OVERCOMING A SENSE OF ACADEMIC FAILURE

This is a workbook created at the University of Oxford by Emily Troscianko and Rachel Bray and was last updated in June 2023. We encourage you to take notes while you read, and to make a point of turning some of your notes into actions.

Which way do you go?

(Susan Blackmore, *The Way*)

This is part of an initiative designed to help make it OK to talk about failure as well as success. Academia is full of people who feel like impostors. The widespread feeling of not being good enough is fuelled by many facets of the academic system, not least the intense and intensifying competition to publish and get increasingly scarce jobs and grants. Above all, however, it is fostered by the insecurities of all the other people who feel the same (at least some of the time), and who do their best to hide their failures for fear of being found out. Almost everyone plays the game, it's far easier to fool other people than yourself, and so the academic world gets ever less honest and less happy.

Not quite everyone plays this game, though. One simple way to stop is to be open about our failures. Doing this allows us to stop pretending, learn from what didn't go to plan, and be part of making obvious to everyone that no academic career is a neat progression from success to success.

The problem and this solution were set out by a then postdoc, now lecturer, Melanie Stefan in a *Nature* article in 2010. After that, a professor in economics, Johannes

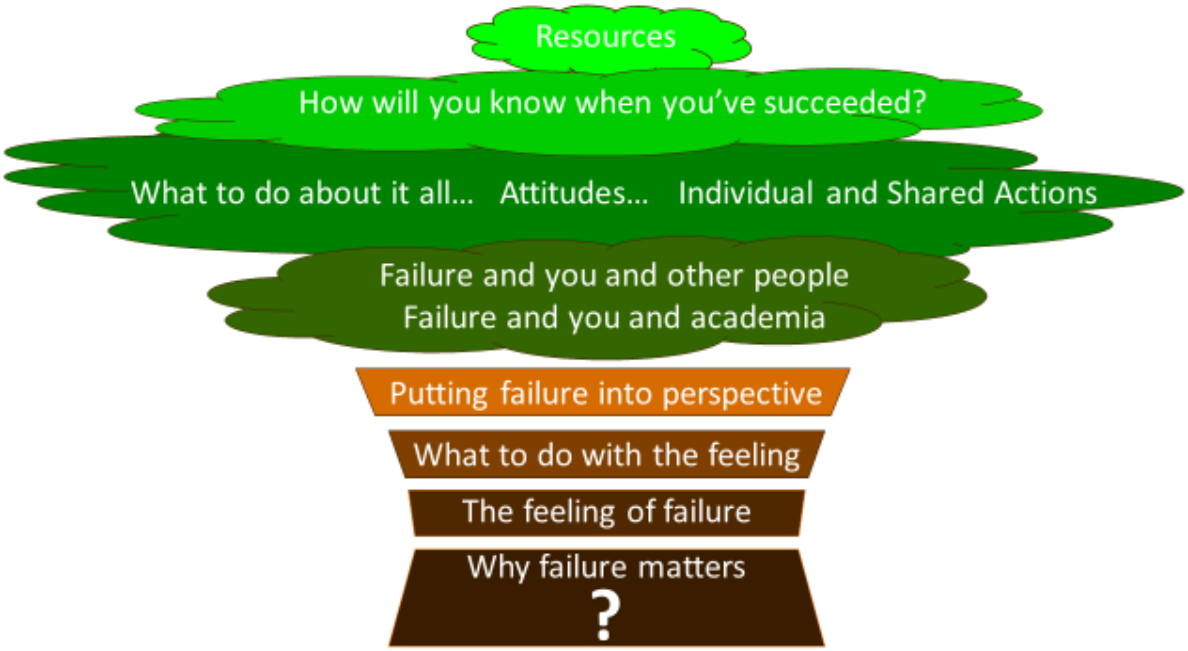
Haushofer, attracted a lot of attention with his CV of failures (his "meta-failure" being that "this darn CV of failures has received way more attention than my entire body of academic work"). And Bradley Voytek, a neuroscience professor, offers a great example of a CV which includes both successes and—without further comment—failures and rejections. (See the References at the end for all three.)

The idea is that if you're feeling you have failed, or even if you're feeling *you are* a failure, it is better to acknowledge that than to try to ignore it. Once you have, you can set your feelings in context and move on from a position of greater strength. The usual default mode is positivism: "academia is a tough road but we must keep trying and stay optimistic"—the academic version of "keep calm and carry on". But pretending everything is OK is not the only option.

The initiative also includes a set of five audio podcasts (see the Resources section at the end) that expand on the ideas presented here, with voices of experience from a range of career shapes and stages. The project is supported by the Careers Service, whose Advisers often see early-career academics lose confidence during their time at Oxford, sometimes getting stuck for many years when they are further on in their careers because of feelings of failure. When feeling you have failed becomes a limiting belief—when it makes you fear to try new things in case you fail again—that is when it becomes really dangerous.

Structure.

We begin at the root by asking why failure matters and how it really feels. Then we gain some height and perspective by contextualizing these feelings and thinking about how they affect us in our everyday working lives and relationships. Practical suggestions are offered thanks to insights from those who have spread their branches and found new ways to blossom.



Many of us experience feelings of failure, yet we rarely talk about them.

- When we feel we are failing now, or that we will do in the future, what exactly are these feelings?
- Where do these feelings come from?
- What can we learn from them?

We will cover these points in more detail in the following sections.

Failure matters.

> *It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all—in which case, you fail by default.*
>
> *- J. K. Rowling (2008) "The fringe benefits of failure and the importance of imagination"*

- Failure is inevitable. Failing can be good. But feeling like a failure is neither.
- Admitting our failures in academia is as important as publishing negative results in science. Otherwise, everyone ends up with a distorted view of reality, and only the pretence of progress is made.
- Change can come only if we make it happen. Attending honestly to our own experiences is one place to start.

What happens when you talk about failure?

- When in 2016 over 30 Oxford DPhil (PhD) students and early-career academics met with seven speakers who had objectively successful careers within or beyond academia to discuss failure, the relief in the room was palpable.
- Feelings of failure were understood as spanning the academic, the wider professional, and the personal sphere.
- Distinctions were drawn between objective failure (e.g. job, grant, paper rejections) and subjective feelings of being a failure or an impostor (e.g. "I'm not good enough for Oxford").
- Everyone wanted more openness about failure across the University.

- Collectively, the group developed a clearer lens on failure, an understanding of how it can shape careers (for good or ill), and ideas for bringing about institutional change.

- This document records and builds on what was said that day. Any wisdom in it is collective wisdom.

The feeling of failure: An exercise

Next time you fail at something, great or small, pay attention to what you are feeling, right now. Consider the following questions, and write down your answers (everything tends to stay unhelpfully hazy otherwise). Or if you're exploring this document for the first time, you might like to bear in mind the most recent experience of failure you can think of, or an experience that has always bothered you, and consider how these questions might have helped you process it. You can come back to the questions when you encounter a new failure.

- What is it that makes failure so unpleasant?

- Are there dark corners of your experience which you fear to look at head-on? What happens if you try focusing on them?

