

A Painful Lesson of Failure

Picture
Removed

When I experienced the first grade of 40 percent, I thought I understood how my students felt, but the second failure felt even more devastating than the first.

Who would have thought a graying grandmother could shed tears over a test grade? But failure hurts, at any age.

The morning of the test, all lights seemed to be green—intensive study had left me feeling confident. I had enjoyed a good night's sleep and a satisfying breakfast. I'd asked God's blessings on this day.

What went wrong? When the professor announced "40 percent" *again*, I felt devastated. The first "40 percent" was a novelty, something I had never before experienced. I hadn't felt too upset since he had promised to drop the lowest test grade.

After we received our scores and sat down to listen to the lecture for the day, I struggled to hold back the tears. A few slipped under my glasses and slid down my cheeks. I didn't want to get out a handkerchief and make my crying obvious to the class. If anyone had offered a word of sympathy, I probably would have burst into sobs.

I think the professor knew what was going on because when he mentioned the hard lessons of life, he glanced my way. By the time the class was over, I felt too drained to cry. Finally, while driving home, I began to weep. This brought relief from the pressure; but the sick feeling remained.

I sensed that I had learned a painful lesson of life—the lesson of failure. When I experienced the first grade of 40 percent, I thought I understood how my students felt, but the second failure felt even more devastating more than the first.

I realized now the pain students felt when I placed papers with poor grades on their desks, and pupils nearby asked: "What did you get?" Did the students with poor grades want to crawl

By Maryann Cavender Hood

Picture
Removed

into a hole and disappear, as I had?

I had received high grades and words of praise from the teacher in my other graduate school course—which offered some balm for my wounded ego. Failure *can* teach some useful lessons—but only when it is balanced by many success experiences. Many students experience *nothing* but failure and defeat. This discourages them and makes it more likely that they will drop out of school and experience a lifetime of poor self-esteem and failure. I began to reflect on how many times I had inflicted just such wounds, not realizing the hurt.

I decided to search for ways to help students avoid the painful lessons of failure that I had experienced, or at least to soften their effects. Here are some of the things I've tried.

1. When returning test papers, always place them face-down

on students' desks, keeping the grades hidden from view.

2. Discourage pupils from asking about each others' grades. To forestall this, post on the bulletin board or write on the chalk board the number of grades in each category without revealing names, so students will know their standing in relationship to the rest of the class.

Failure can teach some useful lessons—but only when it is balanced by many success experiences.

3. Encourage students to do their best and not let others' performance unduly influence their attitudes. Assure them that each person is special to God, and to you.

4. Spend some time talking about good study habits and test-taking skills. Ask

students to make a list of reasons for poor grades, along with ways they think failure can be prevented. List their ideas on the chalk board, and encourage them to follow the suggestions.

5. Talk to the class about respecting other people's privacy and about encouraging each other.

6. Smile and give a reassuring pat on the shoulder as you pass out tests or papers that have been graded. This will remind students that they are loved and accepted.

7. Look for many ways to encourage students and to praise them for the good things they do. For example, give certificates to students who make the greatest improvement in a class. Make a point—every day—of including opportunities for students to succeed in a variety of activities.

8. Schedule short conferences with pupils to encourage them

and discuss ways they can improve their grades.

9. Motivate the students to do their best by having them memorize Scripture verses such as “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).^{*} A favorite text that I use at the beginning of the school year is: “And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord” (Colossians 3:23). Students need to learn early to draw their strength from the Lord. A verse that helps me cope with difficult tasks is Philipians 4:13: “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”

10. If it's obvious a student is not capable of passing a course of study, guide him or her toward remedial work such as an easier class, self-help books, or programmed material. Discuss with

I decided to search for ways to help students avoid the painful lessons of failure that I had experienced, or at least to soften their effects.

parents the need for tutoring. Often, in multigrade classrooms, an older child can help younger ones to master difficult concepts. These approaches will help prevent repeated failures, and enable the student to learn at his or her own pace. (One of my pupils dropped back to the easiest reading group, but before the school year was out, he had worked his way to the top group again.)

After my experience in graduate school, never again will I hand a student a paper with a failing grade without thinking, *I'm so sorry. How I would like to put my arms around you and ease the pain.* I'm re-

minded of Jesus' feelings when He said:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” (Matthew 23:37).

I have resolved to do my best to see that my students do not experience the crushing blow of failure and wounded self-esteem that I experienced. I thank God for teaching me the painful lesson of failure. Sometimes, we learn what others feel only by experiencing some of their hurt. ☞

^{*}All Scripture quotes are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Maryann Cavender

Hood is a retired teacher and mother of four grown children. A freelance author of articles, poems, Bible quizzes, and four books, she lives in Gadsden, Alabama, with her husband.

Picture
Removed

Picture
Removed