To every single young person
who has, at some point,
not felt GOOD ENOUGH
– this book is for you.
E.D.



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failosophy FOR TEENS

A Handbook For When Things Go Wrong

ELIZABETH DAY



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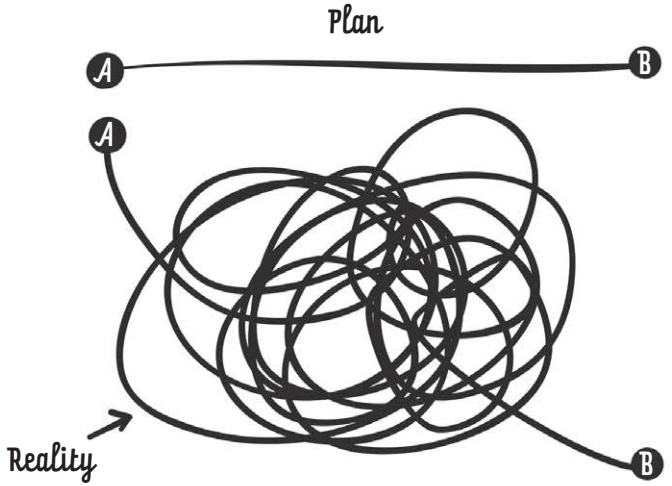
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Introduction

What is failure? Great question! It was one that I avoided answering for a while, because it seemed like such a hard thing to explain. But eventually the definition I came up with was that **failure is what happens when something doesn't go according to your plan.**



Failure happens to us all, even those celebrities who appear like shimmering modern idols on the red carpet and who seem to have everything sorted.



Every day, we are bombarded with success stories to such an extent that we are in danger of believing that being exceptional is the norm. **We live in an age of perfection**, where we are led to think that we deserve success and will be rewarded with it if only we are clever enough or thin enough or sociable enough or, in some way, good enough. And online culture and social media have scared us into believing that any failure will be made public and everyone will soon know about it.

Your definition of failure depends on how you perceive success, but – here's the good bit – you can reframe what success means to you. Perhaps success could mean trying your best when playing football or hockey, rather than being the one to score all the goals? Or perhaps success could mean being nice to your brother or sister, rather than owning a pair of expensive new trainers? Or being happy that you are unique rather than changing yourself to fit in with a group? For me, the truest form of success is about how you feel inside yourself. If you're comfortable with who you are and how you treat other people, that's the best kind of success.



If we don't live our best lives for ourselves, we start to judge ourselves through other people's eyes, becoming people-pleasers. This means acting in a way that we hope will make others approve of us – whether they're total strangers, or our own family or friends – even when this goes against our own wants or desires.

As a teenager, I failed to see that my desire to people-please was making me unhappy. When I made friends, I used to think it was more important to be the kind of person they wanted me to be, rather than just being myself. I spent a lot of time trying to conform and doing things I wasn't comfortable with because I wanted to be liked. But of course, no one stands a chance of liking the real you unless you are brave enough to show who that really is.

People-pleasing sounds like it's a nice quality, but it can be quite destructive to our personal growth. **By constantly yearning for the approval of others and avoiding so-called 'failures', we miss out on the fulfilment that comes from being happy and confident in our own skin.**

> 'If you AIM to be something you are not, you will always fail. AIM TO BE YOU'
>
> – MATT HAIG
>
> **AUTHOR**

When I was four, my family and I moved to Northern Ireland. It was – and still is – a part of the United Kingdom, but not everyone there wanted to be part of the UK. When we went over in 1982, there was a civil conflict. We used to drive through a military checkpoint on our way to school every morning. Bombs went off frequently. It could be a scary place.

As someone with an English accent, I didn't fit in. In some environments, I was mistrusted because people assumed my family must be working for the British military, who were seen as enemy occupiers by those who wanted a united Ireland. (We were actually nothing to do with the army: my father was a surgeon).



At secondary school in Belfast, I was teased for my accent and I found it difficult to make friends. I felt very lonely and sad. My grades spiralled. I became quieter and quieter. Eventually, I told my parents how unhappy I was and I changed to a new school that suited me much better. Although that was a difficult thing to go through, I understand now that it has made me who I am.

I failed to fit in at my first secondary school. But there were benefits to that: I became an observer and a listener, which have proved invaluable skills in my later career as a writer and interviewer. It gave me empathy for anyone who is or has been bullied, and it made me understand the value of kindness. It taught me how important it is to make real friends who accepted me as I am.

