

The Art of Mental Training

Chapter 12

Fear of Failure

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Ask yourself this: what type of competitor are you? Are you the kind who likes to play it safe and just do alright? Or are you the kind who's willing to take a chance on possibly failing in order to accomplish something amazing? More than anything else, it's a fear of failure that keeps people from achieving their full potential in sports, in life, in business—in everything.

Fearing failure is more than just a bad thing. The bottom line is, in order to be good in your sport or whatever it is that you do, you simply *can't* be afraid of failing, and here's why. Being afraid to fail actually helps create the conditions that make failure more likely!

Fear of failure causes a lot of problems. It restricts you. The wrong types of thoughts result in shortness of breath, tight muscles, and an overload of stress. . . . Worse still, fear of failing (sometimes even fear of fear) can cause a competitor to start playing it safe. Instead of rising up to meet the challenge, he subconsciously shrinks from it.

On the other hand—and this is the important point—once a competitor learns to overcome the fear of failing, his chances of succeeding increase dramatically.

In reality, fear of failure is nothing more than a perceived psychological threat to your ego and self-esteem. What typically causes a fear of failing is the state of mind that takes hold when a competitor is afraid of looking bad, or else is such a perfectionist that he's become overly self-critical. In either case, his internal state ends up holding him back, whether he's aware of it or not.

Adults are more than capable of wrecking their own chances with fear of failure. However, with children, parents and coaches must be extra careful. Often the adults are the ones creating this build-up of nervous stress in the child athlete's internal world. Injecting the wrong emotional input into a child's occasional failure can ruin the child's love of their sport and even destroy their confidence. With children it's especially crucial that we help build self-esteem, not tear it down. Parents need to go easy on the criticism.

Parents shouldn't act out. It's that type of adult behaviour that can cause a child's fear failure.

In order to avoid the internal state that causes the fear of failure, the mental athlete must first come to look at failure in an entirely different way from most people. He has to learn to accept that the only way to accomplish anything great is to risk failing at it first. He has to accept that without occasional failures he can never hope to get better. He has to understand that on the path to greatness some failures are inevitable. And when he does lose, the mental athlete has to make a conscious decision to *learn* from that failure. Rather than abandoning himself to the luxury of misery, he will methodically shut down that destructive voice of internal self-criticism in favour of looking at failure as valuable feedback.

Thus, when he experiences failure he learns what, out of all his training, still isn't working. He learns how to fail constructively. The mental athlete won't allow a fear of failure to hold him back from greatness. By learning to look at failure differently, top competitors are able to enter competition without a fear of failure.

After all, there is no one in history, in or outside of sports, who ever rose to greatness without having once failed. Politicians have lost elections. Generals have lost battles. Millionaires have failed in prior business ventures. Behind every Olympic gold medal lie hundreds of second and third place finishes.

Think about it.

Remember: Fear of failure is caused by not knowing how to fail constructively. The only way to accomplish anything great is to risk failing at it first. If you have a fear of failing, it's more than just a bad thing. It can actually cripple your chances of success.