"Have You Ever Been Rejected?"

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

I started to see Luke in therapy at the beginning of his senior year in high school. He was burdened by insecurity, low self-esteem, and anxiety. As his parents explained, Luke seemed to "worry about everything," with the current focus of his anxiety on whether he would be accepted at one of his top two college choices. Both were Ivy League schools with a low acceptance rate (or viewed from the other side, a high rejection rate). His high school counselor advised Luke to apply to other colleges as well, colleges that offered a higher probability of admission. Luke agreed but said that going to a college other than either of his top two choices would be a "real downer." He added, "I would feel like a failure if I didn't get into either of them."

Luke was rejected for admission by both schools. He was accepted at several very reputable colleges, but the two rejections resulted in his feeling devastated and worried that his options for a good job and a "good life" had been significantly reduced. The fact that with one exception, four of his best friends experienced a similar outcome of rejection from Ivy League schools did little to ease his own anxiety, distress, and sense of failure.

Not surprisingly, the theme of rejection dominated our conversation for a number of sessions. I empathized with his disappointment and with his belief that his future was no longer as promising as it had been prior to the rejection letters arriving. I attempted to validate his feelings of distress. However, rather than focusing exclusively on the rejections, my goal was to introduce in a sensitive way the message that his future had not been diminished by the rejections and, in fact, many opportunities were still in front of him. I reminded him that he should not lose sight of his many accomplishments as he dealt with not being accepted to his top choices.

Interestingly, during one of our discussions, Luke asked me, "Have you ever been rejected?" I was curious why he asked. "Just wondering. You seem to think that rejections don't mean that things are closed off to us, but it's hard for me to feel that way right now. So I was wondering how you felt if you were rejected."

A Personal Account of Rejection

I answered directly that there were times I experienced rejection, and I certainly didn't feel very good about it. To ensure that I had not been misunderstood, I clarified that in my maintaining a hopeful attitude in the aftermath of rejections, I was not suggesting that we could totally avoid some hurt and pessimism. I then said I would tell him about two times I was rejected and the outcomes of each.

The first example occurred when I applied to graduate school. I sent in applications to eight programs and the first school from which I heard back was my supposedly "safe school." I was stunned to learn that I had been rejected. None of my professors at the City College of New York could understand the basis for that university's decision. One even wrote to the graduate school to ask for an explanation, but basically he was informed that there were many excellent applicants. I shared with Luke that my first thought was if my so-called "safe school" rejected me, then the other schools were just as likely to do so (in my psychology studies I was to learn that there is a label for such thinking, namely, "catastrophic thinking"). My next thought was that I wasn't as strong an applicant as I thought, followed by the even more ominous worry, "What if I couldn't become a psychologist!"

Luke listened intently and asked, "Well, you're a psychologist now, so what happened?" I replied with a sense of humor, "Several of the other schools realized what a star applicant I really was and accepted me into their program." Luke laughed and said, "You told me you would mention two examples."

I responded, "That's right. Let me get something out of my file cabinet."

"What?"

I walked over to the cabinet, pulled out a folder and said, "I'll show you. It's a letter written by an editor of a journal. It was in response to one of the first articles I ever submitted for publication. I wrote about a storytelling technique I developed for therapy. I called it 'Creative Characters.' I thought it was a very good paper and I was rather certain it would be accepted, but read the letter I received from the editor." I handed Luke the letter, which informed me, in what I considered was a harsh and denigrating manner, that the article had been rejected for publication. The editor asserted that the

"Creative Characters" technique was not very original and that it added little, if anything, to our knowledge or application of therapy. Ouch!

Luke looked at me. He seemed to take the role of a therapist when he asked, "Wow, how did this make you feel?" I answered, "Very honestly, if I recall correctly my first feeling was anger, like how could this editor not see the merits of my work. Then doubt crept in and I wondered if the technique I had developed was not really very original. Then I became even more angry and upset."

"What happened?"

"Well, as long as you asked, let me tell you. I spoke with a couple of my colleagues who told me that they thought it was an excellent article and suggested I send it to another journal. Funny how sometimes you need a little encouragement to do something you should have thought of yourself. I followed their advice and the article was not only accepted, but the editor offered some really nice comments, including how original the technique was. And, after the article was published, editors of two different therapy books requested permission to re-publish it in their books."

Luke's mood seemed to lighten and with a smile he asked, "Did you think of sending the second editor's comments to the editor who rejected your article."

I returned the smile and said, "The thought did cross my mind, but why be revengeful."

This discussion proved helpful to Luke. His disappointment did not disappear overnight, but it slowly lessened. The experience of the rejections eventually served as a lesson for Luke in dealing with setbacks and in becoming more resilient. Luke attended a college for a year, but was not very happy there and then transferred to another college that had accepted him the previous year. He was much more comfortable at this second college and graduated with honors.

Rejection Letters from Colleges

Memories of my interactions with Luke were evoked as I read a recent article in *The Boston Globe* by Deirdre Fernandes titled "Spring Is In the Air, and So Is Rejection for High School Seniors." The article offered statistics that clearly demonstrated the acceptance rate for so-called "selective" colleges, both public and private, had dropped markedly during the past 20 years.