- Is failure, for you, right now, more a subjective or an objective problem? (It is objective if there was a straightforward pass/fail scenario, like getting a promotion or not; it is subjective if the definitions are blurry aznd someone else wouldn't necessarily agree this was a failure, like in a social interaction.) Is there a broader pattern beyond your experience now: Does one kind tend to bother you more often, or more intensely, than the other?

- If you are sitting with an objective failure, can you remember a subjective one—and vice versa? Does an objective failure have more jagged edges than a subjective one? Is a subjective one more insidious, creeping deeper into your self-perception? Are you simply more used to one than the other?

- Might you be confusing failure and guilt? Or failure and some other emotion? How would you know?

- Might you be confusing failure and deviation from your Plan A? How would you know?

- Is this feeling about you, or about what other people may think of you, or about what you think other people may think of you? Where is your evidence about what other people think really coming from?

- Are the standards you set yourself so high you were bound to fail?

- Are you so tired and anxious that you cannot think or feel anything else clearly?

- Do you feel, in this moment, that you are an impostor and all your successes are a charade? If so, can you list some concrete reasons why you feel this? Would someone sensible you know draw this conclusion from those reasons?

- Does how you feel about your failure relate to how you approach your successes? For instance, would you look at a list of all the good and happy things that have happened in your life, and think "that's all just down to luck", while blaming the bad stuff (like what has just happened) on yourself?

- Now you've been sitting with this feeling for a while, and asking interesting questions of it, do you notice that anything has changed?

- If you return to this practice of attending to and interrogating your feelings for a second or a third time, does your perspective on your failures change?

The feeling, of course, is not all there is. You've come to know it better; now, what you do with it?

First, accept one crucial fact about failure: it cannot be avoided except by stopping being alive.

So ask yourself now: what kind of outcome do you seek?

- Does the outcome you need lie in the comfort of making your feelings of failure go away or turn into something else? Or would the comfort of knowing them to be normal perhaps be enough?

Let's start with the normality of your feelings. This is easily established: After all, not only does everyone fail, many people often feel like failures.

Robin Dunbar is Professor of Evolutionary Psychology at Oxford, and Fellow of Magdalen College. He has a BA in psychology and philosophy from Oxford and a PhD in psychology from Bristol, and has held research fellowships, lecturerships, and professorial chairs at universities in the UK and Sweden. He has written over 450 academic papers and book chapters and nine books, as well as more than 100 science journalism articles, and he has supervised over 45 PhD students. BUT, as he says in his CV of successes and failures,…

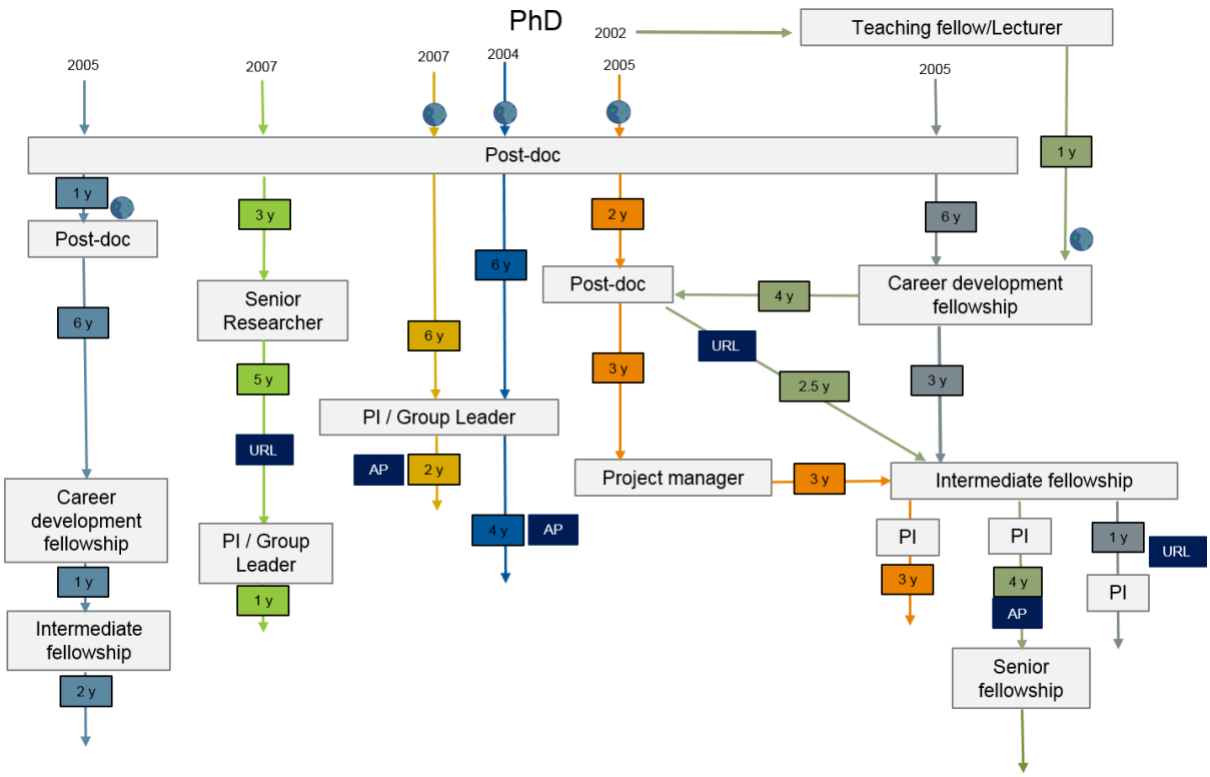
- I didn't have my first full time proper (i.e. permanent/teaching) job until I was aged 39 [thanks UCL!]
- By the time I had my last research fellowship (Liverpool, 1986), I had spent nearly as much time unemployed as I had employed
- I was turned down three times from academic posts at Edinburgh University

[where I was desperate to go]

- I still have outstanding job applications that I have never formally been told I didn't get: at the University of Leicester (ca 1976), Deakin University (Australia, ca 1983), University of Liverpool (ca 2003).
- I might have disappeared without trace on several occasions:
  - To University of Guelph (Canada) in 1977 (rescued by BBSRC and Cambridge Univ)
  - Into industry as a computer programmer (in 1985: they didn't want me, luckily)
  - Into a career as a science writer for New Scientist (in 1986, rescued by Liverpool Univ)

- Lifetime achievements:
  - Number of successful job interviews: 3 [hit rate = 0.10]
  - Number of unsuccessful job interviews: 8 [interview hit rate = 0.35]
  - Number of no-interview applications: ca 20

Even in the structured world of academia, progression takes many paths…



Mapping of PI Career Profiles within the Radcliffe Department of Medicine (Radcliffe Department of Medicine Career Profiles, qualitative study by Katja Gehmlich, 7 March 2016, supported by Leanne Hodsdon and Ruth McCaffrey, with design assistance from Emma O'Brien)

= movement away from country where PhD was undertaken

URL = University Research Lecturer

AP = Assistant Professor

- Chequered is par for the course. The linear and seamless path to success never existed for anyone, even if it looks like it from the outside.

- You have asymmetric data. You know a lot about yourself, and very little about everyone else who seems successful (or unsuccessful).

- It is common not to believe that you are as good as other people think you are. (This tendency may also be gendered, race-related, institutional, and otherwise contextual.)

