Editorial

Why We Need to Talk About Failure: Moving the Focus from Defeat to Indispensable Learning

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Who among us had not had failures—both big and small? We all have and, for the most part, we learn from them. Yet, so commonly, in the pursuit of scientific advancement, the instinct is often to focus on success stories—effective interventions, improved outcomes, and positive change. Yet, beneath every breakthrough lies a trail of missteps, challenges, and failures that rarely make it into the published literature. This omission presents a critical loss for the broader scientific and educational community. If we are to truly advance intervention science and educational programming, it is imperative that we also value—and share—the lessons learned from failures. This issue had a special focus highlighting methodological and implementation challenges to research and educational endeavors aimed at building healthy academic communities. I spoke with dozens of potential authors—all had experienced "character building" events in their work and all had stories they told me about what they would do differently the "next time." However, despite our advertisements, recruitment for papers, social media pushes, and personal cajoling, we had one submission. It should be noted I am coauthor on this submission, so that tells you something.

The Hidden Cost of Success Bias

The current academic and funding ecosystems often reward polished outcomes, perpetuating a culture in which failure is stigmatized or hidden. This success bias creates an incomplete scientific record. When setbacks and challenges go unreported, researchers working on similar initiatives are left to unknowingly repeat the same errors, wasting resources, time, and potentially delaying progress on issues that demand urgent attention—whether in public health, education, or social services.

Consider a behavioral intervention in a school setting that fails to engage students due to cultural disconnects, or an educational technology pilot that falters because of infrastructural limitations in rural districts. If these experiences are never documented, future practitioners may walk the same path with the same expectations and meet the same disappointing end. Instead of accelerating learning and adaptation, we trap ourselves in a loop of rediscovering avoidable problems.

Failures as a Foundation for Innovation

In reality, failure is not antithetical to innovation—it is its bedrock. The iterative process of intervention development depends on continuous feedback, adaptation, and learning. When researchers and educators feel safe discussing setbacks without judgment, an environment is created that encourages calculated risks and allows innovation to flourish. Sharing failures can enhance problem-solving and inspire new solutions by preventing future errors. Every challenge encountered is a data point that informs future practice. When these moments are shared, they collectively contribute to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of what works, what doesn't, and why. Moreover, publishing failures enhances transparency and rigor in the scientific process. It encourages honest reflection about assumptions, contexts, and implementation fidelity. It also enables meta-analyses and systematic reviews to account for a fuller spectrum of evidence, leading to more accurate conclusions about effectiveness and generalizability.

Normalizing Challenge Narratives

To move forward, scientific journals, funders, and academic institutions must play a proactive role in normalizing the dissemination of negative or null results. My hope is that other journals also establish special sections or issues dedicated to lessons learned, particularly those arising from implementation challenges, community resistance, logistical hurdles, or unforeseen consequences. Peer reviewers and editors must also be trained to evaluate these narratives for their learning value, not just their outcome metrics. Similarly, academic training programs should instill in emerging scholars the importance of reflective practice and encourage them to document and share both successes and failures.

Practical and Ethical Imperatives

Sharing our failures or challenges can also help preventing waste of resources and effort. Ignoring or suppressing negative results can cause a replication crisis, where other researchers unknowingly repeat similar experiments, wasting time, effort, and funding. Communicating challenges and unsuccessful approaches can guide future efforts toward more promising avenues and conserve valuable resources. Practically, the pressure to demonstrate success can lead to premature scaling of interventions that have not been adequately tested in diverse contexts. By contrast, sharing lessons from early-stage failures can lead to course corrections that ultimately improve impact at scale. From an ethical standpoint, there is an obligation to share knowledge that could prevent harm or inefficiency. Educational and health interventions often target vulnerable populations. Failing to report challenges in these contexts may result in repeating interventions that are ineffective—or worse, detrimental.

CONCLUSION

So I ask you – can you be brave? Can you share your struggles, headaches, and heartaches when it comes to research and educational programming. Can you encourage your colleagues and students to share both successes and failures. The path to effective interventions isn't always linear; sometimes, the greatest lessons are learned when candidly

sharing the twists and turns—the unexpected outcomes and the projects that didn't achieve their initial goals. It's time to normalize the conversation around failure and recognize its invaluable role in driving true progress. Let us shift the narrative from failure as defeat to failure as indispensable learning.