It's Okay to Fail, and It's Okay to Succeed – The Psychological and Ecological Implications

behind Atychiphobia and Achievemephobia

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At a young age, one of the earliest emotions we learn is the complex, secondary, and self-conscious emotion known as pride. Beginning as early as two years old, the concept of feeling proud of accomplishments—as simplistic as they are at that age—begins to take hold (Nauert, 2018). From age four, we start to notice and understand the concept of pride in others, and from age five, we begin to do so in ourselves (Nauert, 2018). Shortly after this developmental realization of self and others, developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson proposed through his stages of psychosocial development that children reach the transitional, psychosocial crisis known as *Industry versus Inferiority* (Weiten & McCann, 2019). During this psychosocial crisis, competence and social function are imperative as guardians nurture their children less. In turn, their children begin to increasingly engage with concepts of achievement and accomplishment, during which pride plays an integral role in this conceptualization. The emphasis on working hard to realize greater achievement in the eyes of peers begins to play a more prominent role in children's lives, as scholastic, artistic, and even athletic prowess become highly valued among those in and around their social circle. Children are taught that doing well is expected, accomplishments are revered, and achievements are sought after and celebrated—ultimately provoking their sense of pride.

Atychiphobia—an irrational fear of failure—is defined most commonly by its several emotional and physical symptoms. The physical symptoms can include sensations such as a difficulty breathing, a feeling of tightness in the chest, as well as uncontrollable shaking or

trembling; the emotional symptoms can include feelings of panic or anxiety, feeling as if one has lost control over their situation, or otherwise a general sense of powerlessness (Marcin, 2017). These symptoms often occur through the anticipation of failing an upcoming tested circumstance, which rouses feelings of panic and anxiety within the recipient and may impact the performance they can exert over the aforementioned circumstance.

Research conducted at Penn State University (2015) suggests that causes of Atychiphobia "could include demeaning parents or family members, traumatic and/or embarrassing events that arise from minor failure early in life, or an individual experiencing a significant failure and being ill-equipped to effectively cope with it" (para. 1). This continues to assert that those living with Atychiphobia may exhibit a reduced willingness to participate in certain forms of activities, which may lead to a loss of self-confidence or motivation, and potentially even lead to depression. Because a loss of self-confidence or motivation will escalate the anxiety and anticipation surrounding potential, upcoming failure, this creates a negative feedback loop within the individual; fear of failing an upcoming test or event will create feelings of panic and anxiety, which will sap an individual's self-confidence and motivation, thus leaving them with an even greater fear of failing subsequent upcoming tests, events, or anything that will rouse those feelings of panic and anxiety once more. Combining these symptoms and results with potential attributions to depression, and it becomes clear that Atychiphobia proves itself a dangerous phobia to the mental and emotional health and stability of any individual that is living with it.

Achievemephobia, on the other hand, presents a very different (albeit equally debilitating) circumstance: the irrational fear of success or breaching achievement. Despite Achievemephobia pertaining to the opposite of failure (success), the overall symptoms of Achievemephobia are very similar to Atychiphobia: shortness of breath, increased heart rate, as

well as similar feelings of panic and anxiety. This is because the responses exhibited from feelings of excitement run parallel to the same responses exhibited from a trauma reaction—the inherent psychological and physiological reactions the body makes when an individual is put through a single, or multiple traumatic events (Babbel, 2011). The research surrounding this comparison continues to conclude that individuals who have experienced trauma in the past may associate the excitement feelings of success with the psychological and physiological reactions of trauma, and thus begin to avoid subjecting themselves to circumstances which may induce feelings of excitement—establishing a phobia of success or achievement (both primarily excitement-inducing occurrences) in the process. Further research from this comparison has determined that Achievemephobia may also stem from the threat of disappointment when taking uncertain risks, as well as potentially from a past of verbal abuse. The internalization of this past verbal abuse would cause the individual to believe they do not deserve success, thus presenting a tremendous impact on the individual's self-worth and self-esteem, or through a staunch comparison of discomforting concepts such as competition, or envy.