- Think of a person whom you admire as successful, and ask yourself: Do I really think he or she has never felt the way I do? Then, if you can, go and ask them!

- Even people with really interesting lives had no idea what they were doing at some point. Again, invite anyone you know to tell you about a time in their lives where they had no clue how anything was going to turn out, and they will not look at you blankly.

- Feeling clueless yet motivated—having energy but not knowing how best to apply it—is a common state.

Maybe this helps you feel a little better, but not much. What next? How do you go about the alchemy of turning this (maybe now slightly more mildly) unpleasant feeling into something you can recognise as valuable?

Attending to your feelings of failure is about practising realism. More specifically, it's about practising controlled exposure to what you fear, not avoidance of it, with all the benefits that flow from there.

We are often told to try to "overcome negative thinking", but without it we may lose touch with reality. Assess whether something has gone wrong, and if so what. Take a deep breath. Then learn something for real.

> *When individuals do attempt to repress or deny their negative emotions, the strategy inevitably backfires. […] [H]olding negative emotions in compassionate awareness is a more adaptive way of dealing with failure, so that one does not become inadvertently fixated on thoughts of inadequacy and self-doubt.*
>
> *- Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat (2005) "Self-compassion, achievement goals, and coping with academic failure" (p. 283)*

A crucial element of realism is perspective. Perspective comes partly from the appreciation of your normality. It comes also from the ability to place *now* in the context of all the moments that have gone before and will come after.

What in your past may have prepared this moment of feeling this way, now? Have you felt like this only since coming to Oxford, or did you already feel this way long before arriving here?

- Maybe failure for you is a new experience. Maybe you had a glittering school career and this is your first encounter with things that feel academically *hard*, and with people who are as academically competent as you, or more so.

- Academia attracts and nurtures perfectionists. Are you setting the bar too high and letting perfectionism rule your life, instead of using reasonably high standards to serve you and others well?

- Perhaps you or your family have sacrificed a lot to enable you to study/work here. Investing money or moving the family raises expectations for the future.

- The longer habits last, the more entrenched they grow. If you can tease out one or more threads that connect your past to the elements of your present that make you feel like a failure, ask yourself whether these threads would be better off broken, and if so, what breaking them might involve.

Just as your past does not wholly define your present, so your present need not be your future. Now is not forever.

- Everything comes in waves; every career has patches of greater and lesser productivity. (Also, we are not just machines for producing things.)

- Recognise the shapes of things. Does success feel like the dynamics of things happening, and failure feel like nothing happening? Do patches of apparent nothingness feel never-ending? What lies beneath the apparent nothingness—that is, what is actually being achieved?

- *Nothing* you do is a waste. If you disagree, come up with some counterexamples, and justify them. Does this process mean that you learn from them anyway, and so disprove your own point?

- Every new role elevates you in some respect. Work out how this applies to you right now: Where is this role helping you move from and to?

- A failure can take a long time to process. Be patient with yourself, and respect the half-lives of failure: Sometimes its impact diminishes quickly, and other times slowly.

Nonetheless, now matters.

It is easy to prioritize the future over the present for so long that you realize your life is passing you by.

- Imagine you have a magic fairy wand that lets you see your future. Probably it will show you: You will have an interesting life. Whatever else it shows you, despair now is unlikely to be what it justifies. So wave it, stop, and treasure what you can about where you are.

- Focus on now, and what you can do well, now; the future will take care of itself.

- It's easier than you think to let go.

> *"You see, Aschenbach has only ever lived like this"—and the speaker closed the fingers of his left hand tightly into a fist—"and never like this"—and he let his open hand hang comfortably down from the back of the chair.*
>
> *- Thomas Mann, Death in Venice (1912)*

You and other people.

Now you have a better appreciation of your own feelings and the space they occupy, it's time to consider in more depth the role of other people. Other people can energize, support, and reassure you. They (or your idea of them) can also trap you if you let them.

> *I was alone, but deep inside I could not accept that majority views must be right, accepted or adhered to simply because of their majority status. I recognised that we should not leave a paradigm unchallenged simply because it is dominant.*
>
> *- Zuber-Skerritt & Farquhar (2002) "Action learning, action research and process management: A personal history" (p. 103); cited in Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire (2003) "Why action research?"*

- Do you feel only as good as the reception of your last effort?

- If you do things based on others' expectations, it will be clear to others (and it won't make you happy). If you're going to do something, do it for you. If *you* don't want to do it, why *are* you doing it?

- Sometimes we have to do things we don't want to, but bear in mind the balance of these with the things you love and/or care about. In any given week, what proportions exist of each?

- Many feelings of failure come from comparison with your peers or your seniors. You may feel that without such comparison, you would not be competitive. But those comparisons can probably take care of themselves—and may well do more harm than good. Focusing on your own work and your

own goals and why they matter to you can help protect you (as well as letting your work be about more than competition).

- ❖ Remember that changes in professions and institutions usually happen slowly, and may create generational conflicts of expectation. If you feel suffocated by the status quo, ask yourself whether you have the means to effect change, or whether acceptance and accommodation, or departure, is a better aim for you.

- ❖ Hierarchies generally run counter to openness, so don't be afraid to challenge them, with as much force or tact as you sense are required. What is actually the worst that could happen, how likely is it, and might even that not be all bad?

- ❖ Be prepared to resist others' expectations. Be prepared for how uneasy this will make you feel at first. Expectations are more rigid than creativity. Remember too that this is just as true when the expectations are your own.

- ❖ Try protecting yourself from feeling a failure by reminding yourself: They're just not clever enough to see I deserve success. Does this work? How do you feel when you try it?

- ❖ Is it your work or yourself that you want success for? That is, if your work could change the world but you would never get the credit for it, would you want to do it anyway? Or is the work mainly a means to some kind of status?

- ❖ No (wo)man is an island. Don't try to be.

- ❖ Share your failures with your friends and colleagues—and your successes too. Ask them: What could I have done differently? How would you have reacted? Was this a failure? Was it a success?

- ❖ What do other people think of you, and do you care? Why? Why not?

Life's not fair, is it? Some of us drink champagne in the fast lane, and some of us eat our sandwiches by the loose chippings on the A597.

- Victoria Wood

You and academia: Saying farewell, if need be.

It should be clear by now that asking yourself these questions, and listening carefully for your responses (and other people's), requires and encourages honesty at many levels. One of the hardest things for those of us who grow up in an academic setting can be asking: Is academia really where I want to be? But this question needs asking too, if the answers to the others are to remain sincere and meaningful.

- ❖ What would you be doing now if you were not in academia?

- Do you apply for jobs you don't really want, just because you feel you ought to? Try a thought experiment: Imagine getting an academic job. Then imagine hating it. Imagine having to move to a university in a town you know you don't like and a department you don't want to be in, just because you applied for a job there and were unfortunate enough to get it. Or maybe you don't have to imagine…?

- Academia offers just one (messy) set of career paths. Getting a job in academia is not the ultimate success, nor is not getting one the ultimate failure. Most of the world does not care about this sector, and some of the world considers it less valuable than other many others.

