A person with long hair

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Managing Disappointment

July 4, 2021

Hello Friends.

How’s it going?

Life is good here in Dallas. I’m loving that it’s summer.

I’m planning a couple of fun trips for the first time since Covid hit last year.

Never thought I’d be so happy about the prospect of getting on a plane. It’s normally something I find mildly annoying and kind of dread, but right now I’m really looking forward to it. Even WITH a mask on.

Amazing what a little isolation will do for your perspective. Right? Suddenly long lines at the airport and being squished into seats that too close together with a couple of strangers…it all seems like a great idea.

But the big thing for me this week I that I’m LOVING the breakthrough one of my clients had.

You know, that’s one of my favorite things about being a coach. And it’s why I’ve always loved leading and mentoring people in my corporate career.

You get to experience people’s growth and evolution and personal victories up close.

Watching people turn a goal or dream into reality is so inspiring for me. I love movies and shows and books about people who try to do something big, go all out to make it happen and when it DOES…it’s such an incredible high.

There’s always something you can learn by watching people as they strive for new things and go through the inevitable ups and downs on their way to that goal.

And this client’s journey was even more inspiring because it wasn’t about her achieving the big thing she was going for.

It was about how she processed through NOT achieving it.

How she handled the disappointment she felt not only with grace and ease but maybe more importantly, the way she worked to find the lessons that could help her in the future.

Life doesn’t always turn out as planned. We all know that.

But it’s how we HANDLE THAT REALITY and what we DO with that, that determines whether we keep moving forward, keep showing up, keep a good attitude, keep our drive and motivation…

Or, whether we just kind of give up.

Tell ourselves things never work out for us.

Or we just don’t have what it takes.

Or that it’s all somebody else’s fault.

We all know somebody who’s stuck in Disappointment.

They WANTED (very much) something specific to happen and it DIDN’T.

Now, it’s all they can think about and talk about.

They’re blaming their boss. Or their colleagues. Or their partner. Or whatever.

And it’s sad and exhausting to watch, right?

Maybe it’s even happened with you. I know it has with me at times in my past.

You can just get stuck in the spinning, the anger, the blame, the victimhood.

And I don’t know if there’s anything more tragic.

It’s a waste of energy and frankly, our time on this planet.

It keeps us from realizing our true potential.

It holds us back because we’re so focused on what DIDN’T happen that we stop thinking about our future possibilities because we’re stuck in our past.

That’s why today, I want to talk to you about Accepting Disappointment.

Because when you learn how to get good at this, when you learn how to effectively manage through things when they DON’T go your way, it will make all the difference in what your future life looks like.

So, let’s dive in.

I think the first clue about what’s difficult about disappointment is found in the Webster’s definition of it. According to Websters, “Disappointment is ‘unhappiness stemming from the failure of something hoped for or expected to happen’.”

But in my opinion, the psychologist’s definition lands right on the mark. Psychologists describe it as “a form of sadness; a feeling of loss stemming from a gap between our expectations and reality.”

The gap between our expectations and reality. That says it all.

So, here’s how the pathway to disappointment works.

We’re in a situation where we’re going for something new, but the outcome is uncertain.

We HOPE for a positive outcome and have an expectation of what it will be like to have it.

We DO everything we can to make that thing happen.

We BELIEVE we deserve the positive outcome, after all, we’re working hard to make it happen.

And when it doesn’t happen, we’re surprised and DISAPPOINTED we didn’t achieve the positive outcome.

We’ve all experienced this cycle.

But it’s what happens NEXT that determines the quality of our life. Whether we stay stuck in disappointment or move forward into acceptance.

Let’s first look at how and why we get stuck in disappointment.

It has to do with how well we process through negative emotions.

And it comes down to that gap we talked about earlier, between what we EXPECTED to happen and what ACTUALLY happened.

When we DON’T get the outcome we want, we have to come to terms with the fact that we might have given it our all, we might have done our best, but it STILL didn’t happen.

And in fact, it may NEVER HAPPEN. Because that’s always a possibility right?

Like the Rolling Stones say, “we can’t always get what we want.”

The critical thing here though with someone who gets stuck is that they’re trying to avoid feeling emotions that are more vulnerable.

It FEELS BETTER (safer really) to get angry. To blame. To feel victimized.

These feelings don’t feel vulnerable. They feel empowered. Justified.

AND, when we’re feeling angry and victimized, we don’t have to process through what’s really happening, which is that we FEEL SAD about things not turning out as we’d hoped.

Anger, blame, finger pointing are emotions that we can wear like a suit of armor. They protect us from feeling vulnerable by allowing us to masquerade as powerful.

