What if my best is never good enough? [1]

Dear Alice,

That's my question. What if my best is never good enough?

Answer

Dear Reader,

This is an excellent question! One way to start is by looking at a second question: good enough for whom? We live in what can be a very competitive and status-oriented society, and personal background (family, cultural and political background, ethnicity, nationality, religion) can play a role in structuring our ideas of success and failure. While succeeding in the eyes of others can be rewarding, sometimes it is important to separate other’s metrics from your own.

For example, you might begin to ask yourself “how do I measure my own success in a situation? Are the metrics I am using the best way to evaluate myself??

Let’s say you have a fitness goal. If your goal is to get in better shape, you might start by translating your goal into a series of actions meant to help you achieve that goal. You might recalibrate your diet to include more fresh produce, limit or eliminate soda or fast food, in addition to committing to a regular workout regimen. You could sign up for a cardio kickboxing class, start training for a road race, or join a local gym or YMCA, or find a local cycling club for some regular physical activity. What if, after six months, you didn’t lose weight but you increased cardiovascular fitness, made some new friends, gained some new skills, and changed your perspective on physical activity? Does this mean that you your best was not good enough? Answering this question in a self-affirming, positive and empowering way might mean recalibrating your metrics or changing what qualities you ascribe to success.

Another way that having an internal measure of success is useful is in a more directly competitive setting. If you are a classical pianist with a major competition coming up, you might prepare for weeks or even months, practicing and rehearsing. If you take first place, that is wonderful. But even if you do not, is there a way that you can see the success in your accomplishment? Perhaps it was enough to have made it as far as you did, perhaps your performance was still noteworthy to many people, and maybe you inspired a younger pianist in the audience to pursue her dream of becoming a concert pianist.
Both of these examples are ways of setting goals for yourself, being flexible, and recognizing success despite unanticipated outcomes.

Finally, many sources suggest that a good way to move beyond a fear of failure is to cultivate more self-acceptance and to keep a log of things you are grateful for. Happier people tend to be more impervious to self-doubt and tend to adopt a more optimistic outlook on their lives. Most of the literature agrees that people can choose to be happier. Make being happy a priority in your life, cultivate feelings of gratitude (maybe by keeping a gratitude jar or journal, where you jot down things that you are thankful for), commit to being forgiving to yourself and to others, cultivate friendships and invest in your friendships (well-meaning friends will often help you stay in a balanced perspective), and engage in activities that require you to give to others, like volunteering in a soup kitchen or doing community service. All these activities have been shown to increase happiness, self-worth, and self-acceptance. By choosing happiness over success as a priority, you might be less vulnerable to a fear of failure.

If you find you’re still struggling with how to best evaluate yourself, don’t be afraid to reach out and seek the support of others. You might ask a friend to help you sort through your feelings about success. Sometimes our friends are more supportive of our efforts than we are to ourselves! You might also consider talking to a mental health professional with an outside perspective.

Just remember, don’t underestimate the value of your own internal measures for success. Being “good enough” can mean whatever you want it to mean. The mind is a powerful tool—a positive attitude and a hearty pat on the back once in a while can go a long way in achieving happiness for life.

Alice!
Category: Emotional Health

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Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
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