



# Fear of Failure: Why is Pursuing Success so Scary?

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## Introduction

During the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the models of fear of failure and achievement motivation have become popular areas of study [1]. Many individuals in current society suffer from fear of failing due to the importance placed upon success in their educational goals and careers [2]. Research has identified several consequences and implications of fear of failure. These consequences include health concerns [3]; reduced academic performance [4,5]; and self-esteem decline, feeling less in control of their personal life, and feeling less satisfied with life [4]. Past research has examined the fear of success in women [6-8].

The fear of failure orientation has many theories regarding its origin. One theory, in regards to gender role, pertains to societies' outlook on success and failure [9]. Other theories relate to the individual's affective response to failure [10]; and anxiety levels regarding the fear of loss of significant others due to individual failure [10,8]. Further, research has reviewed positive regard and parenting strategies as possible theories concerning the origin of fearing failure [11,12].

The theory of fear of failure is a model that arises from Need Achievement theory [13]. In the 1950s and 1960s, fear of failure as a psychological theory originated out of Atkinson's achievement motivation research [13,14]. Fear of failure is defined as an "avoidant motive which is aroused by debilitating anxiety" [13]. Individuals that demonstrate fear of failure are unsure they will be able to be successful [15], and do not believe in their capacity to avoid failing at their endeavors. Further, those that experience fear of failure often attach negative and painful consequences to the act or experience of failing at a given task or goal [16]. The results in a motive "to avoid situations where one may fail due to anticipatory shame and humiliation because the individual is fearful of failing" [17]. Conroy et al. [17], defines fear of failure as "a tendency to appraise threat and feel anxious during situations that involve the

possibility of failing." As a result, these individuals often avoid or attempt to avoid situations where failure is a possibility [17]. These individuals will opt to avoid goals in which failure is an option [16]. These individuals are frequently depressed, anxious, confused or angry; they lack confidence, have low self-esteem or marital conflict [6].

Fearing failure has been argued as being a significant contributor when identifying the causes and responses to failure [18]. It has been associated with a decrease in goal attainment, increase in avoiding tasks, and decrease in enjoying chores or duties [19]. Being avoidant towards goal attainment has been associated with several outcomes. These include lowered satisfaction in academics and a decrease in self-esteem and feeling satisfied about life [4]. A decrease in academic achievement is also a significant outcome of fearing failure [4]. Research has identified several health risks associated with a fear of failure [3]. Specifically, there is an increased risk in heart attack, diabetes, atherosclerosis, high cholesterol, reduced immune function and an increase in peptic ulcers. An example that has been identified is the increase in cholesterol levels for medical students following major exams that are a result of their chronic worry, fear, and feelings of self-doubt [3].

Fear of failure is often a motivator for individuals to improve performance [10]. Experiencing fears of failing can assist to motivate some individuals in achieving higher levels of performance. For example, some individuals that experience fear of failure become motivated to practice and/or study harder to avoid failure. These individuals often experience high levels of anxiety, which in turn can be highly debilitating. This anxiety can actually prevent some individuals from attaining their maximum potential to achieve academic, career or personal goals [10].

Fearing failure may be divided into two separate and broad categories. The two categories are those that relate to failing on

an interpersonal level and those fears that pertain to failing in education goals or scholarly pursuits [8]. The two categories are oftentimes related. For example, a person that fears that they will fail in their place of employment will also fail in their personal life [8]. Fear of failure can be an avoidant motive that induces some individuals to achieve great goals. Often, students will avoid failure in academics or other educational settings to prevent shame from failing [21]. Students will utilize mastery approach goals to avoid failure [22]. Research has determined that students that experience elevated achievement needs will incorporate performance-approach goals as well as mastery-approach goals. However, students that experience elevated fears of failing will attempt to establish objectives or aspirations that are geared towards avoiding tasks that may demonstrate their incompetence and will utilize those goals that avoid mastery or performance [4,5,22-26]. Further, fear of failure can be identified as being negatively related with cognitive strategy adaptation [22].

