A 'CV of Failures' Offers Path Out of Perfectionism

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Albert Wu, MD, MPH, is not someone you would normally associate with failure. His CV includes serving on the Institute of Medicine's committee on preventing medication errors, and he was senior advisor for patient safety to the World Health Organization in Geneva. He was the first to measure how antiretroviral therapy affected the quality of life in patients with HIV. Now he's director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Services and Outcomes Research in Baltimore, Maryland.

But his career path hasn't all been smooth sailing, especially in the competitive tenure-track world of academia.

"When I first went up for promotion to full professor," Wu recalls, "I was turned down." One criticism he received was that he had not been the principal investigator on enough federal grants.

Most physicians have been there. Your research paper was rejected. You didn't get the coveted appointment or long-sought job. Maybe you got some terrible patient reviews online. Now what?

Talking about or sharing failure with others is not typically considered physicians' forte. The tendency with perfectionist personalities, which many physicians fess up to, is to quietly stew in your own brain juices until you can come to a place of somber self-acceptance.

That's why many people found it refreshing when Princeton University professor Johannes Haushofer posted a CV of Failures to his professional website: a lengthy list of grants, awards, and jobs he was denied. Asked why he would do such a thing, Haushofer told *The Washington Post* that he initially was trying to support a friend who had had a setback. Sharing his own disappointments seemed to help his friend, so he made his list public to show others that things haven't always come easy for him.

The original idea for a CV of failures came from an article in *Nature,* where scientist Melanie Stefan of the University of Edinburgh pointed out that sharing your flops—missed jobs, lost fellowships, messed-up presentations—not only helps you get over them but also helps other people overcome their own shortcomings.

A Better Way to Handle Failure?

Most failures are quietly swept under the table while successes are shouted across social media every day, projecting unrealistic images and potentially engendering negative feelings in others. Experts explain that being reminded of others' achievements can evoke a malicious kind of envy when it's perceived as resulting from internal forces (intelligence, talent, or business savvy) and it looks like the win came effortlessly.

In contrast, sharing failure exposes the external forces at play—that something took hard work, a long time, or may have involved some good luck. In essence, sharing your failures, as uncomfortable as it may be, can trigger productive feelings in others. Admitting failure also has internal benefits. Researchers have found that taking ownership of failure makes it more likely to learn from, move past, and work harder after a disappointment. In fact, certain types of failures—lost job opportunities, missed research grants, overlooked awards—may be considered "intelligent failures," a term coined by Duke University professor of management Sim Sitkin, to describe situations where experimentation is needed and answers cannot be predicted in advance.

Thus, talking about failure is not only crucial to helping with personal growth but is also a great strategy to align colleagues and provide a framework for learning. You don't need to list your every failure and post it on the waiting-room bulletin board, but sharing strategic elements of failures with colleagues can be a path to resiliency and greater acceptance by peers, who may then feel safer sharing their own difficulties.

Fail, Fail Again, Fail Better

"Research, common sense, and experience converge in supporting the importance of failure for building long-term success," says Forrest Talley, PhD, a California-based clinical psychologist.

Failure provides important lessons. "Some of these are practical: what worked well, what was not effective, what assumptions were faulty," says Talley. Other lessons build character: an increased desire to reach one's goal, the realization that failure does not lead to death, clarity regarding priorities, and greater mental toughness.

"Nearly everyone starts life with enormous amounts of persistence and resiliency. This is why toddlers will fall hundreds of times in a week when learning to walk, but nevertheless continue to pick themselves up and enthusiastically stagger across the living room floor one more time," Talley says.

With each stumble followed by a renewed effort, the toddler becomes more proficient, more confident, and his or her skills expand.

The idea has caught on somewhat on Twitter, where some physicians have received encouragement for disappointments they shared using the hashtag #FailForward.

> Today (just today!) I got three rejections and a non-response, so really four rejections, before noon. What a way to start the week!Gonna keep my head up and #FailForward even though I really feel like this:

As for Hopkins professor Wu, after being turned down for a promotion, he redoubled his efforts to secure the kind of funding he lacked.

"Initially I was more annoyed than disappointed," he said. "But the feedback I got did make sense, so I got over myself and got to work." And those efforts paid off when he was made full professor a couple of years later.Wu said he continues to keep a lengthy, if not particularly organized, list of his greatest "not hits."