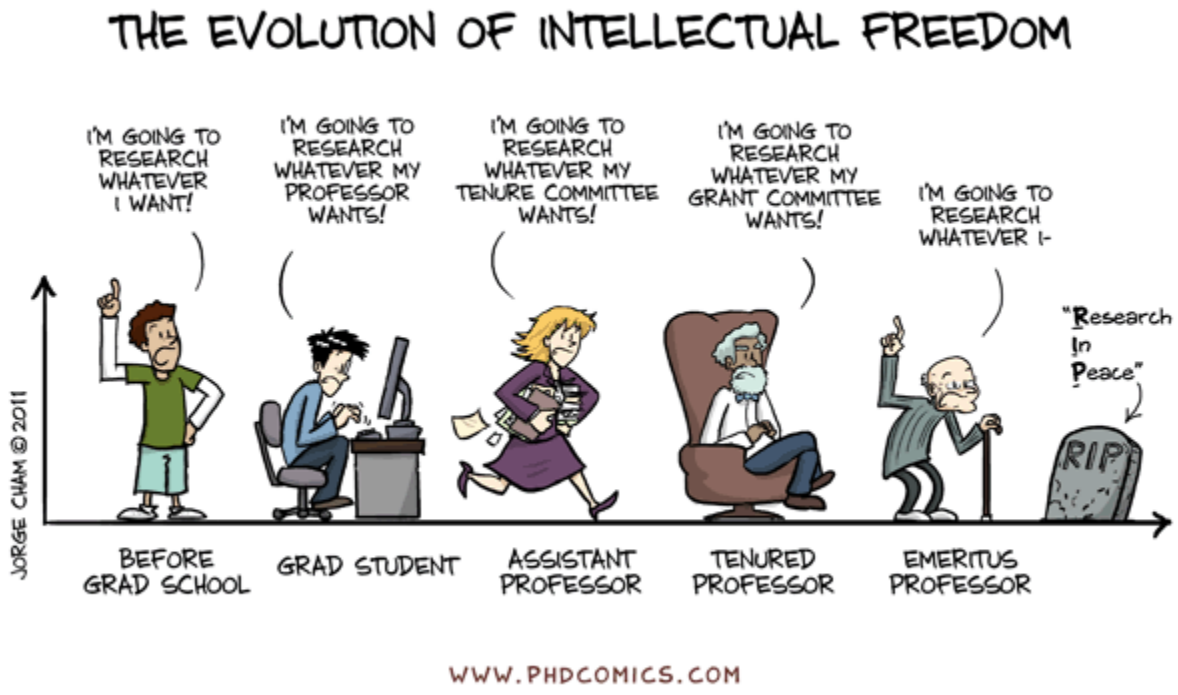
- Having a Plan B (or an alternative Plan A) is not just OK, it's critical. There are a hundred other things you can do. Sometimes you owe it to yourself to take a different path.

- How much do you enjoy your academic work? How much do you enjoy other aspects of your life? What, to you, really matters?

- Is fear keeping you from exploring alternatives? If so, fear of what? What is the worst that could happen if you tried something else, and it didn't work out? Be realistic, and precise.

- It's OK to say that material conditions matter. Along with the creeping expectation that aspiring academics will work for little or no money comes a shrinking sense of entitlement, and a growing sense of disempowerment. You may come to overvalue money precisely because you are undervalued.

- Topsy-turvy can creep up on you. We can come to have perverse perceptions of security in insecurity, and so can be seduced into seizing any academic job as better than the alternative. Are you sure you understand what you are signing up to?



"Piled Higher and Deeper" by Jorge Cham, www.phdcomics.com

- Maybe academic research just is difficult and tiring, and should be; after all, if it were easy, someone else would already have done it. Maybe the most we should expect of things is that they should be interesting, and that happiness and success are bonuses. Maybe not.

- "Listen, this isn't working" can be an empowering statement from you, not just a feared criticism from others.

- Ask yourself, "what is it that would need to be different for this to work?"; then ask, "is that possible, and plausible?".

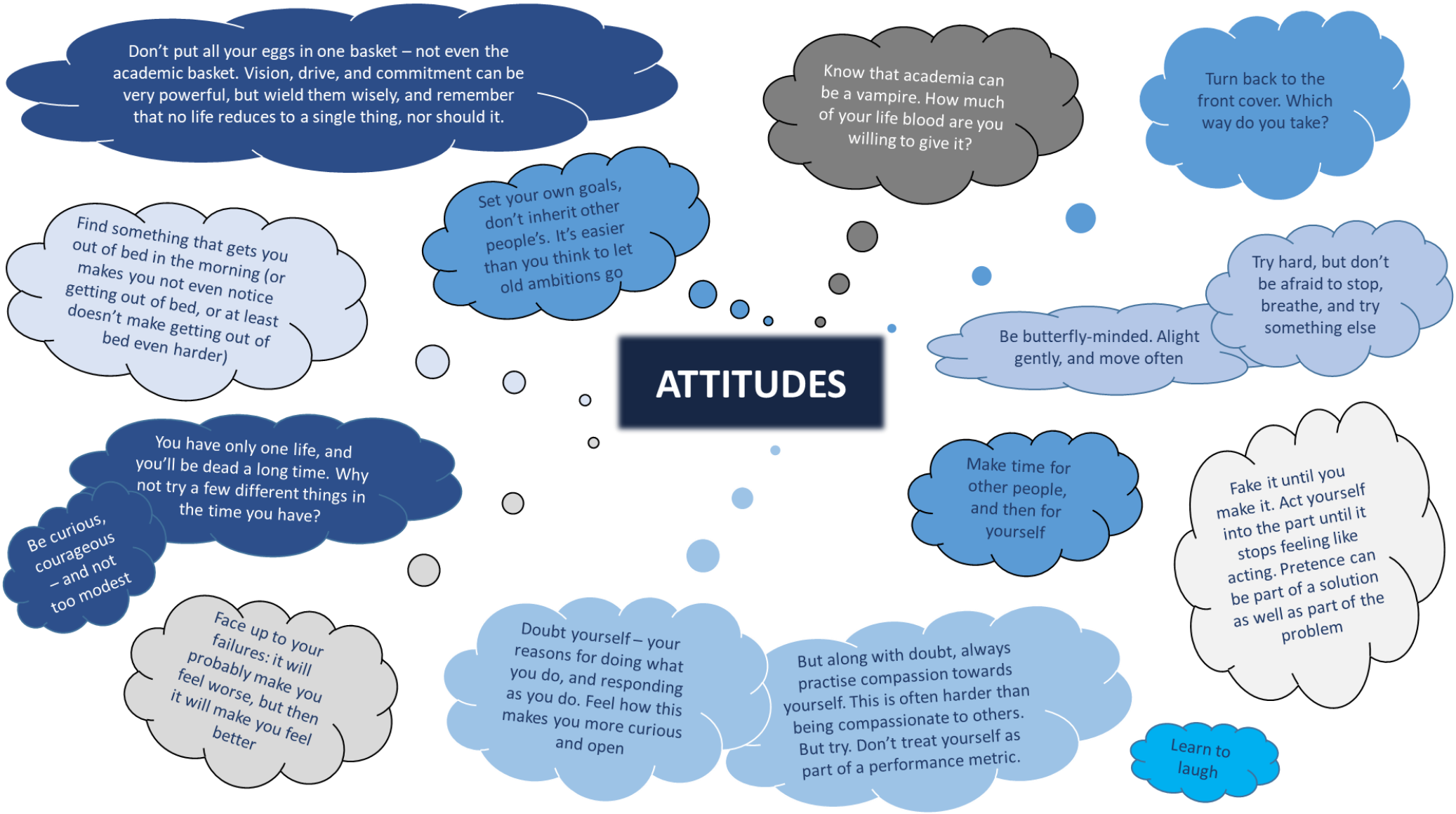
- It all comes back to motivation: It's up to you to keep going—but you can bail out or change tack when you want or need to, and try something new.

