Why 'Fear of Failure' is Something You Need to Unlearn

There are only two intrinsic fears. The fear of failure is not one of them.

BY JOHN BRANDON

Did you know that fear is mostly a learned emotion?

I read about this in a book by Mark Batterson, an author and pastor who lives in Washington, DC. He mentioned that fear of falling and fear of loud noises are the only intrinsic fears, the ones we we have from birth. Every other fear--not having friends at a party, losing our car keys, speaking in front of a group--are all learned behaviors from childhood. We tend to observe the things that freak other people out, including parents and friends and even coworkers, and then model those fears.

I have a weird fear involving tornadoes. I can't explain it. When the wind goes suddenly calm, the sky turns an eerie yellow-gray hue, and the trees freeze in place like they were caught in a spotlight, I go a little bonkers. Add a tornado siren and that locomotive sound only a tornado makes, and I'm probably going to head to the basement and crawl under a table. Quick, what's the number for 9-1-1!

Why is that? Why do I have that fear? My wife doesn't even notice bad storms. In fact, she is the exact opposite. She loves storms. As a child, her parents would hear a siren and go back to reading a book. Once, there was a horrendous downpour and she decided to go outside and dance in the rain. (It's a long story about how we even met and started dating, since we have many opposing characteristics.)

In Minnesota where I live, tornadoes can sneak up on you. There are some hints, but the weather forecasters don't turn a tornado *watch* into a *warning* until someone official--like a police officer or a storm tracker--sees one in person. That did not dissuade my mom, though. When she was a child, she was caught in a tornado that practically ripped the roof off of her house. Growing up, when there was even a hint of a storm, she would start yelling at us kids and tell us to go to the basement *right now*. It created a deep-seated fear in me that has been hard to break.

In business, the fear of failure can also be deep-seated. We all know someone who started a graphic design company or a local coffee shop and had to put up the "closed" sign eventually. We learn in elementary school that we will be graded and that an F means Failure. We carry that thinking into high-school and college and then into life. It's not just a cause for concern. It's a *fear*. We feel it deep in our bones. We don't take risks because we don't want to deal with the perception that comes when we fail. We don't approach a new customer because we fear the rejection involved. We've taught ourselves to avoid new situations and new prospects.

The question is: How can you unlearn that fear?

I will tell you how I've learned to cope with my fear of tornadoes. First, I've educated myself. I've found that tornadoes that cause actual destruction and mayhem in populated areas are extremely rare. I've learned about the best location in the house to avoid getting hurt during a tornado (it's in the center of a room so you are not near any windows). Most of all, I've trusted my wife and her instincts about storms. She's more aware of any real dangers and will usually be the one who suggests we move to the basement when a storm seems life-threatening. I believe her.

Fear of failure in business can also be unlearned. Here's some advice. Find out which businesses usually fail and which ones usually don't. (Here's a hint: Mobile app development is incredibly competitive.) Find someone who has been through a few "storms" and knows the best way to avoid failure. Educate yourself about how to leverage against failure. (I seem to do this as a writer by rote after 15 years.) You can leverage yourself financially but also emotionally, intellectually, and even socially.

Conquer the fear. Try something new.