We lash out.

When we can blame someone or something else, we feel justified in our anger, blame or finger pointing.

THEY did it to us. THEY are responsible.

We don’t have to deal with how we REALLY FEEL which is sad.

When we deal with what’s REALLY GOING ON with our emotions, which is the sadness we feel at not getting the thing, we’re vulnerable.

Sadness feels scary.

Like a raw, open wound and psychologically, that feels scary. Sometimes TOO scary to deal with.

And that’s how and WHY we get stuck in the anger, blame, victimization cycle.

Some other unhelpful ways we deal with disappointment is that we can disproportionately focus on the failure. Some people deal with this by becoming chronic under achievers.

They tell themselves “well, nothing ever works out for me anyway, so why try?”

They set a low bar so they can avoid taking the risk and HAVING the high expectations for their life and so they can settle into a mediocre or unfulfilling life. One where they don’t allow themselves to have big dreams.

Major disappointments are defining moments.

If we can learn how to deal with them constructively, they can be the catalyst for future growth.

If we don’t, they can become an anchor that drags us down and keels us in shame, anger, victimhood or not enoughness.

The key to Managing Disappointment is to reframe it from being bad or wrong or awful to a learning experience.

I love reality TV. Not all, but I love the shows that are about people with big dreams trying to achieve something.

And at the top of that list is a show on CMT called Making the Team. It’s about the annual tryouts for the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders.

Every year, they start with more than a thousand hopefuls from all over the world.

Of those, hundreds will go through the initial phase of tryouts.

Then they whittle it down to semifinals and like 45 or so go into a really tough six-week training camp where another 10 get cut in order to get down to the final 35 or whatever.

For me, the training camp phase of this show is riveting because every one of these girls is a highly skilled, amazingly talented dancer. They have credentials.

Like last season there were some Broadway dancers. Or whatever.

Anyway, they ALL have high expectations. They’ve trained their entire lives for this opportunity.

And yet this squad is about perfection. Every micro move is critiqued, and the feedback is direct and specific. And honestly about things that the average lay person would not notice.

But the coaches do.

And while I LOVE celebrating at the end with the dancers who made the team, what I TRULY find inspiring are the ONES who didn’t make it.

They are crushed.

Devastated.

And yet often, these girls say things like “Well, I’ll just have to work harder.”

Or “I’ll take more classes and I’ll be back next year.”

Sure, there are some who are angry and who storm out, blaming the coaches. But they’re few and far between.

Why?

I believe it’s because they’ve spent their whole life training for dance. They’re USED to being scrutinized and critiqued. And they’ve learned to take that feedback, process through it and APPLY it in a productive way that will MOVE THEM TOWARD what they want.

To me, it’s less a show about cheerleading and more a show about GRIT and TENACITY.

It’s ultimately about processing disappointment.

And when you watch someone else want something so badly, something they’ve worked their entire life for and NOT get it but still find the strength to look at how they can do things different next time…it’s amazing.

I always think about how proud the parents of those girls must be.

Because that character. That internal strength that allows them to not only dream big and go for it but to process through NOT getting it on NATIONAL TV?

Wow. So very impressive.

So, you might be thinking ‘what do the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders have to teach me about overcoming disappointment’?

To that I would say, everything.

The difference between people who Manage Disappointment effectively vs. people who get stuck is what they think about that disappointment.

It’s what they make it mean.

The ones who are resilient look at the disappointment as a chance to learn. To adjust.

They’ve reframed it from failure to a learning experience.

And as a result, their inner talk track is constructive.

I think the reframing works best when you ask yourself the right questions through the lens of curiosity, not judgement. Things like:

* What can I learn from this experience?
* What could I have done more of or less of that might have helped me get that thing?
* What could I do differently next time?
* Could there be a silver lining in this and what might that be?

I like this quote from Hardcore Zen. “Disappointment is just the action of your brain adjusting itself to reality after discovering things aren’t the way you wanted them to be.”

The main thing about that adjustment to reality is to move quickly to acceptance.

It’s okay to FEEL disappointed.

It’s okay to FEEL vulnerable or sad. You’re not going to die if you allow yourself to FEEL sad.

It’s okay to FEEL uncomfortable with the failure.

And the way to handle it constructively is with the reframe.

Okay, so now…how do I make this disappointment WORK for me?

Our lives are never going to be perfect. There will always be the highs and the lows. The key is learnings to see the downside as fuel for your future upside.

And THAT’s what it’s all about.

Until next time, make it a great week my friends.