- Finding something new will take time, energy, and imagination; researching the options for your life is the most profound kind of research you'll ever do. If you feel you have no energy for anything new, that is a problem in itself.

Sue Blackmore is a freelance writer, lecturer, and broadcaster, and a Visiting Professor in Psychology at the University of Plymouth. She studied psychology and physiology at Oxford, and has an MSc and PhD in parapsychology from the University of Surrey. In 1982, after completing her PhD and a brief postdoc position, she had her first child and published her first book. She has now written over 60 journal articles, and her books—including *The Meme Machine* (1999), *Zen and the Art of Consciousness* (2011), and

Consciousness: An Introduction (2003, 2010, 2018)—have been translated into around 20 other languages. She is a TED lecturer and a member of the Edge Community, appeared on *Desert Island Disks*, and was chosen as one of the 100 Global Minds 2015. Here are some excerpts from her CV of failures.

> Early 1980s: Precarious existence living on tiny grants from e.g. Society for Psychical Research while bringing up kids at home. A little research and some papers published in obscure journals.
>
> 1988-ish: Applied for MRC grant on near-death experiences—rejected with the lowest possible grading, "Of no scientific interest whatever", or words to that effect.
>
> 1989 (ish): Failed to get Perrott-Warrick Fellowship at Darwin College Cambridge. VERY disappointed and downcast.
>
> Worked very hard on long review paper on near-death experiences, submitted to *Psychological Review*, many revisions, completely contradictory referees, rejected.
>
> 1992–2000: Senior Lecturer and then Reader in Psychology at University of the West of England, Bristol. Hated it! Cut down to .6 and then less until I left in 2000.
>
> Lost 2 PhD students (I fear I didn't fight hard enough against my head of department).
>
> Return to precarious living as freelance writer, broadcaster and lecturer. Much preferable.
>
> Somewhere along the way did a lot of radio and TV. Big chance presenting potential new TV series for BBC called Antenna. Made pilot programme. Series not commissioned. Felt idiot.
>
> 2014–16: Two children's novels rejected by several publishers and agents and failed in competitions.


Don't put all your eggs in one basket – not even the academic basket. Vision, drive, and commitment can be very powerful, but wield them wisely, and remember that no life reduces to a single thing, nor should it.
Know that academia can be a vampire. How much of your life blood are you willing to give it?
Turn back to the front cover. Which way do you take?
Find something that gets you out of bed in the morning (or makes you not even notice getting out of bed, or at least doesn't make getting out of bed even harder)
Set your own goals, don't inherit other people's. It's easier than you think to let old ambitions go
Try hard, but don't be afraid to stop, breathe, and try something else
Be butterfly-minded. Alight gently, and move often
ATTITUDES
You have only one life, and you'll be dead a long time. Why not try a few different things in the time you have?
Be curious, courageous – and not too modest
Make time for other people, and then for yourself
Fake it until you make it. Act yourself into the part until it stops feeling like acting. Pretence can be part of a solution as well as part of the problem
Face up to your failures: it will probably make you feel worse, but then it will make you feel better
Doubt yourself – your reasons for doing what you do, and responding as you do. Feel how this makes you more curious and open
But along with doubt, always practise compassion towards yourself. This is often harder than being compassionate to others. But try. Don't treat yourself as part of a performance metric.
Learn to laugh

What to do about it all: Attitudes.

If you punished toddlers every time they stumbled, they wouldn't care much for walking.

☹
Applied for 8 junior research fellowships in Oxford/Cambridge in 2011. Had no interviews
☺
In 2012 was awarded a JRF at St John's.
☹
Applied for 3 faculty positions this year and was interviewed for each. Was offered none of the positions! (One of these results came through today.)
☺
Was offered a senior postdoc position at Caltech without applying for the job. Will start this October.

- Failure event participant, James Anderson

What to do about it all: Individual actions.

With any of the following actions you try out, make sure to reflect afterwards. What did I learn? What did I or will I do differently as a result? Keep a written record of your learning curve.

- Failure needn't be secret. Let's talk about ours. Talking about failure will not make you fail.
- Expand your CV to include a section on your failures. Encourage others to do the same, then share, read, compare, laugh.
- Make a regular event with peers part of your professional routine (see below).
- Find a mentor and make a mentoring relationship work for you. Volunteer to mentor someone else. Both could teach you a lot.
- Take up all opportunities for personal development review (PDR). Demand thoroughness and honesty of yourself and the person who helps you conduct your review.
- Know yourself, and don't be afraid to change what you know. Do your current coping strategies do more harm or good? Experiment with variations on them, inspired by ideas you glean from any of the suggestions here or elsewhere. Be on the lookout for prompts to try out new things, and then have a simple system for actually trying them (e.g. a notebook and a calendar alert for checking it for ideas).

- ❖ Make a viable alternative career plan, and test it out. Try Herminia Ibarra's book *Working Identity* (see the References at the end) for tips on considering a new direction, and on tasting alternative roles or sectors and evaluating them.

- ❖ Rather than shying away from them, look your experiences and feelings of failure right in the eye, and say to them: "Do your worst. I will thrive despite you."

- ❖ Ask yourself: How much are you a victim? Should you try to change the system, or yourself? Right now, do you have the means or the energy to do one or both?

- ❖ If you have no energy and feel constantly overwhelmed, find professional help (see Resources).

- ❖ Rule nothing out. You are more than what you have already done.

Barbara J. Gabrys has an MSc and a PhD in experimental physics, and held several research assistant roles and research fellowships in Poland, Belgium, the UK, and the USA before moving on to a lecturership at Brunel, where she began to build up her own research group. When the physics department at Brunel closed but she wanted to stay in the UK, she switched directions into software engineering and took up fixed-term administrative and teaching jobs, and later held a Fellowship at Kellogg College and the Department of Continuing Education at Oxford. Following eight years as Academic Advisor to the MPLS Division at Oxford, she is now Academic Visitor in the Department of Materials, and is conducting scientific studies of mindfulness meditation programmes alongside her activity as a Zen master. She has extensive teaching experience and has designed distance learning courses and published books on academic practice and pedagogy, as well as publishing over 60 papers and attracting £2.1 million in research funding. In her CV of failures, she remarks that in the period from 1982 to 2007 she made 16 academic job and fellowship applications.

Those that I remember failed because I:

- did not get shortlisted
- got to interview but did not get a job
- chose another job offered at the same time
- had a change of heart halfway the interview process
- was dismissed because the job description changed halfway.

