

“MISTAKE PHOBIA” IS COMMON

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Nobody likes to make a mistake, but some people have an excessive fear of making mistakes. After two decades of clinical practice, I've decided to coin the term, “mistake phobia,” to describe this common problem that prevents people from living their lives to the fullest. This phobia of making mistakes is defined as *an irrational fear of making a mistake or error, leading to an avoidance of situations that might result in a perceived sense of failure. Each mistake creates either excessive internal shame and/or embarrassment and results in further risk avoidance in the future.*

People who suffer from a “mistake phobia” exhibit most of the following eight characteristics:

1. They're highly risk avoidant. They'd rather not try than risk being wrong.
2. They perceive any form of mistake, no matter how minor, as a personal failure.
3. They are excessively self-critical and/or perfectionistic. They engage in black and white thinking (with no shades of gray).
4. Their entire self-worth rides on not making a mistake.
5. They avoid new or challenging situations.
6. They have low self-esteem.
7. They tend to have a pessimistic attitude about life.
8. They may have a childhood history of severe punishment for poor performance or a history of being highly self-critical since an early age.

Mistakes not feared by some

Not everyone fears making mistakes. Many famous inventors, authors, statesmen, etc. have expressed a positive view toward mistakes. For instance, Henry Kaiser said, “Problems are opportunities in work clothes,” Albert Einstein said, “In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.” Katherine Graham offered a creative view by saying, “A mistake is simply another way of doing things.” And Ralph Waldo Emerson reminded us that, “Our greatest glory is not in never failing, but in rising up every time we fail.”

Consider all of the famous inventors and how many failures they must have experienced before they finally succeeded. Had they been afraid to fail, they would have stopped after their first failure. Instead, people who persevere and risk being wrong seem to view failures in a unique way. They tend to see a failure as simply:

- a) More data/information
- b) Valuable feedback
- c) One step closer to learning a solution, by eliminating all the things that don't work.
- d) A possible creative alternative to the solution they were seeking

Solutions for Change

What can you do to alter your phobic fear of making a mistake? Begin by just noticing your personal beliefs about making a mistake. If you pay attention to what you are privately saying to yourself when confronted with a challenge, you'll uncover your underlying beliefs. Write these beliefs on the left side of a piece of paper. On the right

side, challenge your beliefs as if you were on the opposite side of a debate. By adopting another perspective from your usually mindset, you'll open your mind to a more realistic viewpoint. Next, ask yourself, "What is the worst thing that will happen if I fail or make an error?" Could I learn from my mistakes? It is also helpful to remember the consequences you suffered as a child when you didn't succeed. Ask yourself if the same thing is likely to happen to you as an adult. Probably not.

Another approach involves creating "small wins" for taking risks. First, make a list of "things you've avoided trying in the past for fear of failing." Then arrange your list from least feared to most feared risk. Choose the least feared item on your list and "just do it." Congratulate yourself for trying, no matter what the outcome. Only focus on your *willingness* to take a small risk. Next, tell several friends or write a paragraph about your experience of "risking possible failure." Repeat this process with increasingly more difficult items on your list of things you've avoided. By the time you've reached the most difficult item, you will have learned that what really matters is "**you tried.**"

Once you've done some self-assessment and committed to changing, learn to talk to yourself in a new way. To change your thought patterns, ask others who seem comfortable dealing with new challenges, how they handle mistakes. Many will tell you that the worst failure anyone can make is "not trying." If you stick to doing only those things you're already familiar with, you'll also limit any new learning. Psychological research has shown that people who refuse to try to learn new things will eventually score lower on intelligence tests as they age. Our minds are like a muscle in our body---"use it or lose it," applies. Our mind needs to be exercised and challenged with new ideas in order to forge new neuronal connections and prevent decline over the aging process.

In summary, "**trying** is more important than performance or outcome." Paradoxically, the more you're willing to try and risk failure, the better your performance will ultimately become."

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