

If at first you don't succeed – use your depression to your advantage

I am certain that my biggest mistakes in life and the ones that cost me the most were the outcome of trying to make something work out despite the evidence that no amount of effort would make it work out. I would prefer not to point out all of my big life errors in a blog, but I bet if you take a short walk down your own personal memory lane, you will find that staying in a situation too long and trying too hard did not always win you the prize either. What constitutes trying too hard? Staying at a job trying for a promotion or a raise in an underpaid job while tolerating an angry and unfair boss who was likely never going to promote you, or staying in a dying relationship while trying with all your heart to make it work. These efforts have probably cost you years, money, stress or unhappiness. A lot of misery is born from trying and failing. And people are often told to keep on trying as if that will be the recipe for success.

But what about when trying does not succeed? What about the idea of cutting your losses?

I am not suggesting that people should give up easily when trying to attain a challenging goal. I *am* thinking, though, that there are many times when people pick an unrealistic goal and then try to make it work despite the bad odds. This can lead to feeling very bad about oneself. If you are depressed, you can be prey to these errors of decision-making. A depressed brain causes people to pessimistically see the worst possible outcome and causes them to believe all negative outcomes are their fault. They tend to devalue their talents and abilities.

But those traits might also lead to success if you use the brain of depression to your advantage.

The ability to identify what could go wrong and plan to meet the challenges along the way is not the typical pattern of the optimist. Pragmatic realism (seeing the possibility of failure) is more the bailiwick of the pessimist. Think about it: preparation leads to more success than merely hoping for a good outcome.

Believing you do not have what it takes to succeed might lead you to pick more realistic goals or seek advice more readily.

The challenge with depression is correctly targeting your anticipation of failure toward adequate realistic preparation. And realism must extend to realistic appraisal of your part in an outcome. You must see your successes as an outcome of planning, preparation and execution: things you actually did to achieve the positive outcome. Walk down *that* memory lane for a bit. When did you work on something and it turned out okay? When did you put in one more bit of effort and got a good outcome? (If you need help with that one, ask a friend or family member to remind you. One problem of depression is forgetting the good stuff.)

Please don't think I am telling you to make half-hearted effort or to just quit when you stumble. There is great value in persistence (a blog for another day). But trying when there is little or no chance of success is not a good plan. It will lead you to feeling worse about yourself. (I know someone will object here, asking about why I don't value trying 'against all odds' or the force of determination. But bear in mind I am not discussing the 'only-one-last-chance' desperate circumstances. I am discussing regular life goals: relationships, finances, jobs, education...) One way I learned about "tactical retreat" (quitting before you ruin yourself) was taking a look at the difference between successful entrepreneurs and wannabes. Most successful 'self-made' people make LOTS of mistakes. They just notice them faster and quit going down the dead end path so that they can try something different. They don't keep trying to hammer that square peg into the round hole. You only beat yourself down when you stay with the person who is abusive to you. You hurt your prospects for development when you stay in the job that does not use your talents. You do not define yourself by waiting for someone else to recognize your talents while you slog away at

something that does not use your gifts.

So make just one small effort to reverse this trend of sticking it out to your detriment.

- Every day, write down something that went well and why it went well. Note what you contributed to make it work out.
 - Some days it might be as small as catching the morning train because you got out of the door on time.
 - Some days it might mean your team won the championship and you were out there playing your part on the field to help that happen.
 - Some days it might mean getting the new job because you applied for it and did a good job on the interview.
- Noticing your contribution to your successes will help you believe more in yourself and develop the ability to select realistic goals that match up to your talents and abilities.

If you see that you chose an unrealistic goal or if events interfere with the success of your plan, then exercising flexibility in choosing to continue or move on will be one more success.