

The Art of Making Mistakes

Dr. Ron Kaiser February 3, 2014 No Comments

The Art of Making Mistakes (Transcription)

Hi this is Dr Ron Kaiser with your December 2012 podcast from The Mental Health Gym.

I hope that you're all doing well and looking forward to the holiday season and a great new year. Let's talk a little bit about mistakes today. In fact the title of this podcast is "the art of making mistakes".

Now that may seem like kind of a stretch for somebody from the positive psychology frame of mind but I think it really is part and parcel of the whole positive psychology movement to acknowledge that making mistakes is not a terrible thing and in some cases probably should be encouraged. Let me tell you what I mean.

First of all I think we all heard the quote from, it actually comes from back in Latin times but was part of a poem or essay by Alexander Pope and the quote is "to error is human to forgive, divine". In essence pope acknowledges that human beings make mistakes and he encourages us and charges us to be able to forgive just as God forgives sinners.

Now this is a concept that maybe strange for some of you because I knew that a lot of people have been brought up with the idea that you really should avoid making mistakes at all costs. The important thing is not make mistakes, to not get embarrassed to not fail, to not expose that weak part of yourself for others to see.

When I used to do individual intellectual testing, intelligence testing and other types of testing, some of the tests used to have as part of

the directions encouraging people to try. If somebody says I don't know, we might prompt them with are you sure? Think about this a little more. And in essence try and see if the person has some ideas we might prompt with tell me more about it.

In other words the encouragement was to try to pursue the answer rather than to acknowledge that hey this is tough and therefore I shouldn't try and it used to bother me when example when I would encourage somebody and the child or adult in some cases would say well I was always taught if you don't know don't try, if you don't know don't raise your hand, so on, and that always bothered me and it bothers me today.

My major question about it is why, what's so bad about trying and falling short. Important things don't really happen without risking, making mistakes. Those of you out there who are in a creative field whether it be art, writing, anything of that nature, you know that your first product isn't likely to be the best, you know that you may try and present something and somebody else won't accept it or acknowledge it or you may be self critical but the fact is that creative things don't happen without attempts. Same thing happens in the field of research.

Many researchers are attuned to the fact that whatever they're doing whether it be in medical research, whether it be in other types of scientific research or historic research or in any type, you risk making mistakes in order to ultimately achieve your goal. If you need success every time then you're going to have to aim very low in order to ensure success.

So making mistakes is part of the job for many people. I would call your attention to some of the quotes of Thomas Edison who invented lots of things but made lots of things that didn't work on the way to

that and he said "I've not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work". In other words he accepted the fact that hey this is ok, in order to accomplish what I wanna accomplish I gotta make mistakes. I gotta do some risk taking. He also pointed out that many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up, something for us to think about.

Some things are hard, some things are challenging and some things are not going to work out. But we can learn a lot from them and they can help in the future.

As many of you know I work in a headache centre and we're used to the fact that if we try a new medication on a patient or an old medication has worked on a lot of people that may not work for you, but we learn from it, we learn what doesn't work and we learn possibly what categories to avoid. And ultimately most people wind up feeling better in the process.

So I do wanna point out that I'm not advocating the idea that making mistakes is good, it's just that I believe it's usually not bad. It's ok to accept the fact that making mistakes is part of being human. But there is an art to it and that's what I'd like to spend a couple of minutes on.

Now to point out how I think you should approach challenges. I think whenever you are creating something, deciding something to take a job, approach somebody about an idea, submit a paper, whatever it may be, I think you have to assess consequences first, both the negative consequences and the positive ones.

A lot of people don't think in terms of positive ones but I think we've got to assess the negative and positive consequences and

particularly when you think in terms of negative consequences, are the consequences catastrophic or horrendous in some way or are they just too bad. By too bad I mean things like, they might be embarrassing, they may be time consuming, they may be inconvenient, but they also may work.

And so if the consequences are not catastrophic, that may be a reason to pursue it. I think that you have to assess the learning potential, in other words, when an artist paints or draws or constructs something out of pottery or whatever, something out of clay rather, whatever, you have to kind of look at hey this maybe time consuming, this is not something that I'm used to but am I gonna learn something that I can then make some adjustments on and produce new and better art. If I am going to select a movie where I am gonna be spending the next couple of hours, is it the kind of movie where I might learn something even if I don't wind up liking it even if I say that it was a mistake, same thing with reading a book. I think the other thing that you have to assess is the impact on your own self image.

In other words if you try something and you succeed, isn't that worth the risk of making mistake. You know, in other words is the project that we're about to embark on, one that offers the possibility of the mistake that's not catastrophic, that I might learn something from and if I am successful, how's that gonna make me feel? in many cases by doing that kind of an analysis, you can pursue the project having making a mistake as kind of one of the possible consequences but not an overriding one. In other words that's the art of making a mistake.

I would kind of end with a couple of points one is that as you might expect I believe that once you commit to a project, then focus upon what can go right. Once you commit to it, once you acknowledge

the fact that horrendous things aren't gonna happen even if you fail at it, don't think about failing. Pursue your project, pursue the behavior that you're going to do, pursue again whether it be asking a person out for a date whether it be applying for a job, whether it be speaking before a group, any kind of things of this nature, volunteering for activity.

Once you commit to it, once you've assessed things and once you've committed yourself to it, focus upon what can go right. Single mindedly think in terms of what can go right. Recognizing that it may not go right but think in terms of what can go right. Now even if you have a hard time with the concept for yourself I think one of the aspects of the art of making mistake is the ability to respect others for trying.

If you're in a position of influence upon others whether you be a parent, spouse, teacher, employer, coworker, recognize that people make mistakes and people who are creative and people who meet challenges and pursue challenges probably make more mistake than others. They deserve our respect for trying and as you may try and struggle with the whole concept for yourself, please respect the ability of others to try and make mistakes and be prepared to applaud them when they're successful.

Hope this gives little bit of food for thought for this month. I'll be looking forward to any comments that you may have. Any examples from your own life and I will be looking forward to speaking with you again in the New Year. This has been Dr Ron Kaiser with you December 2012 podcast from the mental health gym.