Here are my 16:

- Instrument Scientist, Institut Laue-Langevin, Grenoble, France, 1982
- Advanced SERC Fellowship, Imperial College London, 1984
- Director of R&D, DSM, the Netherlands, 1984
- Lecturer in Physics, University of Liverpool, 1985

- Lecturer in Physics, Queen Mary College (now University of London), 1986
- Senior Research Fellow, Exxon REC, 1987
- Director of Reactor Institute and Professor in Physics, TU Delft, 1993
- Senior Lecturer in Applied Mathematics, Open University, 2000
- Wellcome Trust Fellowship, 2005
- The Leverhulme Trust Fellowship, 2006
- Programme Manager, STFC Swindon, 2007
- Public Relations Manager, Diamond Light Source, Didcot, 2007
- Dean of the Faculty of Natural Sciences, Imperial College London, 2014 (headhunted)
- Director of the Sciences Division of Yale-NUS (Singapore), 2014 (headhunted)
- Dean of Amsterdam University College, the Netherlands, 2015 (headhunted)
- Senior Academic Fellow for the Weidenfeld-Hoffmann Leadership Programme, 2016

What to do about it all: Shared actions.

Consider running an event that makes space for failure, and for everything else that goes along with a nonlinear or otherwise challenging (but perfectly ordinary) academic career path.

How you tell the story of your life to others affects what you think of yourself, which in turn feeds into the next storytelling. It's easy to fall into the trap of repeating a story you feel is expected by the "professional sphere": one that attributes failures to things like your inability to think strategically, your lack of ambition, or your over-willingness to compromise. But every time you re-tell your story you have the chance to cast things in a different light: You have the chance to be less self-judgemental.

The Oxford Careers Advisers often observe what a powerful experience it can be to tell one's own story of entering academia and living in it. Students and postdocs often offer to explain how they got to where they are now, and if allowed to talk interrupted, they tend to identify what they value in their past actions, and discover what matters most to them: "I hadn't realised how important X is to me until I heard myself say so with some clear reasons." In other words, they are able to redefine apparent failures as personal successes in ways that enable them quite quickly to plan their next steps and take action. You might find something similar happens for you—or you could be a listener who helps it happen for someone else.

Here are some suggestions for actions that you and others might like to try.

- Set up a meeting with people you think will approach it in the right spirit—this could be your research group or a more ad hoc gathering of your peers.

  Bring food and drink to share, and one thing that went badly for you in the past month.

  Speak briefly about what happened, how you felt at the time, and how you feel now.

  Listen to others as they share their experiences.

  How do they compare? Have you all brought similar things to share? Are the failures subjective or objective?

  Talk about what you can learn and have learned from your own and others' failures. Gather other people's suggestions and reactions, and reflect on them.

  If you like, make it a monthly thing. Have tea, cake, beer, or wine. What changes over time?

  Does your relationship with each other change, as you expose and explore the difficulties you face and what they make you feel? Do you feel differently about yourself?

- One practical exercise to try in such a group could be to explore the potential conflict between what success and failure mean in public versus personal contexts. In the professional sphere, success tends to get equated with things like ambition, lack of compromise, a degree of ruthlessness in "getting ahead", or a tendency to prioritize one's own progress over others'. In the personal sphere it's often thought to involve virtues like selflessness, patience, and accommodation. What does contrast this mean for the stories we tell of our lives? Do we have to be different people in the two realms, or pretend to be? Does success in one mean failure in the other? Do we have to choose which matters to us more, or are there ways of redefining both success and failure so that we don't have to choose?

- You could try something similar to explore our tendency to prioritize the public realm over the private. When thinking about our own actions, we tend to define an attempt that did not produce "the goods"—having a paper rejected, not getting a postdoc position, etc.—as a failure. Others will see success because we had a go, coped well, learnt from the experience, and made new connections or more informed next steps. Each one of us reacts to events in the context of our own personal story, and while we tend to be our own harshest critics, others are more likely to see the bigger picture. Try letting others be your critic instead of yourself, and see what you can learn from their reactions to what feel like your failures—and what doing the same for them can teach you too.

- You could also have a conversation with just one other person. Take turns to listen to each other, identify any assumptions that seem to be perpetuating feelings of failure, and ask an incisive question that suggests a positive alternative. For example: "If you knew that others admire you or your work, how would you feel about yourself?" or "If you trusted your sense that your work has value in the world, what would you do differently?". Listen to each other's responses without interruptions. Encourage each other to write down any questions you found particularly helpful, so you can return to them. (For more tips on effective pair-thinking, see Nancy Kline's *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind*.) Or try the simple storytelling exercise we mentioned earlier: Listen to each other as you describe how you have ended up where you are now. Talk for as long as you need to, without interruption. What do you learn simply from having someone else there to listen to you? Julia Bray's CV offers an example of how to bring different perspectives on your life into dialogue.

Julia Bray is Laudian Professorial Fellow in Arabic at St John's College, Oxford, and the University's Oriental Institute. Here is her CV of failures in full.

My Brilliant Career

A subjective CV

Julia Bray

Laudian Professor of Arabic, St John's College/ The Oriental Institute

Rationale

It could be useful to map our subjective CVs against the ones we draw up for job applications etc. Meeting in the middle, they might give us a realistic idea of how we've spent our time and talents, and how effective we've been at measuring ourselves against what we may think to be an objective standard and marketing the resulting image.

None of my numerous past job CVs, however, meet current employers' requirements. They don't sock it to them. They aren't smart. And they don't in any way correspond to my idea of how I've groped my way through the academic labyrinth or achieved anything of scholarly or academic worth, which is what keeps one going from job (and unemployment) to, one hopes, job. So this will be a *subjective* outline of my successes and (far more predominant) failures.

You'll notice that I avoid dates. Life trajectories and academic careers may not follow the same curves. I've taken large chunks of time out to pursue non-reproductive family duties and to wonder, while doing whatever came up at the time, whether I was enough of a scholar to warrant trying to get back into academe, without having much idea of alternatives. This has given me the abiding impression of lagging ten years behind my contemporaries. So I prefer not to think about timetables.

Doomed to Failure

(i) natal horoscope

Conceived in a last-ditch attempt to save my parents' marriage, I fail from the start. They split up shortly after my birth and my father dies a few years later.

(ii) superiority of sibling

My older sister is good at everything. "Why can't you be like your sister?" is the refrain of my school years.

(iii) superiority of everyone

Growing up in a one-parent family, partly abroad, at a time when these things are uncommon, it is plain to me and my sister that WE DO NOT BELONG PROPERLY ANYWHERE / WE DO NOT FIT.

Pursuing failure:

(i) exams

Unable to fill in forms correctly, sit wrong English Literature A-level paper and have to do it again. Run away from school in Paris before the baccalauréat, as am unable to face compulsory exams in maths and gym.

(ii) University entrance

FAIL Oxford entrance: coming from the wrong sort of school (French), I don't understand that you should be clever not factual. Second time round I get a scholarship. Success at last, and about time too.

From Failure to Success!

Spend three undergraduate years winning prizes and feeling inferior to Classicists and people who come from proper English schools where you play tennis and put on plays. (Doesn't occur to me I could swank about my arty intellectual Parisian upbringing.)

Beginning of Impostor Syndrome

Get a First. A mistake, surely?

DPhil

Now I've got a First, everyone will expect me to know everything! How do I cope? Start a DPhil. No idea how to go about it. Terrified of supervisor.

