

# How to Turn Failure into Success

Research reveals strategies for staying motivated in the face of challenges

- By [Rachel Nuwer](#) on April 1, 2019
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People often say that “failure is the mother of success.” This cliché might have some truth to it, but it does not tell us how to actually turn a loss into a win, says Emmanuel Manalo, a professor of educational psychology at Kyoto University in Japan. As a result, he says, “we know we shouldn't give up when we fail—but in reality, we do.”

Manalo and Manu Kapur, a professor of learning sciences at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich, put together a special issue of the journal *Thinking Skills and Creativity* last December on benefiting from failure. The issue's 15 studies provide teachers and educational researchers

with a guide for achieving success. One study reported, for example, that the sooner and more often students fail at a task, such as building a robot, the sooner they can move forward and improve. Another confirmed that feedback on failures is most constructive when the giver comes across as caring, and the receiver is prepared to weather negative emotions.

Manalo and his co-authors also contributed their own study focused on overcoming one fundamental, everyday form of failure: not completing a task. They asked 131 undergraduates to write an essay about their school experiences. Half of the students received instructions for structuring their writing, and half were left to their own devices; all, however, were stopped prior to finishing. Afterward the researchers found that those in the structured group were more motivated to complete their essays, compared with those who lacked guidance—even if the latter were closer to being done. Knowing *how* to finish, in other words, was more important than being close to finishing.

The researchers dubbed this finding “the Hemingway effect,” for the author's self-reported tendency to stop writing only when he knew what would happen next in the story—so as to avoid writer's block when he returned to the page. Manalo believes that learning how to fail temporarily can help people avoid becoming permanent failures at many tasks, such as completing a dissertation, learning a language or inventing a new technology.

Demystifying failure and teaching students not to fear it make goals more attainable, says Stephanie Couch, executive director of the Lemelson-MIT Program, a nonprofit organization dedicated to developing and supporting inventors. Couch, whose work was also featured in the special issue, adds that we “should really be thinking of failure as part of a process of iterating toward success.”

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