

Research examines how mistakes can make people 'tune out'

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Failure may not be the great teacher that conventional wisdom says it is. New research from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business finds that, contrary to common belief, people learn less from failure than from success.

"Our society celebrates failure as a teachable moment," write the study's authors, Prof. Ayelet Fishbach and postdoctoral fellow Lauren Eskreis-Winkler, who found in a series of experiments that "failure did the opposite: It undermined learning." Their research is forthcoming in the journal *Psychological Science*.

"We are taught to learn from failure, to celebrate failure, to fail forward," said Fishbach, a renowned expert on motivation and decision making. "Graduation speeches often talk about how much you should dare to fail and learn from your failures. And managers talk about the lessons that they personally had from failures. If you just listen to public speaking, you would think that we are pretty tuned in to failures. However, this is not the case."

The researchers conducted five experiments in which each of the 1,600-plus participants answered a series of binary-choice questions. In one experiment, researchers asked telemarketers how much money U.S. companies lose annually due to poor customer service. The choices were either "approximately \$90 billion" or "approximately \$60 billion."

Because there were only two possible answers, once participants received feedback on their answer, they should have known the correct answer—whether they guessed correctly or not. Next, participants were retested on the content of the initial questions to see whether they had learned from the feedback. Consistently, participants learned less from failure than from success—even when the task was redesigned to make learning from failure less cognitively taxing, and even when learning was incentivized. Those who received failure feedback also remembered fewer of their answer choices.

"With more experiments, what we were able to see is that it's really a matter of self-esteem," Fishbach said. "It just doesn't feel good to fail, so people tune out."

In another experiment, the researchers removed ego from failure by having participants observe someone else's successes and failures. Although people learned less from personal failure than from personal success, they learned just as much from others' failures as from others' successes. In other words, when failure is removed from the self, people tune in and learn from failure.

"To the extent that failures are being ignored, to the extent that we actually tune out rather than tune in, then there is no learning whatsoever from failures," Fishbach said. "And when there is no learning from failures, that's quite in contrast with the general impression that failures were teachable moments in our life. Most of the times when we failed, we just didn't pay attention."

The results have implications for how to optimize learning, the researchers said. As Fishbach put it: "We should understand that by exposing ourselves to failure, we might not be giving ourselves the best chance to learn."

Provided by University of Chicago

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