A haven in the archives

Meanwhile, as an archivist, I learn the two most useful things of my career: how to train oneself to do a specific job; and that the job is what you make it. This compensates for my having failed, on the Oxford front, to network, compete, apply for JRFs, etc.

First teaching job

At Manchester, not yet a European City of Culture, where I learn two more things of lasting benefit: that there's nothing like the companionship of good colleagues; and that teaching involves a lot of acting.

Failure again!

Am fired after four years on one-year contracts: my position, privately funded, is wanted for a protege of the funder. Have nervous breakdown.

Ups and Downs

From this point, a certain career pattern of failing and coping develops. All my jobs, for one reason or another, only last a few years, and I move from place to place.

This has the advantage of giving me a broad training, varied administrative experience, and the knowledge that everything doesn't happen at Oxford. It has the disadvantage that I rarely get a sabbatical, and often have to switch tack in my research in order to fit in with the requirements of my current employer. Which turns out to be an advantage too, but not conducive to producing monographs. In this way, I spend three years at Edinburgh, cut short by five years of family responsibilities, with odd-job teaching and writing; then seven years at St Andrews, and nine at Paris 8-Vincennes Saint Denis.

In all these posts, stimulus to be productive comes from two things: having major practical jobs of work to put in hand, such as syllabus reform; and having to prove oneself in a negative environment (at St Andrews, the Head of School wants to close down my department; at Paris 8, a massively corrupt system is reluctant to give way to reforms). Hard work = a feeling of success, even if success is up-and-down.

During all this time, I apply for, and fail to get, numerous jobs in the UK, USA and France. I never succeed in any application for funding and never have any major research project. And so it continues to this day. (No wonder, if my applications are like this CV.)

I learn to cope with being slow and needing serendipity to spark creativity. Colleagues I've worked with over many years provide moral and concrete support, and I realise that in spite of, or by virtue of, not being fashionable, my intellectual interests have given me a valid niche in my field: I do my own thing, not a derivate of a generic philology.

Whether I do it to my satisfaction depends on a balance of external and internal factors. The feeling that other people know what they're doing, are doing it better and to wider acclaim, always remains: it can be a brake, or a spur. The real challenge, though, will always be recognising, and representing, the significance of a project—having the knowledge and honesty to see one's place on the map—and seeing it through: not giving way to dejection and sloth. Periods of which, however, seem to be necessary—or at least, can be put to use—for the incubation of the next idea.

Continue to reflect on what the word "failure" means to you. What do you feel now when you hear or read it? What can you do with those feelings?

When I was an undergrad I had a good friend who failed finals. Ten years later Merton appealed for money. I gave £100, but he gave £13 million…

Is that failure?

- Failure event speaker

How will you know when you have a healthier relationship with failure?

- Maybe you are less afraid to talk about what you've tried, how it turned out (whether that was according to plan or the opposite), and what you're doing now.

- Maybe you're prepared to take another new step, and to confront the new risks it brings with it, more quickly than you were before.

- How else would you define success here?

Remember:

- The boundaries between objective and subjective success and failure are to some extent culturally relative. In entrepreneurial "fail fast" contexts, for example, business failures may be more likely to be seen as proof you've been innovative and gathered valuable experience than as failings to be ashamed of. Could you draw on cultures other than academia to change your angle on failure?

- Think of three things you regret. What are the regrets that stay with you? How do your failures and your regrets relate to each other, if at all?

- Many people would say that the *only* failure is not trying.

- Failing is a skill that needs learning, and practising.

- Failure is the mother of success.

- *We are not failures.*

Success is not final, failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts.

- often attributed to Winston Churchill, probably actually from Budweiser

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Adam Hart-Davis has a degree in chemistry from Oxford and a doctorate in organometallic chemistry from York. After three years as a postdoc he left academia for publishing, and then publishing for television, and he is now a freelance writer and photographer. His 35 books include *Why Does a Ball Bounce?*, *The Book of Time*, and *Taking the Piss: A Potted History of Pee*. As a TV producer he created the successful school science series Scientific Eye and Mathematical Eye; later he presented many series of Local Heroes and What the Stuarts/Tudors/Victorians/Romans Did for Us. He

has appeared on Celebrity Mastermind and Have I Got News for You, and has been awarded 14 honorary doctorates. Here is his list of CV failures.

Failures Adam failed
O-level history 1958
To win the Gibbs Prize 1965
To get a job in academic chemistry in Canada in 1970
To get a job in academic chemistry in the UK in 1971
To get a job at Rothamsted Experimental Station in 1971
To interest any foreign publisher in the Oxford Encyclopedia of Chess Games in 1976
To get the job of CEO of the Shetland Islands Council in 1977
To make a tv documentary on Silver for the Queen's silver jubilee in 1977
To make a documentary on Thinking in 1980
To persuade NHK in Japan to co-produce a schools tv series in 1981
To get various BBC jobs for which he applied in the 1980s
To persuade the Director General that senior BBC staff had been dishonest in 2004
To persuade various publishers that his proposed books would be winners
To sell enough of his wooden bowls and spoons to pay himself more than 95p per hour
To sell a single sketch in his first art exhibition in 2015
To hold his position in Division 1 of the Plymouth Chess Club in 2015-16
… and the list goes on.

Resources.

Useful distinctions to consider and work with:

- For a chapter on "failure immunity", including a nice suggestion on dividing your failure experiences into **screwups**, **weaknesses**, and **growth opportunities**—and for excellent career design advice more generally—try *Designing Your Life*, by Bill Burnett & Dave Evans.

- A *New York Times* piece by Oset Babur discusses the evidence-based distinction between **benign envy** (a useful motivating force, enhanced by talking about failure) versus **malicious envy** (not a good thing, and increased when we talk a lot more about our successes than our failures). It also covers the differences between **preventable failure**, **complex failure**, and **intelligent failure**—and how the startup domain has helped promote celebration of the latter. There's also some good history on Haushofer's decision to write his first CV of failures. See also the final published version of the benign/malicious envy paper (Brooks et al., 2019).

Other things to do:

- Read a little about how failure is gendered, then try out three tips on how to be braver by embracing small failures. (Alisha Haridasani Gupta in the *New York Times*).

- Read up on the hype cycle and ask where on the curve your current field of interest is—and where on your own personal curve you are with it. (Try Garnter.com, Wikipedia, and/or this *IEEE Control Systems Magazine* editorial for overviews.)

- Take the easy route (according to this *Times Higher Education* piece by Beth McMillan): be a great impostor.

- If you feel you need to (or even if you're not sure), seek help from your university's counselling service or occupational health service, or from other welfare teams as appropriate.

- Book a one-to-one session with a careers adviser. This can be a chance to reflect and take stock as much as to seek advice about the next application. (For Oxford, see http://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/advice-appointments/.)

- If you're applying for jobs and it's not going to plan, follow the Oxford Careers Service's recommendations for steps to take either when you're not getting interviews or when you're not getting offers.

- For holistic guidance on career planning, especially if you're considering a change of direction, read a short book by Herminia Ibarra, *Working Identity: Unconventional Strategies for Reinventing Your Career* (at Oxford, you can find a copy in the Careers Service Resource Centre). It includes practical tips on how to "taste" and evaluate alternatives before committing.

