

## **“Why Do You Put Yourself Down?”**

### **Part I**

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

I had just completed a workshop for mental health professionals when several came up to chat with me. I have heard a wide spectrum of comments and questions during and following my talks, but I was not fully prepared for the first question that day.

“I’m curious, Dr. Brooks. Why do you put yourself down?” The question was posed by a man who looked to be in his mid-forties.

I replied, “I’m not certain what you mean by ‘putting yourself down.’”

He responded, “You gave examples of how insecure you felt as a therapist, especially at the beginning of your career, and that some of the things you said to your patients may not have been very helpful. You certainly didn’t sound very confident.”

Perhaps other attendees at my presentations have held the same opinion as his, but I couldn’t recall anyone ever saying this to me. I actually wondered if he were kidding and if he would follow up with a humorous comment, but I quickly realized he was serious. My next thought was that my purpose in sharing struggles as a beginning therapist was being interpreted in a far different way from what I intended, and perhaps in the future I had to be more careful that my stories were not perceived as a self-putdown.

I was ready to explain that my intention was not to devalue myself but rather to highlight that as novice (and even, at times, as more seasoned) therapists we are likely to harbor doubts about our clinical abilities and strategies; I was then going to emphasize why it is crucial to have experienced, encouraging supervisors and colleagues throughout our professional journey to help build our expertise and confidence.

Before I could voice these thoughts, two other attendees who had also come up to speak with me and overheard this man’s comments jumped in to express a view in stark contrast to the one I had just heard.

In a polite manner one of them said, “I was actually coming up to thank you for describing your doubts and what you would do differently today as a therapist.” His next remark was very gracious. “I’ve read several of your books and other writings and I admire your work. It was much easier to listen to you today after you talked about

mistakes you made.” He smiled and added, “It’s so easy to think that an expert in the field never experienced the doubts many of us have in our careers.”

As I thanked him for his kind feedback, the other individual injected, “I feel the same way. Not only that, a few months ago in my role as a mother I attended a talk you gave about raising resilient children and you did something similar. You immediately described situations with your sons Rich and Doug in which you were very open in discussing how as a parenting expert you did not handle certain situations very effectively.” (I was rather impressed that she remembered the names of my sons.)

She continued, “I laughed when you said your sons might be writing a book called *Daddy Dearest*. I immediately felt much more comfortable and more open to learning from you.”

The man who had asked why I put myself down, simply said, “I still think it sounded like putdowns.”

I answered, “That was not my intention.” Referring to the woman who said she felt more comfortable and open to learning from me after hearing about my challenging experiences, I said, “One of my hopes in sharing these vignettes is actually to create an atmosphere in which it’s easier for people to learn.”

The first man seemed as if he was going to say something but decided against it. I thanked him and the other two attendees for taking the time to come and share their thoughts with me.

### **Reflections on the Drive Home**

I reflected upon the observations of these three people as I was driving home from the workshop. Without wanting to be too defensive, I reassured myself that the positive comments were more representative of the feedback I have received after detailing the insecurities and mistakes I faced in my career. I reminded myself that each person who attends one of my presentations enters with a unique history and mindset that will influence what he or she takes from my talk. Even though I always highlight what I learned from mistakes and how I dealt with self-doubt, it was evident that at least one person at that day’s presentation did not focus on this part of my message.

I also considered the reasons that prompted me to include these experiences in my talks. When I first began to give talks, I thought it would be very beneficial in refining

my presentation skills to listen to different speakers, to consider my reaction to each presentation as well as to watch the audience's reaction. Obviously, the relevance of the information for the attendees was an important factor in determining the effectiveness of the speaker. However, I found, not surprisingly, that whether the talk was research oriented or filled with clinical, parenting, self-help, or educational strategies, the audience appeared most engaged when speakers fused their information with personal stories, humor, and a sense of genuineness and vulnerability. The effective speakers conveyed a feeling of empathy that led to a closer bond being formed with the audience.

I felt these variables contributed to an "inviting" atmosphere in which the audience became more relaxed and, very importantly, more receptive to learning. Subsequent studies such as reported by psychologists Shawn Achor in his book *The Happiness Advantage* and Barbara Fredrickson in her book *Positivity* provided research findings to support the significance of creating an emotionally positive environment in which learning could thrive. A mixture of relevant information, pertinent personal stories, humor, genuineness, and vulnerability helped to nurture this kind of environment.

### **The Benefits of Leaders Revealing Their Failures**

I thought about the man who asked why I put myself down as I recently read the thought-provoking article "Why Managers Should Reveal Their Failures" authored by Dina Gerdeman and posted by Harvard Business School <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/why-managers-should-publicize-their-failures>. The article was based on a lengthier paper "Mitigating Malicious Envy: Why Successful People Should Reveal Their Failures," authored by Alison Wood Brooks (although we have the same last name I am not related to Alison) with Harvard Business School colleagues and graduate students Nicole Abi-Esber, Ryan Buell, Brian Hall, Karen Huang, and Laura Huang.