It also made me realise that no matter who you are, there are some people who will always make assumptions about you that aren't true. But you have no control over that. Other people's opinions are mostly to do with how they feel about *themselves*, not about you. They might be unhappy or angry or have a difficult home life and they're lashing out. You are not in control of their opinions, but you are in control of your response *to them*. Don't waste your energy trying to change their minds. Instead, use that same energy to make a new friend or to spend more time doing the things you enjoy. Get to know yourself. And remember: when you go through tough times, it makes the good times feel even better because you have something to compare them to.



‘THE DARKER THE NIGHT,’

Dostoyevsky wrote,

‘THE BRIGHTER THE STARS.’

I have spent a large portion of the last couple of years thinking about my failures. The weird thing is that thinking as an adult about my failures hasn’t been a negative experience. On the contrary, I feel stronger, happier and more empowered as a result.

When I use the word ‘empowered’ what I mean is that I can claim my own courage rather than relying on anyone else’s. Imagine you are a phone. When you use a phone too much without charging it, the phone runs out of power and you can’t text your friends any more which is really annoying. But now imagine that you are your own phone charger: an in-built battery pack that means you *never* run out of power. That’s what I mean by feeling empowered. I have my own battery pack. I don’t have to rely on anyone else to build me up. Failures can’t hurt me as much because I know how to cope with them – even better, every time I learn from a failure, I build up my own battery life.

I’m no longer embarrassed by my failures because when I look back at them, I now feel proud of my resilience in surviving them.

For me, resilience is being able to recover or adapt when things go wrong, or when things change in ways I don’t expect. Being at peace with failure in this way means I don’t have too many regrets. I’ve accepted that we can’t always understand why things happen at the time they’re happening. But I do believe that life will generally teach us the lessons we need to learn if we are open to the possibility. This acceptance of failure helps me to be resilient and adapt when things don’t go to plan.

I wish I’d embraced my failures when I was younger, rather than feeling bad about them. How different my teenage years could have been! My hope is to help you see failure as part of the bigger picture and understand that . . .

although your failures make you who you are, they do not define you.

And I wish I had been more open when things went wrong. I wish I had talked and discussed my failures. In my 30s, I was dumped by a boyfriend. I felt heartbroken and embarrassed. But when I confided in my friends about the experience, I actually felt closer to them. Being vulnerable is an amazing way to connect with others because the chances are, they will have gone through something similar but might never have had the opportunity to talk about it. I realised that conversations about failure were far more revealing than any other kind. When you talk about what’s gone wrong in your life, you allow other people the space to be honest about their own mistakes too.

I then started to think about having these conversations more widely, so that more people could feel less alone. That was the idea behind my *How To Fail* podcast, which launched in July 2018. Each week, I ask my guest to come up with three 'failures' in advance of the recording. These can be sublime or ridiculous; profound or superficial. The only criteria are that the guest must feel comfortable talking about the subjects they've chosen, and that they are able to reflect on what they have learned from them.

My guests have ranged from footballers, psychotherapists, politicians, pop stars, chefs and former reality TV contestants. They have given insights into everything from failed exams and romantic break-ups to how to cope with severe anxiety. You'll hear some of their hugely inspiring stories in this book, along with lessons I've learned from my own life.



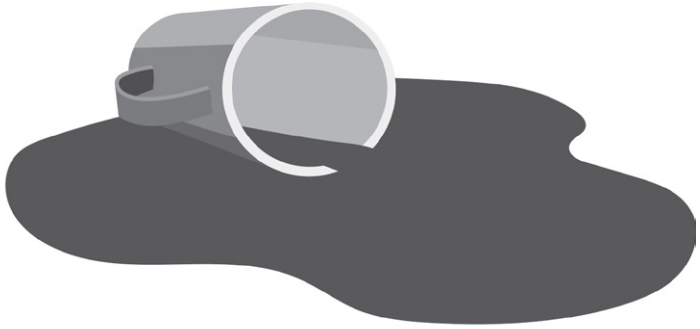
I have condensed the valuable experiences from my podcast and life learnings into seven key areas, intended as helpful guides through life's rough patches. Consider them the equivalent of having a chat with a good friend who wants to make you feel better.