The idea of fearing success and achievement reaches further than tested circumstances, however; because self-worth and self-esteem play such an integral role in the procedure of processing and accepting success or achievement in a healthy manner, dysregulation of these processes may impact the individual in social situations—most notably during circumstances in which the individual is subjected to compliments from peers. Psychologist Guy Winch (2013) confirms these assertions through his comparison of self-worth, self-esteem, and the receptivity of compliments. In this comparison, he concluded that because people often seek to verify their own personal perceptions they have of themselves (whether positive or negative), and because the receptivity of compliments is often a reflection of the recipients' feelings of self-worth and

self-esteem, compliments can make those with lower levels of self-esteem feel uncomfortable due to those compliments contradicting their own (in this case negative) self-views.

This social-emotional response, in tandem with the psychological and physiological similarities to trauma, can as well cause Achievemephobia to create a dangerous negative feedback loop within an individual. The rousing feelings of anxiety and panic in the face of success or compliment, urging disconnection and isolation from any source of these circumstances, and further increasing the levels of anxiety and panic should these circumstances arise again. Much like Atychiphobia, these symptoms within a negative feedback loop then attribute to one of the most common mental disorders encountered worldwide: depression.

So, what is the significance of Atychiphobia and Achievemephobia? Why is it relevant in this setting? The answer is obvious: this is a college setting. This is a place of academia, fraught with the very concepts that produce the aforementioned phobias extensively: abundant testing, assignments, and projects, all of which fall directly under the very cores of failure and success. By the time students reach a college setting, these concepts are not at all foreign to them; from the very beginning of the schooling and education process, these very same concepts are applied to teach children of what is commonly perceived as universal constants in modern society: failure is bad, and success must be reached. Whether through the education system children experience during their upbringing, through their peers, family, and friends, or simply the societal standards children are born into, the concepts of failure and success along with their connotations are ingrained into the minds of aspiring generations. Over many years, these concepts have caused enough of an impact that the terms "Atychiphobia" and "Achievemephobia" were coined in the first place.

Utilizing an ecological systems perspective, the interactions within the individual and the different surrounding systems throughout their life—when considered with the traditional societal views of failure and success, as well as the existence of Atychiphobia or Achievemephobia—seem almost designed to either assimilate the individual into these traditional societal views, or otherwise begin fostering the emotions and negative feedback which then attribute to the acquisition of Atychiphobia or Achievemephobia. The ecological systems theory itself (also known as the systems theory) places a heavy emphasis on the interrelationships of individuals and their immediate environments (the micro, meso, exo, and macrosystems). It centers itself around the key idea "that these systems comprise interrelated parts and constitute an ordered (or disordered) whole, and each part influences other parts of the whole. A breakdown in one system will affect other systems and the persons involved in those systems" (Hick & Stokes, 2017, p. 81).

Due to the interconnectedness of the ecological systems theory when applied to an individual living with Atychiphobia or Achievemephobia, the unfortunate result is that through the lens of societal views surrounding failure and success, an individual will experience conflict and adversity within each system surrounding their life; thus creating a constant state of dysfunction, as well as mental and emotional dysregulation. This dysfunction and dysregulation then contribute to the negative feedback loop those living with either phobia experience.

Within the microsystem, the family and peers of an individual can apply mental and emotional pressure to succeed and avoid failure; the former of which may impose a tremendous impact on the psyche of younger children, as familial ties and their relationships to the individual play an integral role in shaping emotional responses to stimuli such as failure and success, and when conditioned in such a way (through mental and emotional pressure, verbal abuse, or

otherwise) can invoke the creation of a phobia to the allotted stimuli (Weiten & McCann, 2019). As a result, by imparting these culturally universal perspectives of failure and success on the individual child, family and friends can unknowingly begin fostering the dysregulation attributed to Atychiphobia or Achievemephobia at a very young age.

