How to Empower Your Healing Story (Rewrite Your Failure Stories)

BY KARYN SHANKS MD   |   AUGUST 27, 2019

Deconstructing Failure

The Conundrum of Things Not Working Out

It starts like this, doesn’t it? We feel the terrible sting of disappointment because things are not turning out as we hoped. Our expectations are not met. A door slams in our face and we feel devastated. Or, in spite of working really, really hard, our savvy plan seems to go nowhere.

Then what?

You know where I’m going here, right?

Yep—we make up a story. Something like this: “I failed.” Or, “I am a failure.” Or, “they failed me.” Or, “I suck at this.” Or, “there’s no hope for me.”

Somehow, we got it all wrong. Somewhere along the line we decided that when things don’t work out it says something very personal and very terrible about us or someone else.

What’s with that? Sounds ridiculous when we stop to think about it, doesn’t it? But we all do it!

What Failure Really Is

Failure is, in essence, when things don’t go as planned. When this happens, one of three
things is usually true.

_There is something we need to learn._

_There is something else we need to do first._

_What we planned is just not meant to be._

Notice how I list those three reasons for failure with no emotion attached to them. We need to learn something; we need to do something first; or it’s not meant to be. Period.

Failure is Not Personal!

None of them say we’re bad people. None of them say we’re weak. None of them say anything at all about us.

Each is a specific instruction, a direction, a roadmap for what to do next.

My husband failed in his first major research grant proposal because he needed to learn how to write an effective proposal. My son failed in writing his first machine-learning algorithm in graduate school because he needed to preprocess his data first. I failed in my first medical path because I needed to go in a different direction. Most of my clients failed at something on their healing journeys.

None of these “failures” were about us as people. Just lessons to be learned. Not end points. We’ve all moved on. My husband has now received numerous grants. My son is creating new computer algorithms daily. My medical path—well, it’s been mind-blowingly transformational! And my clients? They’re learning to empower their healing stories and transforming “failure” into necessary guideposts on their path to success.

The only possible failure is in giving up.

That’s right. In the end, failure is just a story.

**Failure Is a Story**

_“There is only one reason that a company fails. When the entrepreneur gives up. That’s it. Period. No other reason.”_

—Adeo Ressi, The Founder Institute

We’ve established that failure is not about our personal shortcomings or anything we’ve done wrong.

Failure, plain and simple, is Life School.
However, as a culture, we’ve added negative connotations—stories—to the word. But like stress, failure is neither good nor bad, it describes a situation that is value neutral.

These stories we tell about failure can be powerful.

Every client I see brings a story of failure. Their stories often involve many years of searching for answers and seeing many doctors in various institutions, all to no avail. Maybe they have gone through repeated attempts at weight loss, using a variety of popular regimens without success or diets that were not sustainable. Or failed attempts to take on important new lifestyle practices because the change required losing something they couldn’t let go of. Everyone has these stories. And they are all valuable. They all have meaning and should be used to discover what is true.

But we need to understand—really understand—that the emotions we attach to our “failures” are just stories. They are not the truth. And as we’ve seen, our stories all come from decisions to perceive our circumstances in particular ways. Ways that demean and disempower us.

Yes, life brings us deep disappointments and sadness. And we must honor and grieve our losses. Our failed food plans and exercise goals are no exception.

But we have to see that each of these situations presents us with opportunities to decide: Do we judge and condemn ourselves for not meeting our expectations? Or do we regroup, reassess, get smarter, more supported, and start again?

When we can arrive at this understanding, the shame and suffering for our disappointments and upended plans is transformed. Give your suffering its due, then forgive yourself, and make the decision to move on.

**Failure Is Not Personal**

When we understand that our failures are not personal, we can see them in a whole new light.

All our actions and decisions are experiments that we direct.

And as experiments, the outcomes will not always be what we expect.

That’s life, and we must be patient with its uncertainty. Unexpected outcomes and being pushed in new directions may frustrate us, disappoint us, get in the way of our plans, and greatly inconvenience us, but they are quite possibly taking us to a better place. When we see this, we can exercise a deeper level of responsibility for our actions and their outcomes and what they mean.
Remember to Ask:

*Is there something else I must learn?*

*Is there something else I need to do first?*

*Do I need to try a different path?*

Don’t get stuck in your stories. Move on.

**Failure Makes Us More Successful Human Beings**

*“Fail, fail again, fail better.”*  
¾Pema Chödrön

We fail. We *must* fail.