1. **Failure just is**
2. **You are not your worst thoughts**
3. **Everyone feels like they've failed**
4. **Rejection is survivable**
5. **How to be a failure scientist**
6. **There's no such thing as a future you**
7. **Being honest makes you stronger**

As Albert Einstein said, 'Failure is success in progress.' However difficult something might seem at the time, it is always possible to learn something. **Try to believe that something good will come from a failure.** Sometimes, you might not be able to make out what that positive is straight away. Sometimes, you can only know that with hindsight, but being optimistic could give you the energy or courage to do the things that make you anxious or worried.

I'm not saying it's easy. I know it takes a lot more effort than just talking to yourself in the mirror or collecting quotes from Instagram. **Our mental muscles require just as much working out as our physical ones.** Try out the challenges throughout the book to discover more about you and how to live your best life.

Some failures are far more traumatic than others and it might take more time before you feel better about what's happened. If you feel emotional pain – sadness, upset, embarrassment, anger – that pain is a fact, whatever the cause of it.



But there is a difference between pain and suffering. Pain, like failure, happens to us all. We accidentally burn our tongue on a cup of hot chocolate that is too hot. There is the immediate pain, which hopefully subsides quite quickly. Then there is the subsequent suffering, which lasts a bit longer as we struggle to taste food for a few days. But imagine being hard on yourself about the fact that you'd been stupid enough to burn your tongue for several weeks and months afterwards. That would be prolonging suffering unnecessarily.

Instead, you could say to yourself: 'Well, I burned my tongue, but at least I'll know for the next time to add a bit of cool milk to my hot chocolate before I drink it.'

Thinking positively when things go wrong will prove incredibly powerful on many levels. And instead of trying to avoid failure we can think instead about how mistakes actually help us learn and grow.

And that's what this book is all about.

So, read it all in one go, or dip in and out. Either way, I hope it might help you to realise that failure does not have to be alienating. In truth, it is the opposite: it connects us all. **Failure makes us human.**



That, in a nutshell, is FAILOSOPHY.

The Seven Principles of Failure



Principle 1

Failure just is

This might sound obvious. Bear with me.

The first thing you should know about failure is that it is a fact. As I said before, failure is something going differently from what we had planned or intended. This will ALWAYS happen because of the beauty and unpredictability of life!

Failure, like oxygen, just exists. You can't wish oxygen away or live your life trying to avoid it because that would be stupid and impossible. Oxygen is essential to our survival and so, in its own way, is failure. Failure gives us the opportunity to learn, if we choose to let it, and that can help us grow into better, stronger people.

'The fact of WORRYING about whether it's all going wrong is pointless. What it should be about is just thinking,

"Well, all I CAN DO IS THE BEST I CAN DO, in the way I think is the best way, and we'll see what happens at the end."

Failure is part of the process of getting where you need to be'

– ANDY MCNAB,

AUTHOR AND FORMER SAS SOLDIER

Failure has happened to all of us and it will continue to happen to all of us at various points in our lives. There is nothing we can do that will protect us from failure for ever. There just isn't. Wishing it were otherwise is like wishing away oxygen. Or anything else that exists as a fact: shoes, for instance. There's no point living your life in fear of shoes, just as there is no point living your life in fear of failure.

'The minute you let go of that fear of failure, you score more'

– ENIOLA ALUKO,

FORMER ENGLAND WOMEN'S FOOTBALLER



Failure is a fact. The emotion we attach to failure is separate but, to an extent, within our control.

RISE ABOVE!

Think about a recent experience that made you feel like a failure. You might have had a lot of emotions and feelings about it. That's totally normal! You probably already know that those kinds of emotions can make our body react too.

Write down a failure you've experienced.

Then write down your feelings around this failure, for example . . .

