

## **There is always light at the end of the tunnel**

### **Keep perspective**

First and foremost, the word 'fail' has no place in postmodern society - only a phrase such as 'insufficient achievement'.

Second, your current marks will co-determine whether you will be accepted into your preferred field of study but they will not determine whether you will be successful or not in life itself. Nor will they meaningfully limit your (career-)life prospects. And yes, it hurts when one learns that the outcomes of an examination were less successful than expected. Therefore, it is advisable to step back emotionally and interpret the experience logically in such instances. All human beings experience success and are less successful from time to time. This is the most normal thing in the world.

Over time, we grow accustomed to this ebb and flow of experiences.

Third, reflect carefully on your successful and less successful attempts, including the current ones. Feel good about the first and be motivated by the second. We, as psychologists, are often called upon to counsel people that have had this experience. The following quote (slightly updated) rings curiously true whenever we do such counselling: "Success is not 'final'; being unsuccessful is not 'fatal'. The only thing that matters is the courage to keep on trying" (Winston Churchill). Remind yourself that there will be many other opportunities to be more successful; to (as one person put it) "make up" for not having been as successful as you were hoping for. Take a step back and look at your situation in perspective: This is an eminently manageable challenge. Try to see what has happened as an area for growth or development; a golden opportunity to demonstrate your resilience and become more adaptable (a key characteristic and strength in these rapidly changing times!).

### **I have not been accepted into my preferred field of study. What now?**

Options include the following: They can apply for remarking of their papers, register for and write supplementary exams, or even re-do their grade or only repeat certain subjects. However, no 'one size fits all'.

A timely reminder seems appropriate at this stage: Hard work will be needed: 'Your beliefs don't make you a better person; your consistent actions do'. It will be critical to prioritise your activities appropriately. If your child is serious about achieving more adequate marks, they should demonstrate their seriousness by working hard - and not only articulating their intention or desire to work hard(-er).

As an aside: In today's postmodern society, psychologists are trained purposely to elicit people's advice from within instead of 'advising' them regarding the way forward. Find a person that can help your child to achieve this critical goal.

### **What are other options (than studying at a university) available?**

Going to university is not the end-all and be all. One should not be set on a particular tertiary institution, whether a university, university of technology, college, or private training institution. Yes, research has shown that people with degrees usually find employment more efficiently and earn higher salaries than their competitors. However, one should not underestimate the value of non-university studies. Each study discipline and tertiary training institution (public or private) should be rated on merit. A diploma in film studies or a technical qualification in, e.g. wind turbine service or electrical engineering can suit you as a person very well but also be enriching on a personal level and help you to achieve your specific key life themes (help you improve the lives of others, for instance).

Several specialised diplomas and certificates facilitate a range of career opportunities that make students highly employable and provide them with more options than some common degrees. A handy tip is to thoroughly research career opportunities for students who have already graduated – both now and in the future. Ask yourself regularly whether you will still be employable in five, ten, or fifteen years.

### **Reflect, strategise, and act (magic happens when we move forward)**

First and foremost: **Do** something. Practice and execute positive self-narration (self-talk): Remind yourself (verbally, too) to stay calm and do something. ‘Panicking’ is neither advisable nor helpful or valuable. Find out if you can still apply for the same or a similar field of study at a different institution (geographically) or different in terms of the level of training. Establish whether you qualify for an extended programme (if such a programme is available in your field) or a bridging programme. Consult a counsellor for information regarding whether it is advisable to rewrite relevant papers, have your papers remarked, or repeat or redo certain subjects. Or whether it might be more appropriate for you too. For instance, if you decide to re-apply during the coming year, take a gap year, work part-time, or find other active and constructive ways to spend the time.

Try to speak with a person who has not been successful previously but has successfully managed the situation. Please find out how she went about dealing with the situation. And if you decide to

Also, note that if, for instance, you want to enrol for a certificate or a graduate programme, but your Grade 12 outcomes do not allow you to, it is by no means the end of the world. To name but one example: Jabu (pseudonyms are used) wanted to study medicine, but his marks were not good enough. Jabu did not even take Mathematics or Physical Sciences at school. After completing Grade 12, he registered for Mathematics and Physical Sciences at a post-school training institution. Next, he enrolled for a general degree at a university. After achieving excellent outcomes, he gained admission to study medicine. Today, Jabu is a fourth-year medical student.

You can achieve more satisfactory outcomes, too, if you want to, work hard enough, and have the necessary support structures. To this end, do more than what is expected of you in the future; do your best to take measures that will allow you to gain admission (in)to your preferred field of study.

There are numerous opportunities. Ask someone to help you access the ones that might suit you and that you might benefit from most. Discuss this matter with a person-in-the-know. Consult a psychologist that specialises in career counselling for guidance regarding what you want to become. Ask them to help you recount your career-life stories (maybe even including your earliest recollections!), reflect on these stories, and draw on them reflexively to uncover your key career-life themes and draw on their inner advice about your key life themes; your North Star; what you want to study, and, especially, why you want to do so. Instead of only looking to qualify for a field of study that will help you earn money and make a decent living, consistently focus on those themes.

Here are some real-life examples to show you what I mean:

a) Lebogang has often been bullied in her life. Therefore, she studies hard because she wants to become a lawyer to help people who, like herself, have been bullied.

b) Sharon had to give her baby away when she was in Grade 10. She is now studying to become a social worker, specialising in working with unmarried teenagers who were forced to give their babies away.

c) Lebo's younger sister cannot walk because of a physical disability. He studies very hard to become an engineer because he wants to earn enough money to help his struggling family. More importantly, though, he is motivated to develop inexpensive wheelchairs that can be afforded by people with disabilities experiencing mobility challenges in outlying, resource-scarce environments (such as the one he comes from). He has even set his sights on becoming the CEO of a large company to eventually be in a position to sponsor these wheelchairs. Lebo says, 'Every time I become despondent or get tired of studying, I think of my sister's face and I become re-energised and re-motivated.'

