



Learning from Mistakes and Growing from Criticism

We are biologically wired to feel uncomfortable with failure or potential embarrassment...

Fear of rejection and embarrassment in social settings – this is a part of the human condition. We have inherited these very common features from our ancestors. In evolutionary terms, being ostracized from the tribe would have been tantamount to a death sentence; it would have meant being left alone to fend for oneself in very harsh conditions. It has always been important to read social cues and find a way to make meaningful contributions to ensure connection to the group. Humans have always been social creatures with a need to feel accepted, validated, protected, and loved.

The need for acceptance is psychologically and socially driven as well...

Sometimes we can feel so determined to avoid rejection that we go to extremes to protect our egos. We might become very adept at blaming parents, teachers, the system... We might become argumentative and defensive, unwilling to listen. We might focus so much upon preserving self-esteem that we are at risk of taking feedback from others too personally. We might decide to “play it safe” and only try things that we feel certain will lead to success. Unfortunately, all of this means that fear is running the show and creativity and growth are stifled.

Making matters worse, “helicopter parenting” approaches over the past couple of decades have fostered the notion that children must be coddled and protected – protected from experiences that, in generations past, would have been character-building. Parents often advocate for their children and demand special treatment for them so that their children grow up to feel entitled to privileges without working for them. The ideas that “everybody is a winner” and that a trophy is deserved just for participation may have taken “self-esteem building” too far.

But it can also be important to take healthy risks...

Another part of the human experience is to find ways to challenge yourself – to realize your potential and to strive to meet goals, solve problems, and explore the world. We feel alive when we take a healthy risk and see it pay off. We feel an increase in power, freedom, and excitement as we see our dreams become realities.

If you push yourself to learn new things and stretch yourself outside of your comfort zone, mistakes are inevitable. They are also opportunities to learn. Rather than feeling embarrassed, defensive, or becoming overly self-critical, a successful person is open to making mistakes and receiving constructive criticism from others.

Many of us have been conditioned to believe that we should be able to do anything we would like to do and be anyone we want to be. On one hand, it can feel liberating to shoot for the stars and follow your dreams; on the other hand, it can be important to learn how to accept your limitations while opting to build on your strengths. With self-compassion and acceptance, we can live happier, more productive lives.

Healthy responses to mistakes might include...

- ✓ Reframing mistakes as “results” rather than “failures” – useful data to help move closer to a desired outcome with future attempts
- ✓ Accepting responsibility for the mistake rather than trying to blame others or pass the buck
- ✓ Embracing mistakes as signs that you are challenging yourself to grow
- ✓ Carefully considering the mistake so that elements of progress can be gleaned while strategies that have been ineffective can be avoided
- ✓ Remembering that your identity and value as a person are not contingent upon having made a mistake – you are more than your decisions and behaviors

Healthy approaches to constructive criticism might include...

- ✓ Welcoming and inviting others to look at your work so that you might see it from a fresh perspective
- ✓ Assuming that the person offering the criticism has good intentions and wants to see you realize your goal
- ✓ Expressing appreciation for the feedback, remembering that it can feel risky for the other person to offer constructive criticism (most people are reluctant to say things that could be perceived as hurtful to someone else)
- ✓ Seeking clarity by summarizing and paraphrasing the critic’s message
- ✓ Carefully considering the merits of the criticism before dismissing it
- ✓ Sharing the results of your revised strategy so that the person who offered the feedback can celebrate your accomplishments with you



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