sad

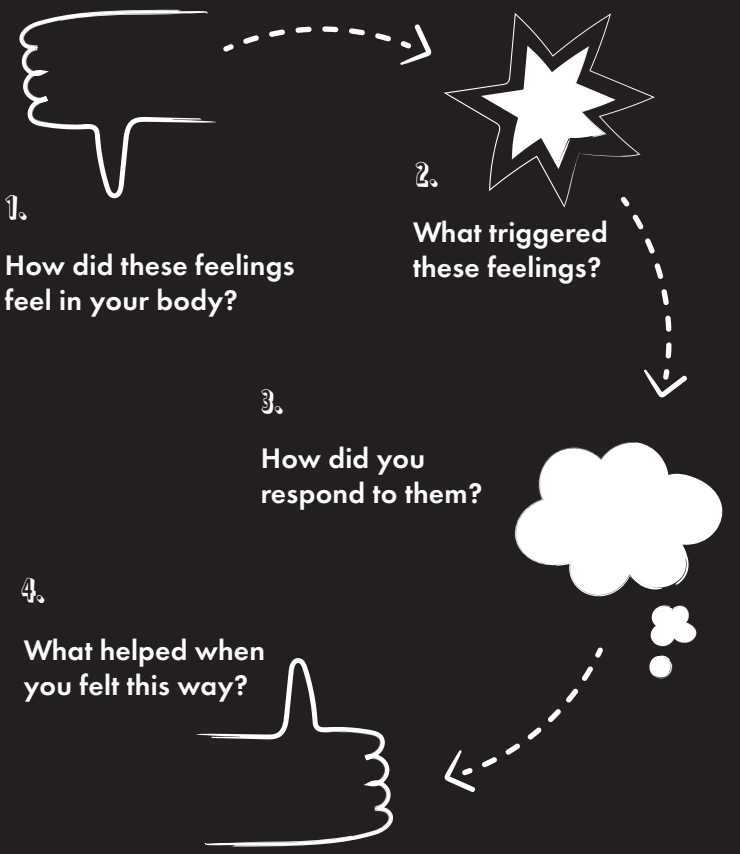
angry

EMBARRASSED

SULKY

hurt

Then try to answer these questions:



For example, if one of the feelings from a failure was anger, then it might make your body tense (1), it might be triggered by feeling that you've disappointed someone (2). Perhaps you responded by shouting (3) and maybe what helped was punching a pillow, going for a walk, doing something you enjoy, listening to music, or speaking to a friend . . . (4).

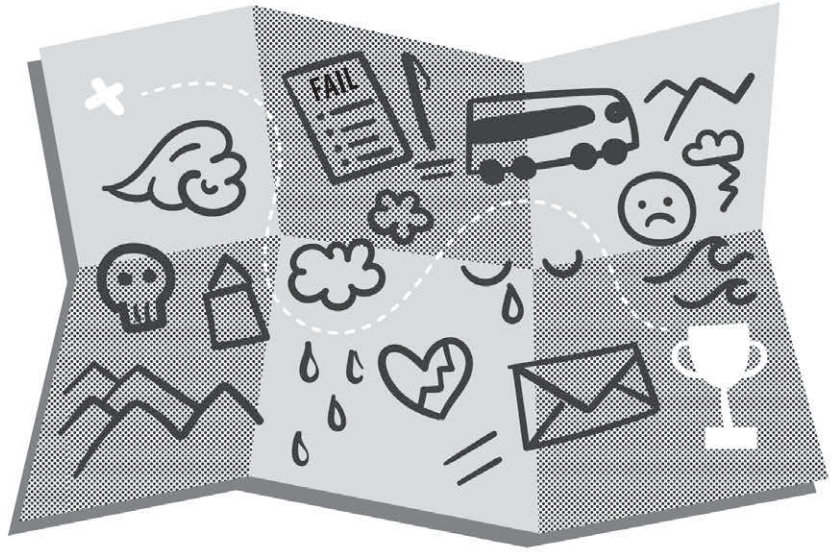
Our failures may be different or they may be the same. We will also react differently to the same situations. For example, if the failure was losing a match, then some people might get cross and want to throw their bat/stick/ball around. Some might want to hurry off the pitch in embarrassment and never play again. Others might think unkind thoughts about themselves, feeling more and more unhappy . . . Acknowledging and exploring these emotions, and accepting them for what they are, helps us understand that we can choose to react to them in different ways.



During one of my podcasts, former England footballer Eniola Aluko talked about when she failed to win the football league with her team. She felt devastated and was inconsolable on the pitch. As well as being upset, failing so publicly added to her humiliation. After the match, Eniola felt that she never wanted to play football again.

However, other people really helped her to deal with the failure. Her coach put practical steps in place to prepare the team for how to stay calm and not panic when losing a match. Her mentors, such as ex-footballer Linvoy Primus, taught her to see that failure doesn't matter if you've done your best. So she didn't quit football after that failure. In fact, a year later, she was named player of the match in the FA Cup final, which her team won.

