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SUCCESS MEANS NEVER FEELING TIRED

Psychological fatigue is an early-warning system: something is wrong. It can be cured—but not by resting.

Mortimer J. Adler

Failure is probably the most fatiguing experience a person ever has. There is nothing more enervating than not succeeding—being blocked, not moving ahead. It is a vicious circle. Failure breeds fatigue, and the fatigue makes it harder to get to work, which, compounds the failure.

We experience this tiredness in two main ways: as start-up fatigue and performance fatigue. In the former case, we keep putting off a task that we are under some compulsion to discharge, either because it is too tedious or too difficult, we shirk it. And the longer we postpone it, the more tired we feel.

Such start-up fatigue is very real, even if not actually physical, not something in our muscles and bones. The remedy is obvious, though perhaps not easy to apply: an exertion of willpower. The moment I find myself turning away from a job, or putting it under a pile of other things I have to do, I clear my desk of everything else and attack the objectionable item first. To prevent start-up fatigue, always tackle the most difficult job first.

Years ago, when editing *Great Books of the Western World*, I undertook to write 102 essays [*The Syntopicon*], one on each of the great ideas discussed by the authors of those books. The writing took me two years, working at it—among my other tasks—seven days a week. I would never have finished if I had allowed myself to write first about the ideas I found easiest to expound. Applying my own rule, I determined to write the essays in strict alphabetical order, from ANGEL, to WORLD, never letting myself skip a tough idea. And I always started the day's work with the difficult task of essay-writing. Experience proved once again, that the rule works.

Performance fatigue is more difficult to handle. Here we are not reluctant to get started, but we cannot seem to do the job right. Its difficulties appear insurmountable and, however hard we work, we fail again and again. That mounting experience of failure carries with it an ever-increasing burden of mental fatigue. In such a situation, I work as hard as I can—then let the unconscious take over.

When I was planning the 15th edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, I had to create a topical table of contents for its alphabetically arranged articles. Nothing like this had ever been done before, and day after day I kept coming up with solutions that fell short. My fatigue became almost overpowering.

One day, mentally exhausted, I put down on paper all the reasons why this problem could *not* be solved. I tried to convince myself that what appeared insoluble really *was* insoluble, that the trouble was with the problem, not me. Having gained some relief, I sat back in an easy chair and went to sleep.

An hour or so later, I woke up suddenly with the solution clearly in mind. In the weeks that followed, the correctness of the solution

summoned up by my unconscious mind was confirmed at every step. Though I worked every bit as hard, if not harder, than before, my work was not attended by any weariness or fatigue. Success was now as exhilarating as failure had been depressing. I was experiencing the *joy* of what psychologists today call “flow.” Life offers few pleasures more invigorating than the successful exercise of our faculties. It unleashes energies for additional work.

Sometimes the snare is not in the problem itself, but in the social situation—or so it appears. Other people somehow seem to prevent us from succeeding. But, as Shakespeare wrote, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves.” Why blame other people and shrug off our own responsibility for misunderstandings? Doing a job successfully means doing whatever is necessary—and that *includes* winning the cooperation of others.

More often, the snare that blocks us is purely personal. Subject to human distractions, we let personal problems weigh on us, producing a fatigue-failure that blocks our productivity in every sphere.

A friend of mine went into a decline over a family problem that she had let slide. Her daughter had secretly married a man she thought her father would disapprove of. The daughter told her mother but made her promise to keep silent. Worrying about the problem, and carrying a burden of guilt over the secrecy exhausted the other. Her fatigue spilled over into her job and turned her usual successes there into failures. She was saved from serious depression only when other people intervened and told the father—who didn’t display any of the anticipated negative reaction. It seems incredible that a person can allow his or her life to get snarled up in this fashion, but that is how problems can fester if they aren’t solved as they come along.

So, our first step should be to use inexplicable fatigue that has no physical base as a radar—an early-warning system—and trace the fatigue to its source; to find the defeat we are papering over and not admitting. Then we must diagnose the cause of this failure. In rare cases, it may be that the task really is too difficult for us, that we are in over our head. If so, we can acknowledge the fact and bow out. Or the block may simply be in refusing to confront the problem. In most cases, it can be solved by patient attention to the task at hand—with all the skill and resolution we can muster. That, plus the inspired help of the unconscious.