Gerdeman immediately captured the main point of the research in the opening paragraph of her article. "If you're a business leader who oozes achievement, sprints up the corporate ladder, and earns big bucks, your co-workers probably resent you to some extent. New research says high-achievers can win over their colleagues with a simple approach: by sharing the failures the encountered on the path to success."

Brooks observed that our successes are typically very obvious. "It's more novel and inspiring for others to learn about your mistakes. One way to do that is to

acknowledge your struggles or shortcomings.” She noted that a goal of her research was to “chip away at the resentment that comes with envy and move toward admiration instead.” What Brooks labels “malicious envy” is viewed as a toxic force in the workplace, “stifling worker productivity, leading employees to behave less cooperatively, interfering with group cohesion, and making people feel more justified in behaving unethically.”

Brooks and her colleagues conducted studies to examine malicious envy with a goal of developing interventions to lessen its emergence and impact. In one on-line study, participants were requested to read a biography written by a fictitious peer who had realized professional success. Interestingly, participants who read only about this person’s achievements felt significantly more malicious envy than others who had read a few additional lines about the person’s professional failures. Other studies have found similar results, namely, knowledge of a leader’s setbacks does not lessen admiration for that person’s accomplishments nor does it diminish their perception of the person’s status.

Brooks advised that these findings pertain only for professionals who have reached a moderate level of success. “If you’re a low status intern, for example, you don’t need to talk as freely about your failure—not because it’s harmful—but because people don’t tend to feel envious of you in the first place.”

In reviewing the results of several studies, Brooks concluded, “Even after revealing their struggles or failures, high achievers still look good.” This conclusion may seem evident even without research confirmation, but I would guess that all of us are aware of people in different professional fields and in politics who never acknowledge setbacks they have experienced or take responsibility for mistakes that they have made. If people equate mistakes or failure with weakness, they certainly will not share these setbacks with others. In contrast, if people view mistakes or failure as part of learning, persevering, and moving closer to realizing one’s goals, they will be less hesitant to describe all aspects of their journey with others.

Obviously, key words in the previous paragraph are “high achievers.” Just as people might not be as receptive to hearing about the failures of interns while they are just beginning their careers (unless, of course, they are supervising that intern), I believe

that most people would not be inclined to listen to and learn from individuals who have consistently been unsuccessful in dealing with and learning from obstacles and for all intents and purposes have given up on pursuing their goals.

### **Setbacks and Solutions**

I assume that most of us like to hear personal stories that involve obstacles as long as these stories also include accounts of how these obstacles were surmounted. Learning about setbacks experienced by others whom we respect typically allows us to be more forgiving about our own mistakes and more motivated to attempt new ways of coping. It is for this reason that when I describe mistakes or setbacks in my life, I also emphasize the ways in which these events served as catalysts for positive change. As I mentioned earlier, although the man I mentioned at the beginning of this article experienced revealing my mistakes as a putdown, fortunately, most of the feedback I have received parallels the research findings of Brooks and her colleagues.

In spotlighting the role of obstacles and mistakes in our lives, I am reminded of the work of psychologist Gabriele Oettingen whom I cited in my October, 2016 article. Oettingen, on the faculties of New York University and the University of Hamburg and author of *Rethinking Positive Thinking*, proposed an important model bolstered by research data to demonstrate the need to “combine positive thinking with realism.” She advocated not only reflecting upon one’s wishes but also considering the obstacles that represent barriers to realizing these wishes. A focus on both wishes and obstacles, a technique that Oettingen labeled “mental contrasting,” led participants in her studies to achieve better outcomes compared with those who focused solely on the wishes or dwelt only on the obstacles.

### **Questions to Consider**

The research of Brooks and her colleagues invites several important questions, including:

When and how to share stories of setbacks so that others can learn from our experiences whether in our role as a business leader or manager, parent, coach, or teacher?

How does empathy play a role in determining the situations in which we share such stories and the ways in which we do so?

Can asking job applicants to describe situations in which they encountered doubts or mistakes and how they dealt with these experiences serve as a useful source of information in the interview process?

I will address these and related questions in next month's column. Until then, you might wish to reflect upon the following questions:

Did you ever listen to or interact with individuals who came across as rarely, if ever, making a mistake? Instead, they spoke only about their achievements. What words would you use to describe such individuals?

In contrast, can you recall listening to or interacting with individuals who were comfortable speaking about their doubts and mistakes as well as what they learned from their setbacks? What words would you use to describe these individuals?

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