These stories have the theme of turning hurt or 'failure' into success and a social contribution in common. They talk to converting passive suffering of 'pain' (of whatever kind) into active mastering thereof. What's more, by helping others overcome their challenges and heal them, you will be helping yourself to overcome the same kind of pain you have suffered in your life. In doing so, you will also be honouring the legacy of your loved ones.

### **How should parents and other loved ones or caregivers cope?**

Yes, parents will feel disappointed when their children are less successful. Looking back and focussing what might have been serving little purpose, though. Parents should be part of the transition from less to sufficient achievement. Parents must reassure their children and communicate openly. Talk to them. Or text them. Offer them emotional support. Ask them how they feel, and, most importantly, listen carefully to their responses. Carefully note their body language. Keep in mind that their child's achievement (or lack thereof) in no way reflects their success.

Let them know there is a support structure in place; that you regard them as precious and that you love and accept them unconditionally. That inadequate achievement neither changes how parents feel about them nor define who they are.

Parents should note and assure their children that this has been just one exam, one transition, and give them hope. Many people fail their Grade 12 exams but become highly successful in later life. The new year is exactly that - a new beginning, a new horizon.

It is essential to ask them what solutions **they** propose. Talking negatively and blaming children serve no purpose. Break the prevailing destructive discourse by making a conscious effort to be positive and inspiring instead of sending negative messages.

Make sure that your child knows that you love her unconditionally and that you feel proud of her. Make her feel special. Ensure that not having achieved as good as both of you would have wanted does not make her 'bad' or that you 'reject' her because of that. And if they 'act out' and make you feel miserable, note that that should be considered 'normal' under the circumstances. (Don't we all sometimes take out our frustration, anger, hurt, or sadness on our 'significant others'; those closest to us?) Do not 'blame' yourself either. What has happened does not make you a 'bad' person or a 'failure' either!

Above all: DO something. Parents who are unsure how to handle their child's disappointment due to a so-called 'failed' Grade 12 exam must seek the help of (e.g.) a psychologist or counsellor that your child believes she can trust sufficiently to entrust them with her deepest 'secrets' and emotions. Someone they will feel safe with; a person that will provide her with a 'holding environment' - particularly if they fear the child is suicidal. Parents must, for instance, be concerned if a child stops talking, cuts themselves off from family

and friends, and seems seriously depressed after the news of the Grade 12 results. Suicide in South Africa is on the increase. This is especially the case when learners believe or are led to believe that they have 'failed' or have let others and themselves down. And that they are left with little or no hope for the future; no purpose in life.

Phone, e.g. the SA Depression and Anxiety Group, Life Line or one of the Suicide hotlines if needs be. If needs be, you, too, should consult a professional person.

### **Miscellaneous comments**

I request learners and their parents always to look at their situation in perspective; to consider the 'bigger' picture. Over time, learners Grade 12 subject symbols will mean very little. They should ask themselves what their short-, medium-, and long-term aims are and decide why they are studying and their end goal. Surely that can't be to please their parents or teachers or to outachieve ('beat') others. Instead, they should become the best possible version of themselves rather than merely trying to be 'better' than someone else; only compete against themselves. Comparing oneself with others serves no purpose.

As mentioned earlier: Today, career counsellors are particularly interested in why learners want to enter a particular field of study. A female student once said: "I want to become a vet. I don't particularly appreciate seeing animals suffer. Each time I get the feeling that the amount of work that I have to master is becoming too much for me, I think about the satisfaction and joy I will experience when, one day, I help animals in need. My personal mission in life is to apply my excellent achievements in Life Sciences and demonstrate practically my love for animals in an environment where I feel comfortable and actualise my God-given talents to work with sick animals. I had to stand by helplessly and see my beloved FIV-infected cat struggle, only to die in the end. Therefore, nothing will give me more pleasure than helping other animals in need in pain (and, of course, their owners). Doing so will also help me experience a sense of meaning, hope, and purpose in life (social meaning).

This is what Anthony (who grew up in a desperately poor, rural environment) said: "I grew up in an impoverished community that had minimal access to running water and electricity. In the event of power failures or other electrical problems, I often helped those who could not afford the services of an electrician. (I discovered my talent for fixing electrical and computer-related problems at an early age). However, I could of course not help everybody. I believe I will experience a sense of purpose in my life when I work in an environment where I can fix things such as computers, cell phones, electrical appliances (**personal meaning**), and earn enough money to take care of my own and my family's needs but also the needs of my community. I also want to take care of my community's needs; deliver a much-needed service for the community. Hopefully, I will eventually build a town and community hall to enable frustrated youths to access constructive recreational facilities. That will make my life purposeful (**social meaning**)."

Learners could also visit my website ([www.kobusmaree.org](http://www.kobusmaree.org)). There, they will find lots of (free) information about, for instance, how to relax, available bursaries, how to study, how to relax, how to apply for bursaries or learnerships, how to do thorough job analysis, explore options, etc. In addition, they could **search for and listen to** the following clip

Dealing with your inner critic by listening to your **inner counsellor**:

<https://omny.fm/shows/the-kieno-kammies-show/psychology-containing-your-inner-critic>