

Failing Can Mean Succeeding

What have you tried to do and failed at?

Did you flunk a test? Did you lose at a sport?

Did you get lost when trying to find a new place?

How did you feel?

Everybody fails. Not everybody fails all the time or at everything; still, everybody fails at something now and then. But not everybody feels bad about failing. Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed, “The only man who never makes a mistake is the man who never does anything.”

But the risk and effort to succeed are necessary for success. Those who set their expectations so low that all they do is repeat the same successes don’t break records, don’t reach their potential, don’t inspire others. Of course they also probably don’t break bones or sweat or work late nights or look foolish when they fall down. Most likely you didn’t learn to ride a bike without falling; even Olympic athletes don’t win every event. It takes multiple attempts, usually with many unsuccessful ones, before winning performances become consistent.

Actually, you can learn from your mistakes. It takes failure to know what doesn’t work. The pitcher who learns that the homerun hit off his fast ball means he needs to switch to curve balls and change-ups can stay in the game, and even though this game won’t be a no-hitter, his team still might win. Failure can eliminate some options so that others can be tried.

Look at one man who experienced multiple failures. He could have bowed his head in defeat and given up. He failed in business in 1831. He was defeated for the legislature in ’32. But he was elected to the legislature in ’34. The woman he loved died in ’35. He had a “nervous breakdown” in ’36. He lost an election for speaker in ’38. He was defeated for Congress in ’43. Then he was elected to Congress in ’46, but defeated when he ran again in ’48. He was defeated for the Senate in ’50, defeated for vice president in ’56, and defeated for the Senate in ’58. But he won the presidency of the United States in 1860. That man was Abraham Lincoln. Most historians say President Lincoln was one of the most successful and influential American presidents. Not bad for someone who had so many failures.

Eliminating false starts and unworkable options is one benefit of failure. Learning how to persevere through multiple attempts is another benefit. Seeing that humans are imperfect and forgiving ourselves and others for imperfections is a benefit too. Don’t feel bad if you fail—do as the cliché says and get back on that horse and try again. Then failure can mean success.