be difficult to accomplish every time. Thus, honestly, failure happens. It is one option that might occur. A better question might be, What can I learn from failing to accomplish this goal?”

—**Ann Wehrman**, College of Humanities

“Yes. Absolutely! Students who do not meet course requirements must fail the course.”

—**Anonymous**

“Yes. Failure is a mindset.”

—**Lisa La Rocque**, College of Natural Sciences

“Yes. If you can’t accept losing, you can’t win.”

—**Joe Kronewitter**, School of Business

“Yes. If failure isn’t a possibility then the bar isn’t high enough.”

—**Grant Sisk**, School of Advanced Studies

by the numbers

success or failure?



123

Rejected by 123 publishers, inspirational speaker Jack Canfield and author Mark Victor Hansen persisted and were finally picked up by a small publisher. Today, *Chicken Soup for the Soul* has more than 200 titles in print, has sold in excess of 112 million copies and has been translated into 40 languages.

9,000

"I've missed more than **9,000** shots in my career. I've lost almost **300** games. **26** times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed," Michael Jordan.



5,000

John Stephen Akhwari ran the marathon for Tanzania in the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. After taking a fall early in the race, the battered, bleeding athlete placed last. When asked why he kept running a race he couldn't win, Akhwari responded: "My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race. My country sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race."