

# How Early-Career Setbacks Can Set You Up for Success

Failure is just part of the process.



By Tim Herrera

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Welcome to the *Smarter Living* newsletter! Every Monday, S.L. editor Tim Herrera emails readers with tips and advice for living a better, more fulfilling life. Sign up here to get it in your inbox.

“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

Yes, it’s a tired, old cliché we’ve all heard hundreds of times throughout our lives. But this tired, old cliché now has something going for it that most other clichés don’t: It’s supported by science.

According to a recent paper published in the journal *Nature Communications*, early-career setbacks can, somewhat counterintuitively, result in a stronger career in the long term — stronger even than that of people who never had a setback.

Researchers compared the careers of two groups of young, “statistically identical” scientists: one group that *just barely* secured a grant from the National Institutes of Health — the narrow-wins; and one group that *just barely* missed securing the same grant — the near-misses.

After 10 years, researchers found that the losing group had gone on to have more successful and impactful careers than the group that had won the grant.

In other words, failures in the first phases of your career may mean you can come back stronger than those who never stumbled.

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“Paradoxically, the near-misses systematically outperform the narrow-wins,” said Dashun Wang, an associate professor of management and organizations at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern, and a co-author of the study.

“When we first saw these results, we were like, ‘Oh, that can’t be right, this is counter to everything I’ve learned,’” he said. “We just tested everything we could think of, but every time we tested, the results come back the same. So that got us thinking more about the mechanisms of why this happens.”

One theory Dr. Wang and his co-authors tested was that perhaps the results could be attributed to attrition. That, after the near-miss event, the weaker members of the near-miss group simply left the field, increasing the average level of success for the group. But after controlling for that, the results remained the same: The near-miss group truly was stronger.

“This is not just survival of the fittest,” Dr. Wang said. “These people became better versions of themselves,” he said, adding that the crucial contribution of this research is that the performance improvement is causally linked to the near-miss event itself.

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Accepting our failures and growing from them is a core component of any successful career. Keeping a log of your failures can even be a source of motivation. Earlier this year in Smarter Living we talked about failure résumés. Whereas your normal résumé organizes your successes, accomplishments and your overall career progress, your failure résumé tracks the times you didn't quite hit the mark, along with what lessons you learned. (But, uh, you should still probably send in your regular résumé on your next job application.)

Melanie Stefan, a lecturer at Edinburgh Medical School, popularized the failure résumé after she published her own, which listed the graduate programs she didn't get into, degrees she didn't finish or pursue, harsh feedback from an old boss and even the rejections she got after auditioning for several orchestras.

“At the time, I thought we were really not talking enough about failure” in academia, Dr. Stefan told The Times in February. “I had just finished my Ph.D. and was applying for so many fellowships to do a postdoc, and I got rejection after rejection, and I said it was something we don't really talk about a lot.”

She added: “Sometimes I look back on them and see how much I've actually struggled to be where I am. That's a powerful reminder that I deserve to be here.” It is also, she said, “a good reminder of how much you've tried.”

Yes, this all sounds a little uncomfortable. Why focus so much on the things that bring us pain? Our career embarrassments and mistakes?

Well, for one, talking about failure can help to cultivate a more collegial work environment, since it can “humanize the sharer by making them seem more approachable and relatable in the workplace,” The Times wrote in a story about failing the right way. “It also generally increased levels of so-called ‘benign envy,’ which can motivate and drive employees to perform better.”

But the best reason to acknowledge and dive into failures is that they have the most potential to help us grow.

“We realized we may have succeeded in understanding success, but we've failed at understanding failure,” Dr. Wang said. “We know success breeds success. Maybe we just haven't looked at people who fail close enough.”

And keep in mind: It's not survival of the fittest. It's about becoming a better version of yourself.

“If you fail and you manage to still be here, give yourself a high-five,” Dr. Wang said.

When have you faced a career setback you bounced back from? I want to hear about it! Tell me on Twitter at @timherrera.

Have a great week!

— Tim

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