

# Celebrate the New Year, celebrate failure

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I was nominated to join the national board of a major organization. The application was very challenging; in fact, it took a week to complete. When I received the letter informing me that I was not selected, I felt disappointed and like a failure. But was I really a failure?

This incident made me think about another occasion. Ten women, who received Woman of Distinction awards from the National Association of Women in Education, described how they achieved their dreams. They identified perseverance, commitment and goal setting as key factors. On a different note, the final speaker, me, said, “I want to speak about the failures each of us had had. We would not be standing before you if we had not faced failure. Remember that successes have more failures than failures have.”

So, if failing is something we all do, something we are all accomplished at, why deny it? Failing itself should not be the issue. Rather, it is how we define it, cope with it and grow from it. The following strategies might help put our failures in perspective:

### 1. Use failure to your advantage.

Retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal was forced to resign for inappropriate remarks he made that were critical of the White House. Did he fade away and die? No. In fact, he lectures on leadership at Yale University in a presentation called Coping With Failure. Mark, a senior in high school threw the losing pass in the final football game. Devastated, he thought he could not go on. However, when it came to writing his

essay for college admission, he wrote a dramatic story about his losing pass and how it has made him a better person. He used his failure to get into college. Ask yourself, “Is there a way I can turn my particular situation around?”

### 2. Reframe and redefine failure.

Don’t catastrophize. Realize that failing in one arena doesn’t mean you are a failure. It is too easy to label yourself a failure. Psychology professors Joachim Stoeber, Ph.D., and Dirk Janssen, Ph.D., suggest that the key is reframing what one calls failure. For example, focus on what has been achieved. “It’s no use ruminating about small failures and setbacks and drag yourself further down,” says Stoeber. “Instead it is more helpful to try to accept what happened, look for positive aspects and — if it is a small thing — have a laugh about it.” Remind yourself, “I need to put this event in perspective. It is not about all of me or my whole life.”

### 3. Read books or research about others’ experience.

Carole Hyatt and Linda Gottlieb, after each failed at a job, wrote the book “When Smart People Fail.” The authors concluded, “There is no such thing as failure. Failure is the judgment of an event: the way you see loss of a job, the closing of a play.” They interviewed hundreds of people who had been fired or experienced a failing career or marriage. Talk to anyone, and there is a story about failure. Tell yourself, “There are many solutions to any problem and creative ways to turn failure around.”

### 4. Review your coping options.

There was a cartoon about Snoopy being depressed because he did



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not receive the employee of the month award. I think Snoopy’s situation could be used as a learning experience. Snoopy can ask the following questions:

■ Can I change the award and make it mine? The answer is no. It is a fact, and Snoopy cannot change that award.

■ Can I change the way I look at this situation? Clearly, yes. Snoopy can see this as a wake-up call — a chance to get more training, to develop new skills, to do what is necessary to turn the situation around.

■ Can I relax as I deal with what I initially defined as a failure? Yes. Snoopy can begin meditating, walking, swimming — anything to reduce the stress level accompanying not achieving success.

So, whenever we are faced with a challenge we can ask ourselves three questions: Can I change what is happening? Can I change the way I see it? And can I reduce my stress?

**5. Build humor into your thinking.** Erma Bombeck wrote: “Failing is what most of us do. ... I have several reactions when I hear people introduce me (with) ... accolades ... so glowing that I don’t even recognize myself. ... Instead of listing a speaker’s successes, why not list the failures? Born average, our guest tonight never rose above it ... never won a Pulitzer Prize ... and has never been interviewed by Barbara Walters.” (Washington Post, July 30, 1991)

Of course we celebrate the good times and our successes, but we need to celebrate our failures, too. Perhaps celebrating and embracing them will protect us from being defined by them. So, back to my New Year’s resolution. I resolve not to be frightened of failure but to welcome it, learn from it and move on.

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