

The Importance of Failure

One common error we all make, which has serious consequences as we grow older, is the belief that failure is the opposite of success. Intellectually, we know better, but emotionally we often fail to act on what we know to be true when it comes to ourselves.

Watch a parent introduce a child to any new activity from drawing, to hitting a ball with a bat, to working out a mathematical equation for school. Commonly, the child fails at first, often becoming frustrated, angry, even tearful. Common responses from the parent include, "Don't worry, you'll get better with practice", "Nobody does it right the first time", "Anything really important takes time and effort", and so forth. Clearly, the parent is saying " Failure is just a step on the road to success. You can't succeed without first failing. Don't lose that perspective or you'll always give up before you should and you won't make any progress."

Modern science is based on this principle. Scientists know that an experiment is never truly a "failure", it's a lesson. It teaches us what **not** to do and pushes us to look for another approach until we find one that works.

But what happens to many adults when they begin a new activity themselves and it doesn't work out successfully? Too often, they give up. They tell themselves that they are too old, too out-of-date, or too incompetent. Instead of seeing the failure as a **lesson**, they see it as a **mistake**. You don't repeat a mistake, you stop. In my observations, this failure to apply a principle we know to be true to our own activity is one of the greatest barriers to growth and change in middle age, perhaps the greatest.

As a youth, I was never successful at athletics, I was intellectually precocious and this was very satisfying. It came easily to me, while athletics didn't. I would try baseball or another sport, do poorly at first, and quit. If I hadn't been doing well as a student, I might have become extremely depressed. As it turned out, that wasn't a problem, so I avoided activities that I didn't do well from the beginning and focused on those that I did. I assumed I had no athletic talent and that I was simply doing what I was meant to do. Inside though, I was very depressed that I couldn't do well at sports and it was a burden in the back of my mind well into my adult years.

At the age of 46, having already begun to understand the importance of failure, I did something truly bizarre. I became a gymnast. Totally ridiculous in light of no athletic background and, most importantly in the minds of others, my age. When I say "gymnast", that's what I mean. Everything from parallel bars to the pommel horse to the rings and so on. It had taken me two years just to find a coach who I could convince to "waste" his time working with me at my age and lack of basic skills. I was pathetic. Worse than pathetic, I was terrible! The gym's professional staff expected me to quit and just not show up after making a fool of myself time after time. They admired my spirit, but doubted my commitment. After all, no other adult without a background in the sport, even at half my age, had gotten much beyond the simplest skills before quitting. Gymnastics is an incredibly demanding sport. It requires great flexibility, great strength, attention to every detail of form, tolerance for pain, and year-round practice. No one ever expected that I would learn enough to compete.

My training was sporadic in the first few years, but my coach stuck with me and I stuck with the sport. I finally decided to compete and, at 52, found myself in a public arena, standing at one corner of the floor, about to begin my first tumbling pass. Because there was no age group for me at a lower skill level, I had to compete in the "open elite" category and be scored as a world-class gymnast would be scored. When it was all over, my scores in the different events ranged from 4.2 to 4.9 out of 10. Obviously, I was not going to be a threat to an Olympic competitor, but was I depressed? No way. I was elated. I'm still a gymnast and, as far as we know, the oldest in the US who competes in regular, sanctioned competition.

That first meet is one that will stay with me for the rest of my life. I had gone from nothing to something purely on the basis of determination and focus, and against "common sense" and the skepticism of everyone else. I certainly wasn't ashamed to get a 4.2. When I was the "right age" to be a gymnast, I couldn't have gotten a 1.0 if my life had depended on it. But to get to a 4.2 or a 4.9, I had to endure hundreds of failures. Had failure been simply the opposite of success, I would never have competed. Accepting it as just a step on the way to success made it possible for me to succeed. It's all so obvious, but that didn't make it easy to do.

The setting may be usual, but my story is not. How many successful gardeners today began with the perfect garden? How many times did

they "fail" before figuring out what to do? How many continue to fail today and will continue to fail tomorrow, despite their "success"? All of them, I would suspect.

We've all learned new skills in life and, with very rare exception if at all, we learned them only after first failing to do them properly. We **know** this is true, but we're all human and it's human to hate failure. I think it's especially difficult for us as adults. Somehow, because we're older, we feel we should learn more quickly and succeed more quickly than we did when we were young. So we slip back into the attitude we had as children. But now we usually lack an older authority, a "parent", to keep us on track. We have to do it ourselves. As a result, as mentioned in another essay at my web site at www.middleage.org, we can end up focused on our limitations instead of on our potential and we "fail". If we want our middle age to be successful, we have to learn again that failure is important and shouldn't be feared. It should be seen for what it is, a step on the road to success.