Rejection

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I have been exposed to the word "rejection" several times in the past couple of weeks. I picked up the May issue of Good Housekeeping in which I was quoted in an article "How to Raise a Hopeful Child." The issue of the magazine also contained a story "A Rejection Recovery Plan," offering advice about dealing with rejection. A couple of days later I was filing several articles and among them was one that appeared in The Boston Globe with a subtitle "Resilience is a Key Asset when Rejection Is a Given."

The same week a woman approached me after I gave a presentation for parents and was teary as she said, "My son was just rejected from the two Ivy League schools he applied to. I don't know why someone with his grades and extracurricular activities could have been turned down. I know he is devastated, so am I. I don't know how to help him with being rejected. He has never been rejected before." I wondered if he had been accepted at other colleges. She said yes and mentioned three colleges with excellent reputations. She added, "But they're not Ivy League."

And just a few days ago I was re-arranging some books in my office and came across one that I had read years earlier titled "Rejection" by John White. The appearance of the word rejection with such frequency prompted me to write this article about the topic.

Rejection comes in many forms. One may be rejected when applying for admission to a college or for a job. One may be rejected by the "in group" or by a love interest. One may feel rejected when losing an election or losing a job or having a research proposal turned down. We have all experienced rejection and in most instances there is some distress involved. I recall when I applied to graduate school. The first university from which I heard was my supposed "safe" school. I was rejected for admission. Not very reassuring to be turned down by your safe school.

The first article I wrote for publication was based on my master's thesis. I co-authored it with my thesis advisor. Not only was it rejected, but the comments from at least one of the reviewers seemed especially harsh (my advisor appeared to take it more in stride than I did, but he already had many publications to his credit).

Years later I submitted a manuscript for publication about the use of storytelling as a therapeutic technique. Not to sound immodest but I thought it was quite original and creative. Unfortunately, the reviewers did not. It was rejected and one of the reviewers noted that it was similar to other articles that had appeared in the literature and thus, added little to the subject area. Ouch!

In elementary school, I mustered up the courage to give a girl in my class a Valentine's Day card. Not even a thank you followed. Who knows how quickly the card was discarded. I recall a look of disdain on her face as I presented her with the card, but I must admit that my impressions may have been a projection on my part rooted in a sense of insecurity. Whatever her reason for not even saying "thank you," it still hurt.

I am certain each person reading this article can think of a number of experiences in which rejection played a role. It is a part of life. Given my keen interest in the theme of resilience, it is not surprising that I also have an interest in how people deal with rejection, especially since the very notion of a resilient person implies someone who handles rejections and setbacks effectively. I have wondered, "What are the factors that help people deal with rejection?" Obviously certain rejections are more important and painful in our lives than other rejections. However, some people are able to rebound even from these.

What follows are some thoughts that might help when confronted with rejection:

1. Avoid self-defeating assumptions. There are those who are prone to interpret rejection in ways that add to their distress and interfere with developing a more realistic, hopeful attitude. In my clinical activities and workshops I have heard a variety of self-defeating assumptions; one of the most common is the belief that rejection is an indication of a basic flaw or shortcoming in our personality. Examples include being turned down for a job and seeing oneself as inadequate and unemployable, being rejected by a boyfriend or girlfriend and feeling unlovable by anyone, being cut from an athletic team in high school and believing that one has shortcomings in all areas, having one's idea for a project at work rejected and feeling one lacks any creativity. One rejection should not be used as an indictment of one's life.

Remember that rejection is not synonymous with failure. There are a number of vignettes in the book "Rejection" of very successful people who were rejected but did not

permit themselves to be seen as failures. Instead they persevered. I chuckled as I read the following examples:

G.K. Chesterton, a renowned British author, could not read until he was eight years old. One of his teachers said that if his head were opened "we should not find any brain but only a lump of white fat." Winston Churchill failed the entrance exam to Sandhurst twice before finally passing. Thomas Edison's first teacher described him as "addled," while other educators predicted that he would "never make a success of anything." Gregor Mendel, founder of genetics, attended the University of Vienna but left without graduating. One of his professors observed, "Mendel lacks the requisite clarity of thought to be a scientist." Giacomo Puccini's music teacher said he lacked talent and gave up on him. Einstein's parents were informed by a teacher that he would never amount to anything.

Imagine if these individuals had accepted these early, far from flattering reviews of their personality and intelligence. Few of us will reach the stature of Churchill or Edison or Einstein, but if we interpret rejections as "the truth" or as the essence of our being, we will never know what we are capable of achieving. This leads to the second point.

2. Don't magnify the rejection in terms of the impact it has had or will have on your life. When a rejection occurs, it is easy to get entrapped in a negative mindset and believe the rejection is a forecast of your future. This is not to minimize the impact of the rejection, but rather to assess it realistically within the perspective of one's entire life. Take what I have referred to as a "helicopter view," viewing your life from a broader perspective, that is, where you have been, where you presently are, and where you hope to go in the future. When one assumes this perspective, some rejections don't seem quite as significant as they do while you are experiencing them without the benefit of this more comprehensive viewpoint.