Fear of failure is correlated with the incorporation of approach avoidant motivation [22]. This in turn affects the quality of self-regulated learning (SRL) for those individuals that approach learning with approach-avoidant motivation. SRL incorporates the use of learning techniques of rehearsal, elaboration, organization, and the use of critical-thinking skills [22] as a means of encoding information to comprehend the material to be learned [27,28]. Metacognitive strategies are typically employed as a means of monitoring individual comprehension and reflecting and regulating individual thinking and cognitions [29,30]. There are negative associations with metacognitive strategies as well [22]. Further, investigations have determined fear of failure is significantly related to a failure to “metacognitively self-regulate” (p. 462). Therefore, individuals with fear of failure may have difficulty in self-regulated learning, which could directly factor into a history of continued failure [31,22].

Murray [32] hypothesized that some individuals have an innate drive for “infavoidance” as a need. Infavoidance can be explained as “a motivator for some individuals to refrain from action because of fear of failure” (p. 192). The link between a need for achievement to the need for infavoidance, Murray theorized, is that a person’s individual failures take away from the achievements attained (1938).

Failure can be a threatening and anxiety-provoking event because individuals have often begun to associate failure with negative consequences. Conroy et al. [17] have identified five undesirable outcomes associated with fearing failure. These five consequences are (1) feeling embarrassed or shamed, (2) having a diminished self-worth, (3) experiencing uncertainty about your future, (4) the loss of interest of those important to the individual, and (5) fear that relevant significant others are angry or upset [17,19,20,10]. As a result, those individuals that believe failure leads to consequences will be more apt to view situations of evaluation as a threatening event [17].

Researchers in the 1970s determined that fear of failure and fear of success are actually two similar components of one motive [33]. Specifically, researchers argue that many similarities in the theories and definitions exist between the two motives. Additionally, there is overlap in how these two motives are measured in scoring systems of assessments. The underlying factor between fear of failure and fear of success was hypothesized as possibly being fearful of social rejection. This finding was found to be more significant in women than in men. Achievement needs and affiliation needs were found to be more closely related in females rather than males [33].

Measuring the level of anxiety for fearing failure and fearing success in women may be actually measuring the same source of anxiety in certain circumstances. Research has found that females have reacted negatively to accomplishments and achievements that conflict with more traditional gender roles [7]. Women often experience fear as a result of going against traditional gender roles [6]. Studies have concluded that when viewing fear of success and fear of failing individually, researchers must account for sex role and the individual’s life situation to ascertain that the fear of success may be demonstrated as fear of failure in another aspect of the person’s life [6]. Researchers determined that going against traditional sex roles can create internal conflict for women because of the internalized belief that they are not conforming to traditional feminine behaviors [2,6,8].

Past research has determined that individuals that are high in fear of success experience nervousness when receiving successful responses or feedback [2,34]. These individuals often have difficulty in concentration, and are overly concerned with receiving feedback or having competition. These individuals are very anxious when they perceive they are being evaluated. Further, these persons often contribute personal successes to chance, luck, or a situation rather than their abilities. These individuals expected to perform poorly, and were surprised when learning that they had performed well. These individuals had difficulty in taking credit for their successes. Shaver argues that fear of failure can create the same response in an individual as the fear of success response [2].

Horner [9] determined that females with more conventional gender roles repeatedly expect to experience rejection in their social environments if they compete within an area that is perceived to be a field that has been traditionally masculine in nature. Similarly, males that engage in more traditionally feminine careers or activities may experience similar anxiety regarding societal perception. Males may experience more severe social rejection [33]. Women that are successful often have to experience social frowning because traditional sex roles often are in conflict with success [33].