It’s key to understand that while a single failure may seem like a big thing in the moment, it’s just a moment. I don’t mean to dismiss it. But in this whole series of articles, we’re talking about something much bigger than a moment—we’re talking about our lives. And from that perspective, we should welcome failure with open arms.

Our failures, disappointments, and challenges build character. Didn’t our parents tell us that? They make us stronger if we don’t give up. They foster resilience and creativity. They’re the challenge that creates our strong center. When what we want comes easily, great! But, so what? We may quickly and easily get what we want. But the easiest way is not necessarily the most fruitful or rewarding way.

Having to struggle or try again is not a sign that we have failed as human beings or that the gods aren’t smiling on us. It’s how we function. It’s the logical expression of how we learn through taking action. It’s Life School. And in the same way a body without stress can’t respond to stress with growth and development and success, a person without failure will never be given the opportunities to develop to their highest potential.

**The Law of Attraction is Misleading**

I think the popular understanding of the law of attraction oversimplifies what it takes to create the life we want. It teases us with the illusion that we can control every outcome if we just think and feel correctly.
This way of thinking leads us to judge ourselves when we run into difficulty.

The things that happen to us aren’t the result of simple cause and effect: think it, believe it, and it will come.

No. The path to getting what we want contains twists and turns that we can’t anticipate, don’t expect, and it require us to actively respond to outcomes. They may be frustrating. We may become disenchanted or discouraged or think it’s our fault. But these experiences of “failure” may contain those necessary elements that carve us into our greater selves in ways that we could never plan or predict on our own. They are the mysterious and miraculous parts of our journey that no planning could ever account for. They teach us persistence, perseverance, and make us resilient.

Failure is the crucible that always leads to something new. With a bit of effort and compassion for ourselves, we can be our better, more successful selves.

The “Three Tack Rule”

“This food plan isn’t working for me.”

“This treatment has done absolutely nothing”

“I thought I’d be feeling better by now. This is a failure.”

Do these “failures” sound familiar?

Healing can be so hard. And take so long. What if you’re working hard and not feeling any better?

This happens. A lot. And it’s important to not mistake “failure” for something not working out. You’re going to find that many of the things you try in order to heal don’t work for you. That may not mean that they aren’t good for you.

*It may mean that there is more to do.*

One of my Functional Medicine mentors, Dr. Sidney Baker, speaks of what he calls “the three tack rule.”

The Three Tack Rule

If you sit on three tacks, they hurt like hell and no amount of symptomatic treatment will make you feel better.

If you take one tack away, or better yet two, you’ve taken care of two-thirds of the problem.
That’s huge! But you still hurt like hell. You may not even recognize how much you’ve accomplished.

It’s only when you remove that third remaining tack that the pain goes away.

Still, removal of each successive tack was critical to resolving the whole problem at a deep, root-cause level.

We’re Not Failures, We’re Complicated!

We often have to address many aspects of a complex problem before our suffering is relieved. This doesn’t mean each step in the process isn’t important. It doesn’t mean we’ve failed. It just means we are complex. We have to tend to the whole of the problem to make real progress.

If you and your health team believe that what you are doing is important to your overall health and healing, hang in there. There is more to do before there is enough recovery for you to actually feel better. Keep the faith.

Your “Failure” is Showing You a Better Path

There are also times when the treatment plan is wrong for you. It can be impossible to know this until you embark on the journey and commit to a particular path. But that still isn’t failure. It’s learning what you needed to know—from what didn’t work—to lead you toward a better path for you.

How Do We Manage these “Failures?”

Remain aware of your body and your feelings. Check in with your team. Work together toward a meaningful change in direction and recommit.

As you keep the faith, ask yourself: Is there something else I need to learn? Is there something else I need to do first? Am I on the right path?

Hope Neutralizes the Sting of Failure

Dealing with the frustration of failure can be tough. I know this so well.

But we have the most powerful tool in our arsenal to deal with it: hope.

You, right now, wherever you are on your journey, can hope. Whether you actually feel it or not, you have it—you’re still with us at the end of this article, yes? What’s kept you here?
Hope. It's powerful medicine.

Hope is what energizes our way forward. It is what pulls us out of the pain of disappointment, disempowerment, and despair. It reminds us failure is not forever.