Fernandes wrote, "Many high school seniors are increasingly struggling to gain a foothold at schools that their parents won admission to without breaking a sweat. As a result, these teenagers are now dealing with perhaps the most significant disappointment of their young lives, awash in rejection letters that have cemented this season as one of dashed dreams and what-ifs."

Fernandes observed that some high schools, cognizant of the stress involved with the college admission process, have initiated steps to lessen the dismay of rejection. Gann Academy in Waltham, Massachusetts "discourages students from wearing sweat shirts to school bragging about their future alma maters until after March, when all the colleges have notified applicants and classmates are less likely to feel hurt."

Students at Newton South High School in Massachusetts are allowed to tack their letters of rejection on the "Wall of Shame," a bulletin board that fills up every spring. It is a vivid daily reminder to students of how many of their classmates received such letters and helps them realize they are not alone. Seniors rejected from MIT can share their disappointment on an online blog sponsored by MIT, with admission counselors and MIT students providing "words of reassurance and sympathy."

In 1987 *The Boston Globe* published an article written by the late columnist David Nyhan that has been reprinted on numerous occasions at this time of year. It is titled "Advice for the College Rejection Letter Recipient." Nyhan acknowledged the hurt and embarrassment of rejection and expressed the opinion that "they didn't reject you, they rejected your resume. . . . They can look at your grades and weigh your scores and see how many years you were in French Club. But they can't look into your head, or into your heart. They can't check out the guts department."

An important perspective upon which to reflect!

Suggestions to Help Handle Rejection

I would like to add three thoughts about the topic of college rejection. I understand that they might not immediately ease the pain of high school seniors who have just received a rejection letter from their top choice school. However, my hope is that if high school students and/or their parents read this article, the thoughts I convey may at some point prove reassuring and result in greater self-compassion about rejection. I also hope that parents appreciate that if their child receives a rejection letter from a top

choice college it is not a reflection on their parenting, and it does not mean their child's future will be less rewarding than if the letter had been one of acceptance.

Now to the three suggestions.

The first is that there are many accomplished individuals who did not attend a "selective" college. I recognize that receiving a degree from a certain college may open more doors than obtaining a degree from a college that is not considered as prestigious, but how far a door will eventually open goes well beyond grades in school or the college one attends. As psychologist Daniel Goleman described in his book *Emotional Intelligence (EQ),* the EQ of individuals often plays a larger role than grades or college attended in determining how satisfying a life they lead, including their relationships with others.

A second suggestion is that given the very low acceptance rate at selective colleges, most high school seniors are likely to receive rejection letters from these schools. There are many variables involved in determining which students will be accepted and which will not. I learned about the complexities and doubts of the decision-making process first hand when I was Director of Child and Adolescent Psychology Training at McLean Hospital. We would typically receive more than 100 internship applications for the five openings available. Given the large pool of applicants, we were only able to invite about 40 for interviews. It was incredibly challenging to select not only whom to invite for these interviews but subsequently whom to accept. With few exceptions all of the applicants were very impressive. I often felt that most, if not all, of them would be excellent trainees in our department. The good news is that typically those for whom we could not offer internships found placements at other excellent training sites.

The third suggestion was articulated by Malcolm Gladwell in his thought-provoking book *David and Goliath.* Gladwell asserted that for some students being admitted to and attending their top choice school may not be in their best interest. For a variety of reasons the school may turn out to be a poor match for them and they may have been happier and more successful attending a respected college but not one considered to be in the top tier. This last statement should not be interpreted to imply that the majority of students who attend a selective college would be less stressed and more successful if

they were at a less elite school; rather, the statement is meant to capture the belief that attending a selective college is not for everyone regardless of their grade point average or scores on an intelligence test.

In support of this perspective Gladwell offered examples of what has been called the "Big Fish-Little Pond Effect" when applied to educational settings. He cited research to illustrate this effect, noting that in any setting we tend to compare ourselves with others so that "students who would feel that they mastered a subject at a good school can have the feeling that they are falling farther and farther behind in a *really* good school. And that feeling—as subjective and ridiculous and irrational as it may be—*matters.* How you feel about your abilities—your academic 'self-concept'—in the context of your classroom shapes your willingness to tackle challenges and finish difficult tasks. It's a crucial element in your motivation and confidence."

Different Paths in Life

During my career as a psychologist I have learned to appreciate that there are many different paths that contribute to a life filled with satisfaction, hope, caring, compassion, and resilience. Sometimes that path may not even include college or it may involve a community college followed by matriculation in a four-year college. I am aware this viewpoint will not be easily accepted by high school students (and their parents) who perceive that their self-worth as well as their present and future accomplishments and happiness are rooted in the college they attend. Nevertheless, we must continue to search for ways to communicate to teenagers that college rejection, while painful, need not be a predictor of the productive, meaningful lives they can lead.