



Knowledge Consortium of Gujarat
Department of Higher Education, Government of Gujarat
JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
ISSN : 2279-0241

Year-2 | Issue-4 | Continuous issue-10 | January-February 2014

Fear of Success

Fear is an emotion that holds a certain intensity of energy. Any number of situations, people, or events can invoke a person's sense of fear. And while this emotion is meant to be a protective response, the meaning it holds from person to person determines the role it plays in everyday life. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines fear as a painful emotion prompted by an expectation of danger. Fear can vary in degree according to a person's past experiences, mental state of mind and sense of potential danger. Sources of fear vary depending on the individual, and so do the meanings assigned to a perceived threat. In some people, a threat can spur a healthy, constructive response, while others may withdraw or avoid threats completely. Both emotional and physiological responses occur when a threat is present.

Sometimes you find yourself with a goal you think you should want to achieve, but you just don't seem to be taking enough action to reach it. You aren't really afraid of failure or rejection, the path to the goal seems clear enough and might even be an interesting challenge, and occasionally you'll make some progress. But most of the time you can't seem to get into that flow state, and you're not sure why. This often happens with long-term goals that require intermittent action, like losing weight or transitioning to start a new business and eventually quit your job.

One question I've found helpful to ask in these situations is this: What will happen if you succeed? Forget about what you hope will happen or what you fear might happen, but realistically consider what probably will happen. So you achieve your goal. Then what? What else will change?

I'm not talking about giving a 5-second cursory answer, like "If I lose the weight, then I'll be thin." Set aside at least 15-30 minutes just to think about how your life will really change once you achieve your goal (with no TV, radio, or other distractions). There are often unexpected side effects that you may not be aware of consciously, but subconsciously they can be enough to prevent you from taking committed action. For example, if you lose a lot of weight, here are some possible side effects: people will notice and will comment about it, other people will ask you for diet advice, you may feel you need to continue with a permanent lifestyle change to maintain your new weight, you may need to buy new clothes, you may become more attractive to others and thereby attract more social encounters (wanted or unwanted), overweight friends might become jealous, your family may resist your changes, you may feel stressed about whether you can keep the weight off, you may worry about the loss of certain favorite foods from your diet, and so on.

It's rare that a goal is all roses. Success requires change, and change has both positive and negative consequences. Often while people claim to want to succeed at something, the reality is that the negatives outweigh the positives for them. But one way to overcome this problem is to consciously think about what those negatives are, and then uproot them one by one. Uprooting a negative side effect could mean figuring out how to eliminate it completely, or it could mean just accepting it and learning to live with it.

It's certainly helpful to focus on the positive side of a goal. But don't forget to take an occasional survey of the dark side and accept that you're going to have to deal with that too.

Unlike fear of failure and fear of rejection, fear of success can be far more insidious because it's almost always unconscious. But it's not fear of success itself that is the problem but rather fear of the side effects of success, many of which may be genuinely unwanted. Fears that are never evaluated consciously have a tendency to grow stronger. The reason is simple behavioral conditioning — when you avoid something you fear (either consciously or subconsciously), you automatically reinforce the avoidance behavior. So when you (even unknowingly) avoid working on your goal because of a hidden fear of success, you actually reinforce the habit of procrastination, so as time

goes by, it becomes harder and harder to get yourself to take action. Insidious!

Asking, "What will happen if I succeed?" can solve this problem because it focuses your conscious attention on those fears. Fear has a tendency to shrink under direct examination, making it easier for you to take action. When I say that fear shrinks, another way of stating this is that subconscious behavioral conditioning weakens under conscious scrutiny. I know some people dislike the word "fear" with respect to their own behavior — don't get hung up on the exact wording; call it "avoidance behavior" if that's more to your liking.

But an additional benefit is that you can also devise intelligent work-arounds for those fears-made-conscious, some of which may indeed be valid signals of unsolved problems. For example, going back to the weight loss example, if you lose a lot of weight, you probably will need new clothes. And if you don't have the money to buy new clothes, then that is a real problem you'll need to address (unless you don't mind wearing oversized outfits). Left unacknowledged, even a simple problem like this can be enough to subconsciously sabotage you from achieving your goal. But once you examine the situation consciously and figure out a way to deal with it in advance, you're sending a message to your subconscious that you needn't fear this problem because you have a practical way to solve it.