I have already given an example of one way of achieving a breakthrough. First, put down all the reasons why the problem is insolu-

ble. Try to box yourself in, like Houdini, so no escape appears possible. Only then, like Houdini, can you break out. Having tied yourself up in knots, stop thinking consciously about the problem for a while. Let your unconscious work on untying the knots. Nine times out of ten, it will come up with a solution.

The worst mistake we can make is to regard mental fatigue as if it were physical fatigue. We can recuperate from the latter by giving our bodies a chance to rest. But mental fatigue that results from failure cannot be removed by giving in to it and taking a rest. That just makes matters worse. Whatever the specific stumbling block is, it must be cleared up, and fast, before the fatigue of failure swamps us.

Human beings, I believe, must try to succeed. This necessity is built into our biological background. Without trying to define success, it's enough to say that it is related to continuous peak performance, to doing tasks and solving problems as they come along. It is experiencing the exuberance, the joy, the "flow" that goes with the unimpeded exercise of ones human capabilities.

Success, then, means never feeling tired.



From *Reader's Digest*, March 1979, 141-143.

THE DAY THE WORLD ALMOST ENDED

Greetings everyone,

The following is a transcript of a speech that I gave in my local Toastmasters club. It provides some idea of my background, and why Dr. Adler's work is so important to me. The book that I refer to is Adler's *How to Think About the Great Ideas*.

J. Michael Ambrosio, Center member

Sunday, December 2, 1990. That was the day the world almost ended.

Before I tell you what happened on that day, let me take you back to the 1980s, and tell you about the person I was as a boy, growing up on Long Island. I wasn't popular; I was terrible at sports; I didn't have any special artistic talent. But I had always done well

in school, and all throughout my life, I had believed that doing well in school, and going to college, was the key to finding a good job and starting a successful adult life.

And so, with that mindset, I went off to the State University of New York in the fall of 1989. Eighteen months later, on December 2, 1990, I withdrew from the university without having completed my degree. I had flunked out of college. At the age of twenty, I had failed at the one thing I was supposed to be good at.


Looking back on it, twelve years later, I know now that the real reason for my failure was that I did not understand the true value of education when I was young. I thought the purpose of education was to prepare oneself for a life of work. I wanted to learn something useful in school. I didn't know why I should have to study history and literature when all I wanted was a degree in computer science. Besides, I knew that many computer professionals had learned their skills on the job, and I thought I should be able to do the same.

So that is exactly what I did. I got a string of temporary jobs working with computers, and slowly but steadily built up my technical skills. Five years later, in 1996, I was hired as a systems analyst for a major corporation in New Jersey. At last, I thought, I had made it. But despite my apparent success in having found a good job, I still felt a sense of emptiness, of incompleteness, and I couldn't understand why.

And then, one day, I was reading in a book from the library, and I came across a passage discussing the true meaning of liberal education, something I had never understood until that moment. What this book said was that purpose of liberal education is completely different from the purpose of vocational education. Liberal education is not about how to earn a living, it is about how to live. It is education not about things, but about ideas, teaching us how to read and write, speak and listen, understand and think for ourselves. It is education that enables us to develop our minds, and to reach the highest level of human excellence we are capable of attaining. And most importantly, it is the education that all citizens of our modern democracy are now privileged to have. For that is the meaning of the word "liberal" in "liberal education"; it is education that teaches free people how to use their liberty well.

I had never heard anything like that before in my life. In a matter of minutes, everything I had ever believed about school, work, the value of education, and what it means to live in a free country had been turned upside down. If my withdrawal from college had been

the day the world almost ended, this was the day the world began anew.

I'm back in school now, attending Rutgers University in the evenings, taking classes in subjects such as philosophy, history, and literature. And I am pleased to report that, if all goes well, I will graduate with honors next year, and finally obtain the degree I have been waiting over twelve years to achieve. But at the same time, I know that, although my schooling will soon be complete, my education will go on for as long as I live. 

I have since graduated from Rutgers University with highest honors. —JMA

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