  Within the mesosystem, schooling and educational systems thrive on the concept of competitive test scores, high-stakes achievement, and the perpetuation of the societal perspectives pertaining to failure and success. Because the nature of the schooling systems in western culture plays such a large role in shaping the sociocultural upbringing of children within society, it becomes no surprise that these same societal perspectives are imprinted onto the grand majority of children moving through that system. Children at a young age are essentially "taught" to value and adhere to these perspectives, with any disagreement passed off as being "lazy" or "unmotivated" to not place emphasis on avoiding failure and seeking success. As a result, these societal perspectives of failure and success impose a tremendous mental and emotional impact on individuals moving through their schooling systems. While some accept this perspective and its impact without difficulty, others may not regulate it in the same manner, and develop an aversion to its preconceived notions of failure and success.

  When it comes to the exosystem within an individual's community and the impact it has on their mental and emotional regulation regarding the topic of failure and success, the ideologies surrounding it are unfortunately drawn from the upbringing a general culture experiences and reciprocates amongst itself through the educational systems and sociocultural norms that have been established in the given society. Just as a generation of children experience an upbringing consumed by the western societal perspectives of failure and success, so too will they reciprocate this knowledge upon the next generation; repeating the process to establish this

perspective as a societal norm within their community, and ultimately allow it to perpetuate and ingrain itself in the culture as a whole. While social welfare services do exist within the exosystem that push back against this unhealthy perspective, it is unfortunately contested by mass media, workplace and child welfare systems, and other social community influences that covertly affect an individual's life. The perpetuation of such ideologies surrounding failure and success find their place in these day-to-day systems, resulting in the sociocultural acceptance of the ideology as a societal norm to be applied not only to the competitive educational systems children are put through while growing up, but applied to many functions and systems beyond these educational systems as well. It is because of this that workplaces are teeming with the feeling of pressure through competition between opposing businesses, or even other colleagues—leaving the idea of failure as seldom an option, and success expected by peers and employers alike. Even within child recreational systems, the semblances are similar: sports teams adhere to the objective of "beating" the other team, and children playing lighthearted board games are taught and encouraged to be the "winner" every time. Even within creative, noncompetitive activities such as writing or painting, children may foster artificial challenges with each other to decide who is the "best" at any given activity. To many people, much of this would be seen in good fun. The idea of friendly competition is how many were raised within these societal perspectives, and has become normalized within western society. However, to some people, this very notion of friendly competition only serves to stoke the flames of their anxieties, and ultimately intensify the budding feelings of Atychiphobia or Achievemephobia that may be growing inside an individual during their younger years.

Throughout the systems discussed within the ecological systems theory so far, the idea of societal perspectives regarding failure and success has been a constant factor amidst each one of

them. These societal perspectives were born and developed through the all-encompassing macrosystem: the system pertaining to the attitudes and ideologies of a given culture as a whole (Hick & Stokes, 2017). It is within this system that societal and sociocultural norms or perspectives are created, and spread through any given culture to be processed and adhered to when applied to the smaller systems, and the different parts of the community they influence. Due to the inherently competitive nature of western society, in combination with the societal perspectives surrounding failure and success, the ideologies which stand to magnify the effects of Atychiphobia and Achievemephobia are found rampant throughout every social system within a community. These ideologies then become celebrated and perpetuated without consideration of who may be negatively impacted by the prominence of them within any given society.

There are many theories as to why these ideologies became the norm in western society, and why competition is rampant and encouraged throughout each social system. Hayward and Kemmelmeier (2007) argue that a rise of the pervasive aspect of competition throughout different societies may be attributed to a rise of egoistic individualism. They believe that due to economic development, which has created many technological and social changes, the idea of traditional communities has diminished in favour of replacing a collectivist ethos with a more radically individualistic one. Hayward and Kemmelmeier (2007) continue to claim that "individualism provides justification for self-interested behavior because it emphasizes individual agency and thus promotes the ideal that people should be rewarded or punished on the basis of their individual efforts and achievement" (p. 370). If this sort of individualistic mentality were assumed a staple within the current western society, it would explain the motivation behind perpetuating and encouraging current societal perspectives surrounding failure and success. By diminishing the idea of a collectivist ethos and encouraging personal agency amongst

individuals, the idea of being in constant competition with essentially every individual in one's society would be prominent—the importance of achieving success and avoiding failure among peers even more so. In this sort of society, the concept of encouraging competitive success and condemning personal failure throughout one's childhood and adult life would be reasonable; any individual that didn't follow this approach would be socially ostracized, and most likely would rarely see success in their society.