Eniola told me that this experience had changed her attitude towards failure. She realised it could be a learning experience. She said: 'It's like, "OK, it wasn't meant to happen." Or there's a purpose for this or it wasn't for me or this door is shut for another one to open. It's completely different. I don't feel humiliated if I fail. I feel very much like, "OK, there's something in this . . . it's not going to be plain sailing all the time, especially if you want to be somebody great. You have to be prepared to fail sometimes and, you know, not get it right."'

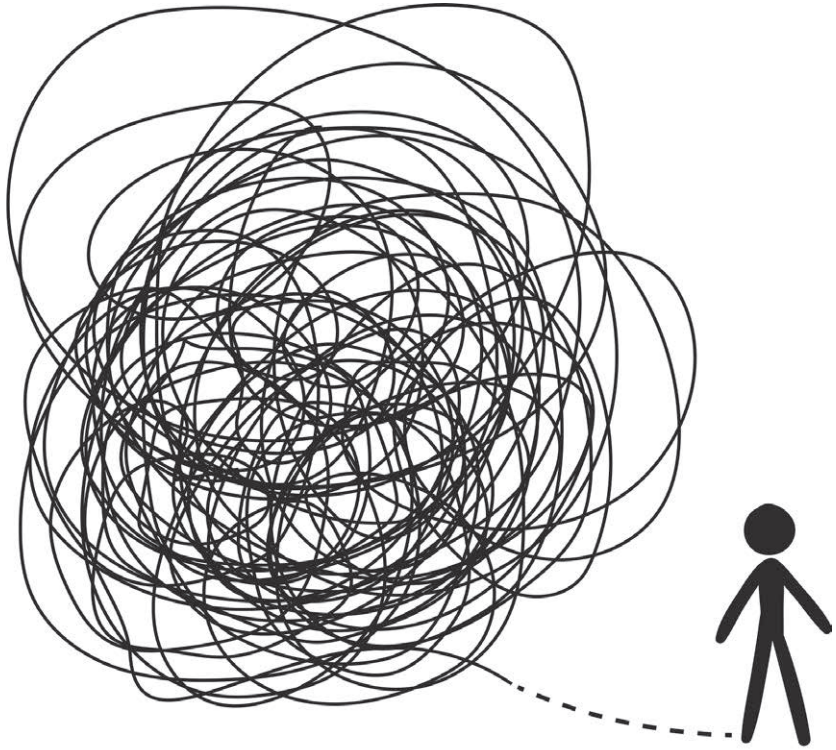


It's important, also, to remember that failure is not what other people tell you it is. Your experience of failure is personal. As much as possible, it should be separate from the judgement of others.

People's perceptions are skewed by their own emotional, cultural, and familial baggage. When I was 10, I sat an exam called the 11 Plus. Whether I passed it or not would determine what kind of secondary school I could go to. I remember a neighbour of ours saying to me that it was 'the most important exam' I would ever take. Although I smiled politely, I didn't agree with her. I knew I would have plenty of exams in the future that were just as, if not more, important – including GCSEs and A-Levels. I later learned that our neighbour had failed the 11 Plus and had gone to a school she didn't like as a result. Her perception of that exam – and how crucial it was to pass it – was entirely shaped by her own experience. It wasn't shaped by mine. And it wasn't an objective fact.



Other people's perceptions are not always going to be the best marker of how you should live your life. This might sound difficult, especially in this age of likes and double-taps, but try as much as possible to **untangle your feelings about failure from other people's.**



We often want to fit in with others because we believe that if they like us, we will be popular and happy and safe. But there's a difference between fitting in and belonging. Fitting in is when you change who you really are so that you can be accepted. Belonging is when you are welcomed as you are.

When I was 14, a few girls in my year started smoking cigarettes (vapes hadn't been invented yet!). They were considered the 'cool' girls. I really wanted to be cool too, partly because of my unhappy experiences at my earlier school when I didn't have any friends. But I **also didn't want to smoke. I hated the smell and I knew it was bad for you because some of my family members were chain-smokers and had long-term health issues. So the real me didn't want to smoke cigarettes. But the insecure me – the one who yearned to be accepted by the cool group – wanted to pretend I did. I agonised over it for days. In the end, I decided to be honest. When I was next offered a cigarette, I just said 'No thanks. I don't smoke' and no one thought anything of it. In fact, they respected me more for being myself. So I became friends with them anyway.**



'It took me a long time to realise that I can't change other people. And I can't actually control other people. I don't control what they do. I can only control myself'

– TARA WESTOVER,

AUTHOR



I was taught to observe failure by Haemin Sunim, a South Korean monk, who is one of the most influential Zen Buddhist teachers in the world. His name means 'nimble wisdom', and the practice of Zen Buddhism involves looking inside ourselves for enlightenment. Zen Buddhists believe that we can only discover the truth from within, through meditation. We can't just buy something to distract us or think ourselves happier with clever words. We have to silence the outside world and become more aware of the inner one.