Now let's consider the opposite side. Suppose you ask, "What will happen if I succeed?" and upon considering all the side effects, you realize that you don't actually want to achieve the goal at all. The negatives outweigh the positives. I encountered this when I made a plan to grow my games business but didn't seem to make as much progress as I wanted. When I asked this magic question, I realized that I didn't really want to achieve the goal with all its side effects — what I really wanted was to transition to writing and speaking full time, and further building my games business would actually take me farther from that more important goal. Growing my games business seemed like a goal I should want, but when I really thought about where I'd be if I achieved that goal, I realized it wouldn't be the success I truly wanted. That was a difficult realization for me... to recognize that my original ladder of success was now leaning against the wrong building. So I actually had to "unset" that goal once I really understood the likely consequences of achieving it.

Even now as I set goals in the direction of writing and speaking as my new career, I recognize that there are big side effects. I simply don't have the mental bandwidth for two full-time careers. One of the hardest side effects for me was letting go of the goals and dreams I had for my games business. All those creative ideas for new games that will never be... and the would-be players who will never experience them... But this is outweighed by what will happen as I succeed in my new career. To create a new game that challenges, entertains, and uplifts people is wonderful; however, being able to help people grow fulfills me even more. I found it a very enlightening process to review all these side effects and one by one to acknowledge that I accept them.

What are the solutions to address a fear of success?

- Suppressing anxieties of not being good enough
- Uniting all talents and virtues for a greater good
- Confronting and dismissing existing fears in an appropriate manner
- Recognizing and welcoming the the chance to triumph over competition without feeling unworthy or undeserving
- Expressing views and opinions without hesitation
- Setting sights on a goal and achieving it with both sacrifices and rewards--these make up the rough climb, the seemingly impossible.
- Steps that if completed always lead straight to success, rewarding those who persevere

Fear of success is the following:

- Fear that you will accomplish all that you set out to, but that you still won't be happy, content or satisfied once you reach your goal
- Belief that you are undeserving of all the good things and recognition that come your way as a result of your accomplishments and successes
- Opposite of fear of failure, in that fear of failure is the fear of making mistakes and losing approval--Fear of success is the fear of accomplishment and being recognized and honored.
- Lack of belief in your own ability to sustain your progress, and the accomplishments you have achieved in your life
- Fear that your accomplishments can self-destruct at anytime

- Belief that no matter how much you are able to achieve or accomplish, it will never be enough to sustain success
- Belief that there are others out there who are better than you, who will replace or displace you if you do not maintain your performance record
- Belief that success is an end in itself; yet that end is not enough to sustain your interest and/or commitment
- Fear that once you have achieved the goals you have worked diligently for, the motivation to continue will fade
- Fear that you will find no happiness in your accomplishments--that you will be perpetually dissatisfied with life.

What are the negative consequences of the fear of success?

Fear of success can result in:

- A lack of effort to achieve goals you have set for yourself in school, on the job, at home, in relationships, or in your personal growth
- Self-destructive behavior, such as tripping yourself up to make sure that you do not sustain a certain level of success or achievement you once had in school, on the job, at home, in relationships or in your personal growth.
- Problems making decisions, being unable to solve problems
- Losing the motivation or the desire to grow, achieve and succeed
- Chronic underachievement
- Feeling guilt, confusion and anxiety when you do achieve success--this leads you to falter, waver and eventually lose your momentum.
- Sabotaging any gains that you have made in your personal growth and mental health, because once you become healthier, a better problem solver, and more "together," you fear that no one will pay attention to you. You are habituated to receiving help, sympathy and compassionate support.
- Your choosing to do just the opposite of what you need to do to be happy, healthy and successful
- Reinforcing your chronic negativity, chronic pessimism and chronic lack of achievement since you cannot, visualize yourself in a contented, successful life
- Denouncing your achievements and accomplishments, or seeking ways in which you can denigrate yourself enough to lose what you've gained

What new behavior patterns can help in overcoming your fear of success?

- Learning to reinforce yourself for the hard work, effort and sacrifices you have made to achieve success
- Being able to honestly appraise your level of achievement, success and accomplishment
- Accepting yourself as being healthy, "together," happy, successful, prosperous and accomplished
- Not giving yourself any excuses for being unsuccessful
- Giving others in your life permission to give you honest, open, candid feedback when they see you self-destructing or backsliding
- Monitoring your level of commitment and motivation to reach your goals
- Visualizing your life when you are successful
- Giving others credit, recognition, and support for their personal achievements, successes and accomplishments
- Honest, open, realistic self-talk that encourages you to work your hardest to achieve the goals that you have set for yourself
- Accepting the compliments and recognition of others with an open heart and mind

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