

## Afraid to Fail?

“Only those who dare to fail greatly, can ever achieve greatly” John F. Kennedy  
“I didn’t fail repeatedly; I just found 10,000 ways not to make a light bulb.” Thomas Edison

One year, both of my children won first place in sparring at the Diamond Nationals karate tournament in Mpls, MN. They were both excited to have won at such a competitive tournament and of course were thrilled at winning 5 ½ foot trophies!

Then, one month later they both competed in our intramural tournament here in Schaumburg, IL and both promptly lost their first fight. They were extremely disappointed. After the loss, one of my children said that they were not going to compete in any more karate tournaments. My response? I said, “No one wins all the time. Get used to it. Life is full of disappointments and if you give up every time you experience failure, then you won’t be doing much – because we will all experience set-backs no matter what we do. In fact, it’s good to lose sometimes because we need to learn how to handle failure in a healthy way. We grow stronger through adversity if we persevere and don’t give up.” Not very compassionate, I know, but the truth of that statement is life changing. I am happy to say that after we had this talk my child decided to keep trying. Besides, it’s really not a failure, we just found another way to not win a karate tournament. We can make some changes for next time.

I see in America today that we try to shelter our children from any disappointment or loss in an effort to improve their self-esteem. Psychological studies show that this actually has the opposite effect. In the short term this seems to work - but eventually there will be a failure that we cannot prevent, and then everything comes crashing down like a house of cards.

Just this month I watched one of my Black Belt students handle a very emotional and disappointing election loss for class president. Another of my Black Belt students who has played basketball all his life had to deal with the rejection of not making the school basketball team. This summer I watched how my students on my son’s baseball team handled striking out. And I have almost a dozen of my adult students who are dealing with losing their jobs because of the bad economy. I am proud of how my students are handling this adversity.

Disappointment is part of life and we all better get used to it. How we handle our failures and set-backs is paramount to our mental health. The time to develop these coping skills is now and if we shelter our children from any chance of failure, then they will not have what it takes to handle real disappointments as they get older. In the gist of life, losing a karate tournament or being cut from the basketball team is nothing compared to losing a job or a loved one. When you look at it from that perspective, it is actually healthy to lose sometimes. That’s what I like about sports, sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. Just like life. You can’t run from it, but you can learn from it.

Super Bowl winning coach Tony Dungy says this about failure. “The beauty of what I’ve learned through a life of sports, is that failure happens – regularly. And failure, as it turns out, is a constant in the human experience. I’ve also learned that if you’re afraid of failure, you won’t try to do very much. But if you’re going to chase meaningful dreams and do significant things, you have to be willing to come up short sometimes. **Success is really a journey of persistence and perseverance in spite of failure. Through pressure, stress and adversity, we are strengthened – in our character, in our faith, and in our ability to get out of bed again and give it one more try”.**

We will all fail. Remember that. But don’t fear it. True toughness is how you respond to adversity.

**Homework:** Write your answers on the back of this paper.

1. Are you afraid to fail?
2. Write about a time that you personally experienced a failure or disappointment.
3. Did you learn anything, or can you think of anything good that came out of it?