- For guidance on creating effective thinking partnerships with peers or seniors, try Nancy Kline's 1999 book *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind* (again, the Careers Service Resource Centre has a copy).

- To give your mind a chance at greater clarity, calm, and openness, try out one of the audio sessions from the Oxford Mindfulness Centre or a self-compassion meditation from Kristin Neff.

- Draw on the in-depth guidance on how to set up a mentoring scheme from the Oxford Learning Institute (now the Centre for Teaching and Learning), or download a mentoring book with useful info for both mentors and mentees from Medical Sciences.

Explore in more depth:

- Listen to the series of five podcasts that accompany this workbook (The Feeling of Failure, Failure and Other People, Failure and the Farewell to Academia, and What To Do About It All: Personal Attitudes and Personal Actions). They explore the material covered here in different ways, including contributions from our failure-event speakers and others with experience to share. Available at https://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/change-setbacks.

- "[L]eaving the academy may feel like failure, but it can function as an act of resistance against an exploitative system". Read Diana Bellonby's thought-provoking article Academia trained you—but the world needs you.

- Try an episode of Elizabeth Day's podcast *How To Fail*, which "celebrates the things that haven't gone right".

- Try an episode of Emma Elvidge's podcast *Bumps in the Road*, on "facing failure, overcoming difficulties, improving our research culture" (all episodes have transcripts too).

- Listen to Reshma Saujani's Smith College commencement speech comparing impostor syndrome to bicycle face: both "are equally laughable—just two more failed attempts to hold women back".

- Watch Arianna Huffington join Craig and Megan Ferguson to reflect on what really makes for a successful life, the fact that failure isn't the opposite of success but a key or stepping stone to it, and the collective delusion that to succeed we need to burn out (plus the phone addictions we all demonstrate by denying). (*Couple Thinkers* E6).

- Read about the good intentions and the naivety and squeamishness that lead us to treat failure as a staging post on the way to success, and the case for giving ourselves and others more of "the novelty of being treated as a grown-up" by not sugarcoating. (Janan Ganesh in the *Financial Times*, via Medium.com).

- Dip into the podcasts on coping with university from the Oxford Counselling Service (student-focused and Oxford-based, but more broadly relevant).

- Read up on "pundit accountability": kind of like publishing null results in science—a way to make there be costs to being wrong in journalism (with David Weigel on Slate.com).

- Visit www.labmosphere.com, inspired by Uri Alon's line: "Science has a culture, and culture can be changed." (See more from Bryony Graham on LinkedIn.)

- Check out Shit Academics Say, run by an associate professor in Educational and Counselling Psychology who also does research on academic wellbeing and failure—via the blog, the Facebook page, or a write-up on the University Affairs site.

- Explore a collection of "alt-ac" (alternative-academic) resources from UNC-Chapel Hill.

- Learn how to recover from postdoc mistakes (with Alaina G. Levine in *Science*).

- Read up on how not to fail other people (e.g. your students) with Sian Townson in *The Guardian*.

- Find out how to throw a rejection party for your students (from Danielle Braff in the *New York Times*)

- Consider the dead ends of the academic path ("Don't do it. Just don't.") with Rebecca Schuman on Slate.com.

- Enjoy some wry advice on failure, success, luck, family, and gender from a white male academic and parent, Paul Cairney ("Gender and getting ahead", on his blog *Politics & Public Policy*).

- Understand the emotional realities of learning, specifically the eight drivers of procrastination, with Richard Gipps on the Philosophical Perspectives in Clinical Psychology blog.

- Imbibe this reminder to take the long view—"You'll never make up for your past: The long con of redemption"—with John Gorman on Medium.com.

- Online or irl via one of its touring exhibitions, visit Sweden's Museum of Failure, Sweden, featuring Colgate lasagne and Donald Trump's take on Monopoly: "Learning is the only way to turn failure into success." "The majority of all innovation projects fail." See http://museumoffailure.se/ and a UCLA student paper review here.

- Read Emily's reflections on the failure event which inspired this resource, in connection with mental health, in her *Psychology Today* post "To failure". Her CV, complete with failures, is on her website here.

Concluding thoughts.

> "For me, success is not a public thing. It's a private thing. It's when you have fewer and fewer regrets."
>
> (Toni Morrison)

> "Often the difference between a successful person and a failure is not one's better abilities or ideas, but the courage that one has to bet on one's ideas, to take a calculated risk—and to act."
>
> (André Malraux, in K. Petras and R. Petras, *"Don't forget to sing in the lifeboat": Uncommon wisdom for uncommon times*)

> "Failure is most useful when you give your best effort. If you fail with a lackluster effort, you haven't learned much. Perhaps you could have succeeded with a proper focus. But if your best effort fails, you have learned something valuable: this way doesn't work."
>
> (James Clear)

> "The CRSE [Centre for Research on Self-Employment] wants a culture where failures are seen as a normal part of entrepreneurial life, not as personal failures

of self-employed people. They claim one way of achieving this would be to restructure bankruptcy procedures to "allow for good faith business failures."

(Josh Hall, "7 ways the government could improve life for the UK's freelancers", Simply Business)

"The art of beautiful failure", a little visualization of failure by Veronica Gray, one of the Research as Art images from Swansea University.

"Initially, the films we put together, they're a mess. It's like everything else in life—the first time you do it, it's a mess. Sometimes it's labeled ... "a failure" ... but that's not even the right word to use. It's just like, you get the first one out, you learn from it, and the only failure is if you don't learn from it, if you don't progress."

(Ed Catmull, Pixar, "Keep your crises small")

"Failure is a good preparation for success, which comes as a pleasant surprise, but success is poor preparation for failure."

(Sarah Manguso, *300 Arguments*)

"Failure is one of the major hidden narratives of research. Yet if the only research that's communicated are the successes and the big breakthroughs, academic publishing is a heavily curated Instagram account of science, a snapshot of the tiny fraction of work that is deemed a success. And what's wrong with a highlights reel? Absolutely nothing. But there's something enchanting about being given a glimpse behind the curtain, of the personal and the intimate. Discussing failure is an honest representation of research, and in my view, more relatable."

(Richard Johnston, in "Telling a story" on Radio 4's Four Thought)

"Nobody is rooting for you to fail. You may succeed. You may fail. But, for the most part, nobody cares one way or the other. This is good. The world is big and you are small, which means you can chase your dreams with little worry for what people think."

(James Clear)

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(An introduction to "action research" (engaged, value-driven research for the greater good): what it is, how people find their way to it, and what it means to them as researchers, teachers, and people. "From the descriptions of the journey to action research we received from editorial board members, it appears that many of us have one thing in common—our profound dissatisfaction with where we were. […] Acting from this sense of dissatisfaction, we began our search for a new research practice.")

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> (Study 1 found that self-compassion was positively associated with "mastery" goals and negatively associated with "performance" goals, a relationship partially mediated by lesser fear of failure and greater perceived competence of those with self-compassion. Study 2 confirmed these findings among students with a recent experience of perceived exam failure, and also indicated that self-compassion correlated positively with emotion-focused coping strategies and negatively with avoidance-orientated strategies.)

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