Fear of failure has many underlying factors. Fear of failing in females has been argued as being an attribute to the aforementioned traditional sex roles [6]. Low self-esteem or low self-confidence have been determined as contributing factors for fear of failure [6]. Research has determined that those persons with higher

feelings of self-confidence and feelings of personal value develop and utilize more adaptive coping skills. These individuals are more likely to create alternatives when success is not initially attained. Further, these individuals tend to be more successful academically, demonstrate more persistence, exhibit more effort and have better coping skills when faced with difficult situations [6].

Conversely, individuals with low self-confidence or feelings of self-worth often dwell on their perception of personal failures. These individuals have a tendency to ruminate over their own perceived deficiencies and have a more fatalistic and negative life view than those persons with higher feelings of self-belief [36]. Extensive research has linked self-belief to accomplishment, monitoring of self, determination, and effort [36-41].

Another factor that can influence developing fear of failure is control. The ability that the individual is about to be successful and avoid failing is the definition of control [36,42,43]. Individuals with low feelings of control or outcomes often feel unable to be successful or avoid failing [36]. This feeling of control correlates to the amount of persistence demonstrated, participation levels witnessed, and quantity of effort demonstrated by the individual. Not surprisingly, individuals that feel "less control tend to be lower in their achievement mastery motivation, competence evaluation, teacher's ratings of competence, and autonomous judgment" [36].

A dangerous motivational combination can consist of high fear of failure, low control, and low belief about self has been shown to appear in some individuals [36]. This mix of variables can be especially harsh to individuals when performance is required or expected. Persons with this type of motivational cocktail feel high levels of anxiety with a negative outlook when faced with an event requiring performance. These individuals are often pessimistic and experience trepidation, fear, dread and anxiety symptoms [36].

Another identified dangerous amalgamation has been as a fail acceptor [36]. The fail acceptor is an individual that has low fear of failing, but has low self-confidence or self-belief and low feelings of control [36]. This individual could be described as being learned helpless [44]. These individuals have ascertained that they will fail and have accepted the failure. The major difference between the fail acceptor and the lethal motivational cocktail person is the lack of fear regarding failure. These individuals may be pessimistic, but they experience little anxiety [36], and may have given up. Incidentally, in research, Martin found that failure acceptors were not represented in the research studies [36,37]. This is likely because failure acceptors did not participate in the research study and likely had not been attending classes.

Fear of failure has been identified as contributing to the maladaptive personality characteristic known as perfectionism [17]. Past research has defined the term perfectionism as a striving for flawlessness [45]. Perfectionism is typically considered to be a negative characteristic because those with characteristics of perfectionism often have detrimental and adverse consequences stemming from the perfectionistic qualities [17,45]. Fear of failure

can also be a crucial motivator that causes the development of perfectionism [17].

Past research has identified three forms of perfectionism and has determined the linkage between these types and fear of failure [46, 17]. Socially prescribed perfectionism involves perfectionism that occurs when a person suffers the necessity to attain perfection due to high standards established by significant others [46]. Depression and perfectionism have demonstrated significance in correlational research that has been identified as prescribed by society [47-50], anxiousness [51,52], eating disorders, [53], suicidality [54], and poor response to changing situations [55]. These individuals fear being negatively evaluated, which creates a strong motive for circumventing failing [56].

The second form of perfectionist behavior is other-oriented perfectionism. This is perfectionist behavior that involves the creation of unrealistic goals for other individuals and the expectation that the person will be perfect. This results in stringent evaluation of performance for perfection [46]. This is more external in motivation; specifically, individuals judge other persons through the use of their own high perfectionist standards as opposed to their personal individual performance [17].

Self-oriented perfectionism is the creation of idealistic or impractical, often unattainable or unrealistic, goals for the individual for their own self [46]. The individual is often harsh or critical of their own performance or behaviors as a means of a drive to achieve perfection and avoid failure [46]. The individual demonstrating self-oriented perfectionism has been related to destructive results, including suicidality [57,58], anorexia as an eating disorder [53], being depressed [59,49], ruminating about events [60], burnout [61], being dissatisfied with personal performance and experiencing emotional maladaptive responses to feedback regarding failure [60].

