

WHAT IT IS

Individuals often become caught up in the idea that if they can't do something perfectly, then they have failed at the task. This challenge is often described as having a low frustration tolerance or lacking persistence or resiliency on a task. Another aspect of how individuals approach failure is related to their past experiences, which may include challenges experienced as someone who is neurodivergent, has experienced trauma, or had negative experiences based on gender, sexual orientation, race, or ethnicity. Our task becomes finding ways to inspire hope and encourage them to overcome the obstacles on their path to success.

The term "narrative therapy" was used by Australian family therapists Michael White and David Epston in their book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* to define the way we all use stories to relate to our experiences. They suggest that people organize and give meaning to their experiences through the stories they tell. Individuals construct the meaning of life through stories and then treat these stories as the "truth." Those helping others should seek to elicit stories related to their past experiences to better understand their points of view. Narrative therapy helps individuals see their stories from a different perspective. The story doesn't change, but how they think about it is shifted.

WHO TO USE IT WITH

Those who have experienced negative social interactions, barriers to accessing services, or a lack of opportunity for growth and success. This approach works well with those who feel no matter how hard they try, they aren't living up to the expectations of those around them. They often feel disheartened and even hopeless about how they will be able to move forward in their lives.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

1. What are some examples where it feels like no matter how hard you try, you end up back in the same place?
2. What are some stories of success and failure in your life? How have these stories changed over time as you've gained perspective (e.g., have there been stories in which you first saw the experience as a failure but then, over time, began to see how the story could be seen with a different perspective?)

TEACHING INSIGHTS

- Help individuals understand failure as an essential part of their journey. Too often, we see failure as a sign of weakness, rather than a lesson we can learn from. Share examples from your life or stories from others where failure was simply a delayed success.
- Part of being successful is being connected to those in your life who can support your positive choices, not negative ones. This goes hand in hand with assessing where your energy is going and prioritizing tasks that allow you to build from prior successes. Help them redirect their energy.
- A great video to share with is called life=risk. They can google it on YouTube and watch some examples of famous people who were able to overcome setbacks.
- Expect failure as part of the process. When we strive for perfection, we end up falling short. Learning from past mistakes and adopting an approach to success that allows for hiccups and speedbumps along the way is critical to our overall success.

TRY A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

A central idea in cognitive behavioral therapy focuses on the power inherent in how we think about the things in our lives and how these thoughts lead to beliefs that govern our lives. Consider the following “re-frames” and add your own examples in the open spaces.

Negative Belief	Positive Re-frame
I just started this job, but I’m definitely gonna get fired. This stuff comes easy to everyone else, but I still have to ask for help and have made a few mistakes.	While I may have had some setbacks and haven’t done everything right, I should have some patience with myself about learning new things and figuring out how things work.
I just want to find someone who I can spend my life with, but there is no one for me. I really am at the stage of just giving up on all of this.	Finding the right person takes time. Other people’s relationships may look easy from the outside, I don’t know all the details of their stories. Maybe they have had it just as hard as I have.

THE MESSAGES WE SEND OURSELVES

Another concept related to redefining failure is thinking about the idea of what messages we tell ourselves. Think about the commentary you share in your mind when you are struggling with a task. Do you tell yourself, “I can never do this” and “Why should I even bother, I’ll never make it.” Think about these comments as weights that hang around your neck, slowing you down and keeping you from making positive changes. What messages do you tell yourself when you are struggling?

LIFE = RISK

Search on YouTube or Google the phrase “life=risk.” The video offers the idea of a band-aid as an example of what it means to be a successful person. Share your thoughts about the video as it relates to some of your challenges or when you feel like you aren’t good enough.

