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Mindful About Life

Focus, Flourish and Fly
using the science of positive psychology

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Fear of Failure – It is real and you can overcome it!

Fear of Failure is a real thing. I know that and you know that. Not only can we feel it in our gut, scientists can even measure it! 😊 An article was just published last month that presents research with entrepreneurs about measuring it and overcoming it. While the research was done with entrepreneurs, I think it is just as valid for all professionals who have to decide on a path forward in business or career decision. I have a hunch that it is also very similar to test anxiety, but that is more of a stretch.

When an entrepreneur has fear of failure when making a business choice, there is usually one of just two reactions – either they avoid the threat altogether and never reap the possible reward they could have gotten or they will react too aggressively and possibly screw things up. Obviously, neither is a really good choice.

But let's think for a moment about what motivates the entrepreneur (or professional) in the first place. Someone who starts a business is motivated by a sense of achievement, they really want to accomplish a lot of things in life. Whether it is the teacher who starts a tutoring business because she

really wants to help children love learning and succeed in life or the woman who opens a clothing store so that she can help other women feel good about the way they look, people start businesses to help others. Entrepreneurs almost always have unbounded optimism. Anything is possible. Today, one coffee shop to feed the neighbors, next year I will be taking over Starbucks locations! And, of course, the passion! The contractor who wants to get every detail of the construction right so that the finished job makes them smile from ear to ear. (If you have a big smile on your face from reading this paragraph – you might have the entrepreneurial bug!) These BIG motivations really get entrepreneurs out of bed in the morning.

So how is it that fear of failure can stop them in their tracks? The science of positive psychology describes an upward spiral and a downward spiral. When the entrepreneur is thinking about all those things that motivates them, they are on an upward spiral and things are getting better and better. But then they might face a choice and they fear that the wrong choice could screw up everything. Or they face a setback



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and that brings up the fear and self-doubt. How do you keep moving forward with all these negative thoughts gnawing at your good intentions? How do you avoid the downward spiral?

One way to move forward is using positive reappraisal. We all face setbacks. When we can take what happened and see the good in it, we can stop the downward spiral and get back on track to doing the good things we are meant to do in our lifetime. This might be as simple as asking, "What can I learn from this?" or "What can I be grateful for from this situation?" Instead of focusing on the negative, we put a positive spin on the situation. We do not ignore the negative, we learn from it.

Dr. Sode and Dr. Chenji at the ICFAI University did a very simple study. They used a mindfulness program based on Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn's MBSR program and taught entrepreneurs about mindfulness and had them meditate for just seven days during their lunch break. We are not talking about a week-long retreat or sitting in a monastery for a year. These business-people just learned a little about mindfulness and practice meditating during lunch.

Now, the truth is, Drs. Sode and Chenji did not measure entrepreneurial success, they only measured fear of failure and positive reappraisal. And I can imagine you are not surprised to learn that when you are trained to be mindful you realize that not every setback is the end of the line. When you are mindful of the negative thoughts you reappraise them and find the silver lining. Mindfulness helps us to stop the downward spiral and look up again. Mindfulness help us

get onto the upward spiral. John Wooden said that, "Things work out best for those who make the best of the way things work out." Perhaps this is what he was talking about. When we make the best of a situation, we stay on the upward spiral.

So what should you do if you are in a funk? What should you do when a customer leaves or your boss gives you a hard time? You should be mindful. Be mindful of exactly what happened. Be mindful of what you could have done differently. Be mindful of what you can learn from the situation. And be grateful for the opportunity to grow.

And if you need some help finding the silver lining, ask a friend for help or hire a coach.

And then, in the spirit of the quote, "Keep smiling, it will drive people crazy", go back to your boss or your customer and thank them for the learning opportunity!