When I met Haemin, he was in simple monastic clothes – a modest quilted grey overcoat worn belted around some equally modest grey trousers – and he seemed so self-contained that my chatter about the weather felt embarrassing.

I was trying so hard to break the ice,
I hadn't realised there was no ice to be broken.
I didn't need to try. I could just be.



Still, for the first few questions after I started recording with Haemin, I panicked. He left such long pauses before answering that I worried he had taken offence at something I'd said or simply wasn't going to answer at all.



Then, when he did speak, his answers would be so short that I rapidly found myself burning through all my pre-prepared questions and running out of things to ask. He felt no need to fill a silence.





After a while though, I got used to his rhythm. It was calming. The chatter inside my head began to quieten itself.



What he was doing, I now realise, was allowing space for us both to contemplate what had just been said and what was about to be said. We were observing before we were reacting.

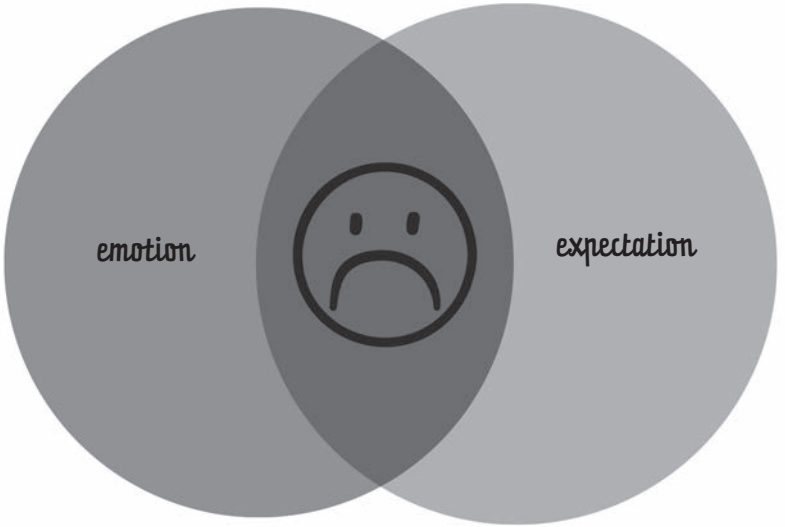


This, said Haemin, was the key to greater understanding. The whole point of meditation, he told me, was 'to become aware of what's happening in your mind. It is not to get somewhere, [to] some kind of peaceful inner state. Rather, it is whether you can become aware of what is really happening in your mind, clearly.'

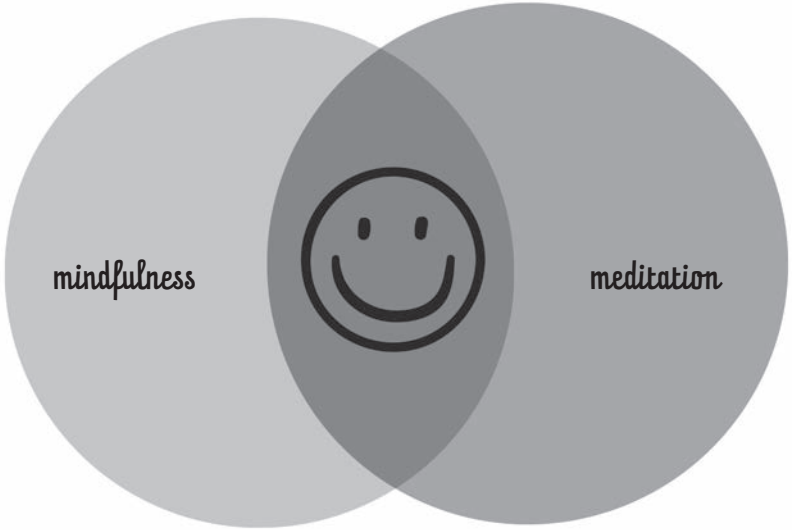
So, I asked, is the next step to observe that without attaching emotion to it?

