

Do You Feel Like a Failure?

Objective

To identify ways minimize feeling like a failure.

What to Know

Feeling like a failure manifests as emotional distress regarding your perception of yourself. Symptoms include:

- persistent self-doubt
- a sense of hopelessness
- anxiety
- depression
- negative self-image
- shame
- embarrassment
- anger
- disappointment
- fear

Feeling like a failure can be caused by:

- falling short of achieving a goal.
- inability to meet expectations.
- comparing yourself to others.
- having low self-esteem.
- childhood trauma.

Check off any of the following statements that apply to you.

I believe other people my age have accomplished more in life.

I think I am less competent than others in my field.

I am not as intelligent as the people I mix with.

I tend to put myself down.

I am afraid to try new things.

I do not enjoy meeting new people.

It is difficult for me to see the possibilities around me.

I feel flawed if I am not constantly meeting goals or achieving success.

I have high expectations for myself.

I am disappointed when those expectations are not met.

___ I do not believe I have the capacity to create a meaningful and fulfilling life.

___ I place importance on what others think.

___ I constantly measure myself against others.

___ I lowered my goals to lessen the chance of failure.

___ Total your score.

If you checked off more than four statements, you might want to intentionally build your confidence and work on reducing your feelings of failure.

When things do not go according to your plans, or you fall short of achieving a goal, it can be easy to feel let down. Comparing yourself to others or lacking confidence also contributes to feeling like a failure. You may even believe you have never succeeded and are not good at anything. Your inner voice might tell you that you have failed at life.

Believing you have failed feels unpleasant, so you may try to avoid it. Rather than avoiding failure, there are ways to minimize these feelings and learn how to cope with perceived failures.

Why do some people easily bounce back from failure, while others do not? This pattern of thinking about yourself negatively can be caused by:

- unreasonable expectations from parents and caregivers.
- highly critical family members.
- depression or other unresolved mental health conditions.
- perfectionism.
- internalized societal or cultural norms.
- low self-esteem.

These factors can lead to basing self-worth on what you *do* rather than who you *are*. This core belief is often formed in childhood, but feelings of never measuring up can be overcome.

When feelings of failure creep in, reflect on your thoughts and feelings. Below are recommendations on healthy ways to cope with failure.

1. Challenge negative thoughts. Remember, thoughts are not facts. Evaluate a thought to see whether it is true and challenge the thought. Evaluate the evidence by keeping a thought diary. This will help you see what situations elicit failure and plan how you will challenge the thought with proof of your successes. Track situations that trigger feelings of failure and challenge them with evidence of your successes.

2. Minimize comparison to others. Social media can make it hard to feel good about yourself when everyone's accomplishments are all you see. Not everything online is true, and posts might not even be examples of things you value. You rarely see others' struggles or setbacks. When you notice yourself falling into the comparison trap, bring your awareness back to your own accomplishments. Remember that another person's accomplishment does not take anything away from you, nor do they reflect on you. Review your past self to see how far you

have come. If specific social media accounts trigger you, consider unfollowing them or taking breaks from social media. Reframe comparisons and "compare down" to focus on your successes and progress.

3. Notice the positive. When you feel like a failure, practice gratitude. Reflect on the areas of your life where you are doing well and feel fulfilled. Take a moment to appreciate yourself. Note: Forcing yourself to only see the good during challenging times can be a form of toxic positivity. Have a balanced perspective, practice gratitude, and acknowledge positive aspects of your life—while avoiding the trap of toxic positivity.

4. Engage in self-compassion. Everyone makes mistakes and fails. Do you respond to these mistakes by shutting down your feelings or shaming yourself? Holding a negative perception of yourself can lead to feeling defeated by challenges. Building self-love and self-compassion are essential because you are reminded that you are inherently worthy. Kindly validate your feelings, and say something like, "I'm struggling with feeling like I'm a failure. That's okay because I'm human. Things have been hard, and I'm allowed to be unhappy sometimes." Self-compassion is essential for breaking the cycle of negative self-perception.

5. Realign your understanding of failure. Ask yourself, "What is driving my personal view of failure?" Gain insight into your core beliefs around failure—and success. What matters is how you learn from your failures, how you bounce back, and whether you try again. Failure is not a label; it is something that happens. Failure is a natural part of life and does not define your worth. In addition, explore how you define success. Instead of looking at external measures, think about what traits you have that you value, like being a reliable friend. List times you have persevered in the face of obstacles.

6. Focus on the process, not just the results. Enjoy the journey of life rather than fixating on outcomes. If you find yourself struggling to enjoy the process, it might be a sign that your goals or aspirations do not align with your true passions and values. It is a valuable opportunity to reevaluate your objectives, ensuring that they resonate with your authentic self. By aligning your goals with your passions, you can infuse your journey with enthusiasm and a sense of purpose, making the process more enjoyable. Focus on defining your own path.

7. Remain present. Practicing mindfulness is a powerful way to anchor yourself in the present moment. By consciously focusing your attention on the here and now, you can cultivate greater self-esteem. When you are fully engaged in the present, you appreciate your worth and capabilities, unburdened by regrets or anxieties. Mindfulness not only enhances your self-esteem but also allows you to make better decisions, foster deeper connections with others, and find contentment in the beauty of each moment.

8. Embrace risk. Recognize that failure is a natural part of the journey toward success. In the pursuit of your goals, understand that taking risks is not a sign of weakness, but rather a testament to your courage and determination. By gradually exposing yourself to situations that challenge your limits, you create opportunities for growth and self-discovery. Imagine what you could achieve if you approached each endeavor with the mindset that failure is merely a steppingstone on your path to accomplishment. Embracing risk becomes a powerful tool for

personal development, pushing you to explore uncharted territory and unlock your full potential.

By implementing these strategies, you can shift your perspective and move toward a more positive, self-compassionate outlook, breaking free from the feelings of failure and embracing personal growth and resilience.

What to Do

Why do you think you feel like a failure? Be specific.

What would it feel like to live life regardless of what others think?

Would you feel pressured if everyone had high expectations of you? Explain.

Do you feel sorry for yourself and disempowered? Why? Explain.

What are your beliefs around failure? About success?

What valuable traits do you have, like being organized or reliable?

How have you persevered in the face of obstacles or life challenges?

Keep this success list handy when you feel like a failure.

Next, every time you feel like a failure or believe you are useless, choose one of the above strategies and record your experiences in the following chart. For the next two weeks, note the

Reflections on This Exercise

Did this activity help you feel less like a failure? Why or why not?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
