

Success follows failure less often than expected, study finds

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The platitude that failure leads to success may be both inaccurate and damaging to society, according to a paper published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, titled "The Exaggerated Benefits of Failure."

Researchers conducted 11 experiments with more than 1,800 participants across many domains and compared national statistics to the participants' responses. In one experiment, participants vastly overestimated the percentage of prospective nurses, lawyers and teachers who pass licensing exams after previously failing them.

"People expect success to follow failure much more often than it actually does," said lead researcher Lauren Eskreis-Winkler, Ph.D., an assistant professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University. "People usually assume that past behavior predicts future behavior, so it's surprising that we often believe the opposite when it comes to succeeding after failure."

In some experiments, participants wrongly assumed that people pay attention to their mistakes and learn from them. In one [field test](#), nurses overestimated how much their colleagues would learn from a past error.

"People often confuse what is with what ought to be," Eskreis-Winkler said. "People ought to pay attention and learn from failure, but often they don't because failure is demotivating and ego-threatening."

While telling people they will succeed after failure may make them feel better, that mindset can have damaging real-world consequences, Eskreis-Winkler said. In one experiment, participants assumed that [heart patients](#) would embrace healthier lifestyles when many of them don't.

"People who believe that problems will self-correct after failure are less motivated to help those in need," Eskreis-Winkler said. "Why would we invest time or money to help struggling populations if we erroneously believe that they will right themselves?"

However, people may recalibrate their expectations when given information about the negligible benefits of failure. In two experiments,

participants were more supportive of taxpayer funding for [rehabilitation programs](#) for former inmates and drug treatment programs when they learned about the low rates of success for people using those programs.

"Correcting our misguided beliefs about failure could help shift taxpayer dollars away from punishment toward rehabilitation and reform," Eskreis-Winkler said.

More information: The Exaggerated Benefits of Failure, *Journal of Experimental Psychology* (2024). DOI: [10.1037/xge0001610](https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001610)

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