'Right,' he said. 'If you are attaching some emotion or expectation, then you become mindful [of that]: "Oh, I'm expecting something wonderful to happen. But it's not happening. I feel like a failure."'

The key to meditation, he continued, is 'to see yourself objectively in a non-judgemental way: *that's* the meditation.'



see self as failure



see self without judgement

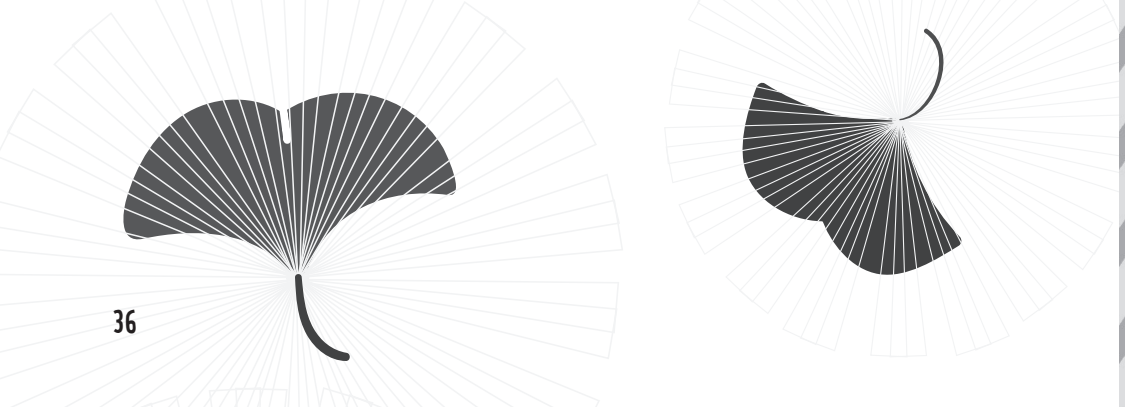
It's the same thing, I believe, with failure. The key is to start by seeing it with an open mind, in a non-judgemental, unfearful way. To think about the idea of it before attaching any feelings to it.

Perceptions and feelings can often be unhelpful. They can come from panic, grief, disappointment and internal criticism. In a time of crisis, they are often not the best measure of what is actually happening. **These feelings will sometimes give us unhelpful advice** because they are automatic responses that come from past experiences, even though they might no longer be relevant to our current situation.

'Whenever we feel very unhappy it is because we are resisting what is,' Haemin continued. 'Whenever we resist what is, then of course we'll feel very unhappy. The trick is how do we turn our mind and then try to accept the thing as it is?'

He went on to say:

'We will fail. The question is whether we can fail gracefully and also whether we can learn something from that experience.'



PRACTISE AN OPEN MIND

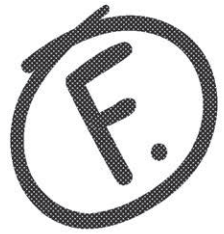
Try to think about how you felt the last time something didn't work out the way you hoped. State the fact, observe your emotions or the situation objectively, then think about what you've learned from the experience and how it might be better next time. So, for example:

Fact: I failed in an exam.

Observation: I found it very tricky, worked very hard and tried my best but still did not pass. Was supported a lot by my teacher.

Lesson learned: Recognise this is a subject that is difficult for me. We cannot be good at everything. People were there for me even in this difficulty and gave me options for resits and doing other qualifications.

Next Time: I have more time to revise to do the resit, and I have a very clear idea of my interests and where my strengths are. I know who to go to for help.



Perhaps your failure has led to you being picked on. Perhaps you're not sporty at all and came last in a race. That can be so painful. It's OK to feel hurt and upset – in fact, it's important that you acknowledge your feelings rather than trying to ignore or bury them because that often makes it worse. Remember that these feelings – just like bad weather – do eventually pass and the sun shines again.

Once you've given yourself time to feel those emotions, then you can remind yourself that you are unique. We all have our talents and our good qualities: we just have to look in the right places for them. Even if you don't perform how you'd like to in one area, you still have other amazing skills. You could be rubbish at sports (I am) but you could also be really kind. You could find it difficult to make friends, but that might be because you haven't met the people yet who will appreciate you for all the things that you once thought you wanted to change. Stay strong in knowing who you are – that's the most precious quality of all.

Haemin taught me that you don't have to torture yourself about failures or be consumed by emotions. **Because you are in control of your perceptions, you have the chance to process your feelings in a positive and healthy way.**

