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Failure TO LAUNCH

THE GREAT IRONY ABOUT SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE IS THEY
TEND TO HAVE HAD MORE THAN THEIR FAIR SHARE OF
FLOPS. BY REBECCA L WEBER

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as children, we take our time struggling through crawling and toddling before we learn to walk. Yet, as adults, we expect instant mastery, often not trying things we don't naturally excel at. Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck calls the unwillingness to see mistakes or setbacks as anything but failure a 'closed mindset'.

But some of us do retain the growth mindset we all had as babies, recognising that each time we get back on our feet (literally or figuratively) and try another step, we're closer to achieving success. To better understand why getting back on the horse is important, we spoke to real women about challenges they were unprepared for.

ON THE RISE

Antoinette Prophy didn't know a lot about failure. Growing up in Joburg, she was top of her class in high school and won employee of the month at the international consulting firm she worked for in her twenties. She started her own company, Afrofusion Advertising, at just 26, winning a Vuka! Award and coverage on CNBC for a client's recycling campaign.

When the opportunity to acquire a larger agency in Durban presented itself, the risk-taker decided to go for it. But after 10 months of negotiations, the deal soured. Antoinette suddenly had to switch gears into survival mode and retrench half her staff. 'It was one of most painful things I've ever done,' she says.

Things slowly improved. Then came another offer, to move into 16 East African countries. When that deal collapsed, not only was Antoinette devastated, again, but she realised she hadn't yet dealt with the previous failure.

ROCK BOTTOM

The thing that distinguishes successful people from the masses is not so much intelligence or skill, but rather the ability to rebound after failure.

Angela Duckworth, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, studies grit, which she defines as 'the tendency to sustain interest in and effort towards very long-term goals'. Grit is a hot education topic in the US: it can be taught and it's a better predictor of success than intelligence tests.

For adults who get knocked sideways by failure – be it in business, baking or love – the ability to see a setback as a step towards future success can still be learnt.

In Antoinette's case, she discovered that she was in the exact same spot as before, not having dealt with the underlying problems yet. 'I could have not gone through with the deal – it wasn't even in my initial plans. Going through that failure made me realise that I needed to learn how to say "no",' she says.

The entire process has taken her company from survival mode back to thriving. 'I've become more reasonable in my business,' says Antoinette. 'When I started 10 years ago, it wasn't about survival. I wanted to have an impact on the communications space, on how CEOs communicate to the tea lady; how government organisations communicate to a woman in Soweto.'

THE ABILITY TO SEE A SETBACK AS A STEP TOWARDS SUCCESS CAN BE LEARNT

BLINDSIDED

When 34-year-old Alex Davidge met the handsome, adventurous and charismatic man she dated in her mid-twenties, he swept her off her feet. 'I had never been in love,' she says. But the fairy-tale romance didn't have a happily-ever-after ending and she didn't see the break-up coming. Before she knew it, her ex was engaged to somebody else.

'That whole experience rocked my self-esteem and made me question if I had anything to offer anyone,' she says. Her parents and brother had moved abroad, and she felt alone in the world.

John, a long-time friend, offered her support, and a year later, the relationship had grown from friendship to a budding romance. 'I thought I knew what I wanted, but I didn't know what I needed,' says Alex. 'I was looking for all the froth and bubble and none of the substance.'

Alex and John are now married and she is a full-time mom to their two young kids. 'I don't know if I would have recognised my husband for who he is if I hadn't had that heartbreak,' she says.

'It took me by surprise because I was looking for a Hollywood ending.' ■

DO YOU HAVE TRUE GRIT?

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NOT SO PERFECT

'There are few misfortunes in the world you cannot turn into a personal triumph if you have the iron will and the necessary skill,' said Nelson Mandela. If Tata had interpreted his life sentence as a failure, he would not have been able to go on to lead the nation.



Back before Oprah Winfrey was Oprah Winfrey, she co-hosted the evening news. After a few months, she was demoted to morning cut-ins. This hardly set her back though, as she went on to recreate the talk-show genre.

'You'll find true success and happiness if you have only one goal,' she said at the Harvard Commencement last year. 'There really is only one, and that is this: to fulfil the highest, most truthful expression of yourself as a human being.'



JK Rowling was a single mother, living on the dole, writing stories longhand in a coffee shop. She describes herself as 'the biggest failure I knew'. She focused her energy on finishing her novel, which was rejected by a dozen publishers. 'I discovered I had a strong will and more discipline than I'd suspected,' she said. The *Harry Potter* series sold enough copies to make her richer than the Queen of England.