And hope is in us—it's part of us. Hope is the bridge, the horizon, the faith that tomorrow will be a better day, that “this too shall pass.”

Hope is the decision. It’s a “yes.”

### Grit Energizes Hope

First, we hope. But how do we create real world solutions?

Grit comes next. It’s how we take that next step in total faith, not seeing the way forward. It’s the toughness that helps us to persevere when things are really hard. It’s how we embrace hope when we hurt like hell. How we create new stories that nourish us and help us to rise up out of our current circumstances to aspire to something new and better.

Grit is hope in action. It takes courage. It’s our decision to go forward squarely into the face of the unknown, ignoring the stories of possible misfortune, keeping a laser-sharp focus on our desires. Grit is how we embrace hope, knowing that our current perceptions, experiences, and feelings do not fully define who we are or the trajectory of our lives. As humans we get to be much bigger than that. The courageous journey we choose for ourselves is fortifying. It builds resilience. And from time to time we get to experience the thrill and miracle of success. We get to be reborn. Grit always moves us toward our full potential.

### We Must Fail

“The most promising words ever written on the map of human knowledge are terra incognita—unknown territory.”

¾Daniel J. Boorstein, The Discoverers

Here’s my final and most important piece of advice: Screw up, fall down, mess up.

That’s the only way you’ll ever be able to prove to yourself that you risked trying. Every moment of every day, you are walking into the unknown. As you embark on your healing journey, you can have no idea of the exact path you will follow.

There will be change. How the change occurs will be uncertain.

There are risks: you might be wrong, you might be right, you might have to try really hard,
you might have to ask for help (it’s not that bad!), you may get in over your head, and you will inevitably have to learn new things about yourself and what you are made of.

It all takes great courage. And, inevitably, you will fail.

And when you do fail, you must be tender with yourself as life offers up its most precious lessons to you in this way. The lessons that you give birth to yourself out of your effort, determination, and creativity. Your failures are the guideposts, the intuitive guidance, the divine intervention that redirect you down a new and unexpected path, the path that is better for you at this time or that closes doors to old ways that no longer serve you. We must learn to say “thank you” instead of hanging our heads.

Exercise: Failure Mining

Think about a spectacular failure. How do you feel about it now? Still feel that sting of shame, guilt, or sheepishness? Write this story down.

Now, tell a different story. A new, shiny, and ennobling story.

What did you learn from this adventure? How did it shed light on a situation that no longer worked for you? In spite of your dashed hopes or unrealized expectations, did it move you in a new and better direction?

If you still have not recovered from that failure, I want you to reframe it now. Explore it from the Life School POV and see it through the lens of love. Assume it happened to save you. To steer you in a better direction. To help you create a better life. Write that story in as much beautiful detail as you can. Then live that story—your true story.

Stand Proudly

On April 23, 1910 in Paris, France, Theodore Roosevelt delivered one of the most widely quoted speeches of his career entitled, “Citizenship in a Republic.” He railed against a trend of cynics who looked down at people who were trying to make the world a better place. Considering what you’re trying to accomplish in your life by reading this book, in dealing with the inevitable setbacks, in dealing with the people around you who may not be as supportive as you’d like, I think Roosevelt’s words apply. How we take care of ourselves is how we take care of our world. This precious gift of life—ours, of those around us, or our planet—is in our care. Making ourselves better will make the world better. Be strong. Stay centered. And when you fall, stand proudly up, brush yourself off, think of this quote, and smile.

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or
where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasm, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

Heal Your Failure Stories

Now go celebrate you. Celebrate your commitment to your healing life. To your potential. Celebrate each and every step, no matter how small or humble, made in the spirit of your growth and healing. Know that I am with you—we’re all with you—as we take this journey together. The human journey. The journey of discovery, of enlightened failure, of presence. It is the journey toward the energy and potential we all seek. To heal ourselves, our lives, our world. I bow to you all.

Resources


Karyn Shanks MD. How to Empower Your Healing Story: By Reimagining These Five Stories. 2019.


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Karyn Shanks, MD, is a physician who lives and practices in Iowa City. Her work is inspired by the science of Functional Medicine, body-mind principles, and wisdom gleaned from the transformational journeys of thousands of clients over her twenty-five-
year career. Her work honors each individual and the power of their stories, their inner wisdom, and innate healing potential. She believes that the bones of healing are in what we do for ourselves. She is the author of Liftoff, a manual of energy recovery and healing through essential self-care practices.