

Please Try This at Home

Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

In Praise of Failure

Pop quiz: What two things do these statements have in common?

1. If I can get enough time free for an intense work out today, then I'll hit the gym.
2. I'm not asking out that hottie in my chemistry class unless she shows interest in me first.
3. Once I've taken golf lessons and am good at it, then I'll play with my colleagues.
4. I'll lead that group study only if I can find the time to plan all 12 lessons out in advance.
5. I'll quit my job and be a photographer as soon as I know that I've achieved financial security.

You got it! If we pop the hood of these things that run through our minds some of the time or even a lot of the time, we find 1) a fear of failure and 2) an all or nothing approach to trying new or difficult things. The mantra of this kind of thinking is: "I won't do it unless I'm sure I can do it well."

What's Wrong with *Only* Doing Things Well?

Now you're probably thinking that I'm going to tell you that the fear of failure and all or nothing thinking are bad and we shouldn't do them, right? But let's be honest here. As with just about every way that we choose to approach life, there are good and bad things about this kind of thinking. Making sure that we can do things well before we start means we're less likely to look stupid or be caught unprepared. People can't laugh at us or think badly of us if we just do what we know we're good at. And by people, I mean ourselves, too! We give our inner critics less to mock us for if we only do what we can do well. That's no small thing.

The down side, of course, is that we try fewer things. Refusing to be novices, we're not as likely to discover things we'd really enjoy or would eventually be really good at if we'd only press through the beginning failures and stick with them long enough. We're not likely to learn that we can survive and even learn from failure, or that we don't have to fear failure it as much as we do now, because we haven't had enough experience with it to learn that. Also, we're not as likely to change those hurtful habits we've picked up along the way, because at least now, when we've not really put our whole effort into changing, we can say we didn't fail because we never *really* tried. So we don't *really* try and we also don't *really* change.

The saddest thing about the "I won't do it unless I'm sure I can do it well" approach is that as we develop a habit of pulling back from risk and opportunity because of our fear of not doing things well, we may wake up to find ourselves living boring, wasted, hurtful lives. We buy short term "safe" success at the cost of long term failure to really live.

So Do it Poorly

This is where my favorite quote comes in. G.K. Chesterton once said, "Everything worth doing is worth doing poorly." I know, that sounds awful, doesn't it? Like I must have quoted it wrong? But what he's getting at is that if something is worth doing, and we don't have the time, skill,

confidence, or energy we need to do it really well, we might as well go ahead and do it poorly, since it's still worth doing.

It's the *worth doing* that is key here. Of course I'm not recommending that we all go out and try to fail or do a half-hearted job at everything we do. If you're already great at something, by all means do it well! This approach is strictly for those things that we're not great at, but are worth doing *despite* the possibility of shoddy success or even failure.

So what would that be like? Returning to our previous examples, it might sound like:

1. I've only got 45 minutes left to work out today, but that's still better than nothing. I'll do what I can now and get a better work out in tomorrow.
2. I don't think I'll ever be sure whether that chemistry class hottie will say yes to me. If I don't ask her out, though, I'll always wonder what would have happened if I had. I might as well do it. If she turns me down, that will suck, but I'll probably live.
3. I want to play golf with my colleagues and I know I'm not going to have time to do lessons before. I'll just go with them, tell them I'm a newbie, and we can laugh at my game together.
4. There will be some weeks that I won't be able to prepare for the group study until the day before. I guess I'll just ask the group to bring in some of their own questions and ideas on weeks that I know I can't be on my A-game.
5. I've always wanted to see if I could make money at photography. Even though I don't feel ready to quit my job right now, maybe I can cut down my hours and start using that time to learn about selling my photos.

You'll notice that all the statements now have two new things in common. Each thinker knows the value of the opportunity—staying in shape, the possibility of romance, recreation with colleagues, learning leadership, transitioning to a fulfilling career—and lets that value override the fear of failure. Each thinker is also willing to tolerate half-way effort—doing it “poorly”—at least long enough to try it out. Even if these folks come to the end of their lives without ever being great at these things, they will still have the consolation of saying, “I tried things that were important to me. I did what I could. I may not be great, but I'm not a coward.”

When we redefine failure as “not trying important things” rather than “not succeeding at important things,” we can set ourselves free to live adventurously. Of course our inner critics and those who are not secure enough to be really “for us” will tell us that we aren't doing things well. But as we keep reminding ourselves “At least I'm doing them!” we can gradually develop calluses to protect us from those voices that would chain us to a safe, boring, strictly “successful” life.

If that weren't reason enough to give this approach a try, another exciting byproduct of doing things that we can't do well all by ourselves is that it generates opportunities for other people or God to come through for us and fill in the gaps we couldn't cover. The only way we can really know that we are not fundamentally alone—that at the end of the day others really will be there for us—is by being willing to encounter things that we will not succeed at *unless* others come through for us. When we do this and others come through, that's when we finally know we can trust them. And it's that kind of trust, that heart knowing that others have “got our back,” that gives us the courage to try more and more worthwhile things, leading to a full, adventurous life.

Six Steps Toward Redefining Failure

To begin moving from a safe, constraining, “I won’t do it unless I’m sure I can do it well” approach to life to the “I’m doing it poorly, but at least I’m doing it” approach:

1. Take some time to yourself to review journals or thoughts that remind you of life dreams you once entertained or activities you once wanted to try.
2. For each one, ask yourself if that dream or activity is still worth doing. If you got to the end of your life and never did it, would you be disappointed?
3. For those things that you’d be disappointed if you didn’t do, ask yourself what’s the worst that could happen if you tried them and didn’t do them well or even spectacularly failed at them? Could you and your loved ones live through that? What good might come to you from the process of trying and failing, even if you didn’t eventually succeed?
4. Now ask yourself what it would look like to do at least some of each dream or activity, even if you couldn’t do it to the extent you’d like or with the full skill, time, energy, or competency you’d like.
5. What steps could you take today toward doing a bit of each dream or activity that is still worth doing, whether you succeed or not?
6. See if you can try a few small, half-steps toward your most important dreams and activities, sticking with those small steps through the first several failures—long enough to know you’ve faced your fear and given them a fair try.

Whether you excel at your dreams, or simply overcome your fear of failure through repeated exposure to it, I wish you all the best in your courageous pursuit of living life to the full!

Thanks for reading!

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