I have spoken with a number of individuals who immediately take a rejection as a prediction of their future. This prediction is likely to become true if we fall into the trap of a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, if we believe we are a "reject," we may without realizing it behave in ways that prove our prophecy. We expect to be turned down for a job so we downplay our abilities. We expect a proposal at work to be dismissed as

inadequate so we offer apologies in advance. It is as if we communicating to the world, "We have been rejected so we are a reject." I once saw a man in therapy whose project at work was accepted. He had struggled with issues of rejection and insecurity most of his life. He said to me, "I'm embarrassed to say this, but the moment my department head told me he liked the project, my first words were, 'Are you sure?' I guess I just expect to be turned down because I was turned down in the past."

A rejection in the past is not a predictor of rejection in the future. That leads to the third point.

3. Don't allow a rejection to compromise or derail your dreams. Rejections hurt, but if they lead you to abandon certain dreams that you have, you may always regret your actions. I have seen a number of people in their 40s or 50s in therapy who reflect upon their life with sadness for "what could have been." These are people who experienced rejection and retreated from the possibility of future rejections by failing to confront new opportunities and challenges. In the book "Rejection," I was especially amused by accounts of rejection of works that were to achieve enormous success. Enjoy this sample:

"The Tale of Peter Rabbit," a favorite children's book, was rejected by at least seven publishers. "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" received 20 rejections. Irving Stone's first book was about Van Gogh. Several publishers said no to his manuscript and the sales department at one well-known publishing house wrote, "There is no way to sell a book about an unknown Dutch painter." Fifteen more rejections followed before the book, titled "Lust for Life," was finally accepted and published in 1934. By 1982 it had sold more than 25 million copies. Dr. Seuss, certainly one of the most popular children's authors of all time, experienced at least two dozen rejections of his initial work. Agatha Christie's first mystery novel received over 20 rejections. This list of prominent authors whose works were turned down goes on and on. What if these authors had thrown in the towel after one rejection!

4. Finally, learn from your rejections. This point is tied to the first three. It is true that some rejections may offer little, if any, information for future change but other rejections may. Whether there is helpful feedback or not, rejections can prompt us to engage in self-reflection and ask, "Is there anything I can do to improve my chances of

success?" In some instances, we may arrive at the conclusion there is little to change and that we must persevere, while at other times, we can envision room for improvement.

An example of this last point is captured in my response to the two manuscripts I mentioned earlier in this article that were rejected for publication. While the rejection of the manuscript based on my master's thesis contained what I considered to be some overly harsh criticism, I did reflect upon what the reviewer said. (I must admit my first reaction was, "How did they ever let someone like this become a reviewer?") Interestingly, one criticism was that there were too many statistical analyses included. As I re-read the manuscript I could see that an avalanche of numbers might obscure some of the important findings. We revised the manuscript and did not include as many of the research findings. We submitted it to another journal and it was quickly accepted with several very complimentary remarks.

In terms of my paper about the therapeutic use of storytelling, upon much reflection and feedback from some colleagues, I did not believe as the reviewer said that it was similar to other articles and added little new information. Thus, I did not change it. Instead, I sent it to another journal. Not only was it accepted but subsequently it was reprinted in two books about child therapy.

I know individuals who after being turned down for a position re-wrote their resumes and/or received "coaching" on how to present themselves at a job interview to maximize future success. A woman I saw in therapy worked on her presentation skills so that she might express her ideas more coherently and convincingly after receiving feedback about her style. If we can avoid becoming defensive (not always an easy task), we may be able to learn from rejections.

For those who might be interested, after I was rejected for graduate studies by my so-called "safe" school, I was accepted by five other universities. Very importantly, the rejection of my Valentine's Day card in elementary school, while painful, did not deter me from giving out such cards in future years. I'm pleased to say that while in college I gave a Valentine's Day card to a student whose name was Marilyn. She accepted with enthusiasm. Marilyn has been my wife and soulmate for many years.

In closing, I do not want to minimize the hurt of rejections nor fail to recognize that some rejections have more of an impact on our daily existence than others.

However, if we are to lead satisfying, meaningful lives and develop what Dr. Sam Goldstein and I refer to as a "resilient mindset," we must recognize that rejections can either burden us with feelings of pessimism and hopelessness, or they can serve as catalysts for future accomplishments. It is difficult to imagine achieving success without having encountered rejections. To experience rejection implies that we were willing to take risks in order to pursue our dreams and goals. Such risks are often small compared with the alternative of remaining confined in a so-called "comfort zone," a zone in which the joys of life are often subjugated to an empty sense of security.

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