Fearing failure has been examined in regard to emotions or feelings [20]. An individual experiences feelings or emotions when change is perceived in their environment [62]. These changes are seen as impactful to the individual's ability to attain or achieve goals and can be actual and real or false and imaginary. However, the individual must make an appraisal, either on a conscious or unconscious level, regarding how the changes will influence their goal attainment. Anxiousness or fear related appraisals include assessment of relevant change, determination if change aids or hinders goal attainment, and identification of content of the actual goal. Emotions can be specified and appraised as a Core Relational Theme (CRT) of specific emotions [62].

Theories regarding the development of fear of failure identify the experience of shame as being a significant contributor [18]. Shame behaviors are avoidant [18] and can be considered as the negative censure that we feel for our own self [62]. It is reproachful of the self as innately bad and negative for having fallen short of standards against which the self is evaluated [63]. Lack of success can create shameful feelings of incompetence and emotions [18].

Past research has suggested that the origin of childhood shame regarding failure stems from their parental reactions to their failing behaviors [18,64].

Parenting styles are an area that must be reviewed when discussing fear of failure. As a motive, fear of failure has been identified as being able to be regulated by the self and can be impacted by evaluations from parental figures [18]. The fears of failing avoidance motive can be argued to begin formation in early childhood [12]. The theory that parental treatment of children contributes to developing fears of failing has been supported through research [18]. Research has found that boys who have a mother with high fears of failing often place elevated values or principles regarding success and achievement for their sons; however, these mothers typically have beliefs that their sons cannot attain their achievement goals [65]. Parents that punish failure but react in a neutral manner to success and achievements, have been found to create children that are high in fears of failing [11]. Additionally, parents with high quantities of fears of failing are a predicting factor for children with fears of failing [66].

Fears of failing are transmitted intergenerationally from parent to child. Researchers have determined that a specific parenting style, love withdrawal mediates the fear of failure in relationship [66]. In particular, love withdrawal from a mother is a mediator between fear of failure from a mother to child fear of failure. However, love withdrawal from a father figure has not shown to be a mediator for this relationship with the child fearing failure [66]. Even though fearing failure is deemed a motivation regarding competency, there is a component of relational features as well. The relational feature has been theorized as likely being due to fear of being potentially abandoned and having love withdrawn when faced with fear of failure [18]. Additionally, the relational relationship is significant because of the relationship linking fear of failure with shame [18]. Finally, researchers argue that those individuals that demonstrate a high fear of failure are educated for social cue awareness regarding failure. However, these individuals are typically unaware of cues regarding their personal successes [66]. Success is given little thought and importance in the individual's self-evaluation, almost as if it is irrelevant or does not exist. Conversely, failure is viewed by the individual as significant and bearing impact, which has negative effects on the evaluation of the self by the individual. This creates anxiety and other emotional responses that inhibit cognitive function and planning [66].

## Conclusion

As explained earlier, fear of failure is the fear of not reaching or accomplishing a goal [6]. Fearing failure, often, some individuals will avoid possible shame and/or embarrassment by avoiding certain situations that could result in failure [17]. Because fear of failure has long been associated with beliefs regarding self-esteem [4,6], self-doubt [3], and self-efficacy or self-beliefs [36], is it any surprise that some individuals would avoid trying to attain success? The fear

of reaching for a goal, then only to be disappointed when failure occurs, can be daunting. Therefore, the concept of pursuing success may not be deemed worth the effort because failing is frightening. Instead, some individuals prefer to pursue, or remain in, situations that are believed more comfortable and emotionally safe.

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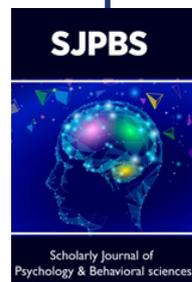
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