They Failed. (And So Can You.)

Is messing up the secret to success? By Jessica Press

Once upon a time, there was a boy in Wilmington, North Carolina, who dearly loved basketball. Sure he had talent, but he wasn’t a star. In 10th grade, he didn’t even make the varsity team. But this boy was not about to hang up his jersey. Day after grueling day, he kept shooting, dribbling, practicing. That boy’s name? Michael Jordan. And he became one of the greatest basketball players in history.

Generation Perfection

As a culture, we are obsessed with perfection. We “go for the gold,” not the silver or bronze. We pressure ourselves to get the best grades and feel lousy when we don’t. We post Instagrams that make our lives appear fabulous, while keeping our struggles to ourselves. And we aspire to look as flawless as the celebrities we see in (heavily retouched) photographs.

It might seem that an attitude of “failure is not an option” would push us to excel—that it would help us achieve the perfection we desire. But actually, such an attitude can have the opposite effect. Such an attitude can hold us back.

Here’s why: When you’re afraid of failing, you may choose to do what you’re good at rather than what interests you. You may be reluctant to try new things or you might quit anything at which you don’t immediately excel. And then, you won’t develop grit—the strength of mind that allows you to persevere through difficulties (in other words, stick-to-itiveness). And according to psychologist Angela Duckworth, perfection—not talent, not intellect—is the most important factor when it comes to lifelong achievement.

Failing Up

Perhaps no group has embraced the mistake-making mindset more passionately than today’s leaders in the field of technology. These visionaries have their own name for grit: They call it “failing up.” They operate under the notion that a failed app or website isn’t a problem. It’s a chance to build something better next time. Tech leaders even gather for conferences called FailCons, during which they share their failures and work to change the idea that failure is bad.

Consider Evan Williams. Back in 2005, Williams co-founded a podcasting company called Odeo. It never took off. Instead of giving up, Williams used what he learned from the experience to try something new—and he became the co-founder of one of the biggest tech success stories of all time: Twitter.

The fact is, making mistakes is inevitable. The trick is to look at your mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow—and try again.

So What About You?

Let’s say you dream of basketball stardom, but like Jordan, you don’t make the team. How are you going to use this setback? Are you going to hang in there and keep working as Jordan did? Or maybe you will explore another interest instead.

For example, Steve Jobs was once fired. He lost five elections before winning the presidency. Even Abraham Lincoln lost more than 9,000 shots in his career. NBA star Kevin Durant lost some 9,000 shots in his career. J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series was rejected by 12 publishers.

So What About You? Let’s say you dream of basketball stardom, but like Jordan, you don’t make the team. How are you going to use this setback? Are you going to hang in there and keep working as Jordan did? Or maybe you will explore another interest instead. Maybe you’ll try out for band. You may end up as an accomplished clarinet player—or you may just find that scoring, playing as much as winning, is the process of learning—valuing shooting as much as passing, playing as much as winning.

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Why should we be willing to fail?

1. Write your answer to the above question:

2. One piece of text evidence that supports your answer is:

3. This evidence supports your answer because:

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