While the idea of slowly-evolving individualistic ethos compelling culture to shift its norms may be a likely candidate in creating the competitive, success-driven society seen today, Jim Taylor, Ph.D. (2013) argues that one of the greatest founders and influencers of competitive culture and the societal perspectives surrounding failure and success is the proliferation of competitive reality television, as well as other forms of competitive mass media that have taken western society by storm. Taylor claims that activities that were once considered to be noncompetitive, freely approached passions (such as dancing, cooking, or even poetry) have now since been turned into competitive pursuits through the media's use of these passions to appeal to popular culture. Taylor (2013) then asserts that "competitive reality TV shows provide viewers (or [rather] voyeurs) with the ability to live vicariously through the winners while experiencing the most exquisite schadenfreude watching the losers, without having to face the potential risks of experiencing these highs and lows firsthand" (para. 13). Due to the astounding influence, popular culture has shown to have over the mass populace of any given society. It is reasonable to believe that the rise of competitive reality media would contribute to the increased nature of competitiveness throughout western society, perhaps enough so to explain the societal perspectives surrounding failure and success that are so prominent today. Taylor concludes his thoughts questioning the notion of society no longer finding simple hobbies meaningful without

a competitive aspect, and considering the correlation between increased competitiveness and a change in the values and priorities of modern, western society.

Regardless of the reasoning behind this infatuation with competitiveness and the assertion of societal perspectives surrounding failure and success, these sorts of ideologies are exceedingly unhealthy when encouraged upon many individuals both inside and outside of the educational systems throughout western society. In a study conducted in the province of Ontario in 2016, it was found that 33.1% of college students felt anxiety impacted their academic performance within the last twelve months, and 21.9% felt depression did the same (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2016). This study continued on to find that at any time within the last twelve months of its conduction, 61.4% of students felt things were "hopeless," 89.2% felt overwhelmed by all they had to do, 46.1% felt so depressed that it was hard to function, and 65.4% felt overwhelming levels of anxiety.

Keep in mind these numbers are not representative of those directly living with Atychiphobia or Achievemephobia; they are a report of the representative sample of college students in the province of Ontario. However, to imagine such shocking percentages most likely, including those living either phobia, the levels of anxiety amassed within such an individual would be overwhelming. As western society already values success and competitiveness so highly that 89.2% of a sample of college students feel overwhelmed during their schooling, it's no wonder those living with such debilitating phobias experience such harsh, negative feedback loops. Societal norms and perspectives are not adapted with their wellbeing in mind, and as a result, they will suffer for it.

While there are studies and methods that have attempted to combat the rising societal perspectives and infatuation with competitiveness regarding the mental and emotional regulation

of individuals, they unfortunately have been found to be quite rare. In addition, their effectiveness and relevance towards those living with Atychiphobia or Achievemephobia are debatable. In an article written at the Western Kentucky University, one study argued a perspective that society's current ideologies surrounding success seek to develop levels of obsession towards success that foster monstrous egos, dangerous and destructive inclinations, and in the cases of some individuals, even lead to their deaths (Burch, Cangemi, & Allen, 2017). This study further argued that due to the parents and authority (within the micro and exosystems, respectively) placing overwhelming expectations on young children for academic, athletic, or other forms of achievement, this study believed that "many individuals fail to learn the value of self-restraint, humility and common courtesy because the light of their own perceived extraordinary self-worth has blinded them, often leading to a permanent fall from grace" (p. 211). This argument undermines the socially accepted positive stigma of seeking success in lieu of a far more critical, psychologically-based outlook on the impact of seeking success to the degree that society does today, and the negative connotations brought with the concept of excessive hubris within an individual.

In terms of self-regulation when encountering failure, Cowden & Worthington Jr. (2019) suggested a self-forgiveness framework which—while used in their study to combat failure in competitive sports—could be used to acknowledge and self-regulate the concept of failure whenever it may arise. Within their study, a stress-and-coping framework is adopted, drawn on previously researched stress-and-coping theories to highlight self-forgiveness through a eudaimonic (happiness-focused) process, and ultimately avoid responding to failure "with undue self-blame and disproportionate ascriptions of self-responsibility, prompting excessive condemnation and punishment directed towards the self." Cowden & Worthington Jr. argued this

in the hopes that self-forgiveness could be reached through the acceptance of personal responsibility, affirmation of the self, and arriving at a point in which reconciliation of negative emotional experiences can be achieved. These methods of mental and emotional self-regulation have the potential to aid those living with Atychiphobia, and through a process of self-forgiveness as noted in a stress-and-coping framework, can potentially build enough self-confidence in an individual's ability to regulate the impact of failure that feelings of anxiety and panic at the thought of failure may be reduced.

When tackling the problem of Achievemephobia, the most commonly used method of therapists, social workers, and other general practitioners is cognitive behavioural therapy (or CBT). CBT is most commonly cited as "a structured, goal-oriented treatment that emphasizes the 'here and now' rather than the past. Clients learn skills and strategies to manage current symptoms and prevent relapses" (Hick & Stokes, 2017, p. 95). Due to the nature of irrational fears stemming from excess-ridden behaviours that take place with great frequency and intensity, CBT seeks to utilize a non-traditional psychoanalytical approach in order to positively alter thought patterns through the interrelations of beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, while employing methods such as group, individual, or family therapy to apply this approach (Fritscher, 2019). While this type of approach may take several steps and sessions to accomplish, CBT is renowned for its use of treating phobias and the symptoms that they carry. Through a study conducted in 2012, CBT was found equal in effectiveness to applied tension or applied relaxation, generating large range effect sizes, with long-term maintenance of gains (Hofmann et al., 2012). In that same study, CBT was also found equally efficacious to supportive therapy, relaxation therapy, and psychopharmacology when handling generalized anxiety disorders—a category which is applicable to both Atychiphobia and Achievemephobia.

While these studies and methods do make a reasonable attempt to tackle the occurrences of Atychiphobia and Achievemephobia, as well as critique societal values and perspectives which may instigate these phobias, unfortunately, neither they, nor other studies and methods conducted in the future may be able to generate a shift of societal norms to the point in which these mentally, emotionally, socially, and arguably culturally unhealthy ideologies will be reformed. Due to the increasing propagation of pop culture through mass media distribution (much of which is charged with hyper-competitive ideologies), and due to the proliferation of the current societal perspectives of failure and success throughout the western culture and each of its systems when following the ecological systems theory, it is unlikely that a focus on competitiveness, adoration of success, and condemnation of failure will decrease in our current society and culture. At this stage of sociocultural values and norms, the most that may be hoped for is the de-escalation of these phobias at an individual level, advocation for individuals living with these debilitating phobias, and the resources needed to promote further awareness to the mental and emotional regulation of these individuals—young and old—when encountering the thoughts and feelings most commonly associated with failure and success.

While it is concerning to consider that an entire cultural ideology may be producing full-fledged phobias which instigate anxiety and depression en masse in our society, the importance now lies most prominently with our peers, and the next generation they leave in their wake. Perhaps if those living with these phobias can be reached and treated, their knowledge may be imparted to future generations, and awareness may slowly increase within western society. It may take several generations for this awareness to more notably be seen, but for the sake of our children, our peers, our employees, our students, our neighbours, our families, and perhaps even ourselves, it may be worth the effort.

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