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Research Paper

Analysing Fear of Failure Through a Client Experience and Therapeutic Intervention

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I have attempted to combine theoretical constructs of fear of failure with a client's experience of overcoming this fear. Through my experience with Miss A (name kept anonymous for the purpose of confidentiality), her struggles and her emotions are analysed with a relevant review of the literature to holistically explore the said phenomena. Data in this context has been derived from the dialogic process of online therapy, which includes client experiences and reflections as well as the learnings and insights gained through the therapeutic process. Lastly, the intervention focuses on ups and downs to learn to cope with negative emotions, deal with thoughts related to fear of failure, and gather courage to accomplish challenging tasks.

Keywords: *Fear of failure, Procrastination, Perfectionism, Case study, Therapeutic intervention*

When clients enter counselling sessions, it is typical for a counsellor to note the contents of their thought patterns, emotions that arise from these thoughts, and their verbal and nonverbal displays. As sessions progress, observable themes emerge, providing clarity and paving pathways for further analysis and intervention. This article discusses such a theme, 'fear of failure.'. I met Miss A in 2021. However, this memory stayed, subconsciously wanting to ponder into the subject. In 2024, while I was going through my case notes, the idea to pen down this experience seemed exciting. Thus, here I present you with the case of Miss A navigating through her fear of failure and connecting it with relevant research in the field.

Purpose

This article attempts to combine theoretical constructs of fear of failure with a client's experience of overcoming this fear**.**

Background Information

This submission intends to share a personal narrative related to mental health challenges. This prompted me to reflect on Miss A's journey, which not only highlights her resilience but also offers valuable insights into the process of achieving triumph over what is feared to gain what she desired. In June 2021, there was a call for an online therapy session from a 39-

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year-old female mid-level manager based in Bangalore. She reported that she felt overwhelmingly anxious. She was required to take a test to qualify for a promotion that would lead her to climb the ladder of senior management. But then she was avoiding it for the last 3 years, not able to be eligible for promotion, which made her feel stuck in her current position. She described that the thought of taking the test caused her extreme anxiety and even panic attacks. On the surface level, it seemed to be as simple as any student who is about to take a test has some level of anxiety. However, in context to Miss A, she wasn't a student! And clearing an exam would certainly help her achieve her goal of being promoted. Then what was the huddle?

Presenting problem

During our initial sessions, it was clear that in Miss A's context, "test anxiety," which she mentioned in the phone call, was a generic description that manifested on the surface. A little more probing opened Pandora's box, and the depth of emotions was felt. The real problem with Miss A was fear of failure along with perfectionism. Considering fear of failure as the cause and perfectionism as a personality characteristic, which is also a defence used to cope with the underlying fears. Perfectionism was displayed to cope with her overt social setup, and fear of failure was a covert motive. Parallelly, procrastination was the outcome behaviour. Anxiety, shame, and fear of shame are the resultant emotions in the process.

Conceptual understanding

1. **Fear of failure:** Atychiphobia is a fancy name for fear of failure characterised by an irrational and persistent fear of failing (Kendra Cherry, 2023). In the 1950s and 1960s, Atkinson, a popular researcher in the field of motivation, in his theory of Need for Achievement (N-ACH), defined fear of failure as a "motive to avoid failure in evaluative situations based on anticipatory shame upon failing.".
2. **Perfectionism:** The American Psychological Association (APA) defines perfectionism as the tendency to demand of others or of oneself an extremely high or even flawless level of performance, in excess of what is required by the situation. Perfectionism demands a person to set high standards for him/herself/themselves. It is accompanied by self-criticism and negative appraisal of self. It results in emotions such as shame, embarrassment, and guilt. It is primarily considered a personality trait (Frost, 1990). Forms of perfectionism are described as normal perfectionism and neurotic perfectionism by Hemachek D.E. in 1978, and it is the neurotic perfectionist who experiences greater intensity of emotional disturbance leading to maladaptive behaviour.

The impact

Fear of failure significantly impacts the sufferers' lives substantially in more than a single aspect of their lives. It was noted that Miss A's fear of failure was not limited to her career but also extended to her personal life. She had been in a relationship for the last 7 years but feared committing to marriage with her partner with a question: what if it fails? Her presentation showcased the crippling effects of the phenomenon of fear of failure.

The interconnections between fear of failure, perfectionism, and procrastination

Fear of failure leads people to constantly appraise their situations categorising them as safe and unsafe. It could possibly cause aversion to making mistakes and may make the affected person feel vulnerable to thought rumination and self-criticism. All challenging circumstances that may potentially provide opportunities for growth, for example, writing a

test, presenting at a meeting or doing an interview, would be seen as threatening situations leading to stagnation in personal and professional life. (Conroy et. al., 2001). It is the underlying fear of the need to be perfect that kept Miss A away from achieving her major goals in life. It was also intriguing to observe that Miss A was functional in most other areas of her life and wasn't a habitual procrastinator, but she delayed only those tasks that involved a higher risk factor. Hence, displaying a high need for control and certainty.

Another related study observed that a person who is driven by perfectionism and procrastination would be trapped in the approach-avoidance conflict. "The drive and determination to be successful is an indicator of an approach orientation. However, this drive is defensively fuelled by fear of failure, which accounts for avoidance orientation.". (Covington, 2000). Miss A was also conflicted by the values of societal conditioning. The desire to be successful verses being the "good woman". She seemed to seek constant approval and validation from authority figures. Interestingly, in the early years of the 1950s, research in achievement orientation studies was mostly conducted on men. There was no clear explanation for why women did not opt to become successful in their careers. It was researcher Martina Horner who proposed that women have societal pressures to conform to traditional feminine roles, and achievement orientation is considered to be a masculine drive. This made women fear success. Horner provided a gender perspective on the phenomenon of fear of failure. Additionally, it is observed that women feel more pressure to conform to societal obligations, are more shamed by society, and tend to display perfection more than men (Elison J, Partridge J.A., 2012). This sociocultural perspective gives an insight into Miss A's social conditioning related to her fears and the need to be perfect.

Elaborating further on the social influence of fear of failure, research evidence suggests that society significantly influences how we perceive success. Failure is often seen as a deterrent and could lead to isolation (Conroy 2001), and that results in shame (Katz, 1999). A glimpse into Miss A's feelings post her divorce provided evidence for the shame she felt as a result of social deviance. She mentioned that the divorce was a major setback, a social taboo to her and that she hid it from her friends or colleagues. Thus, feeling socially isolated.

A positive perspective of fear of failure is proposed by Australian researcher Martin Andrew J. in a study titled Fear of Failure: A Friend or Foe, which suggests that a healthy orientation of fear of failure and perfectionism could drive a person to achieve in the face of adversity. Miss A displayed a hard-working orientation and persistence in her professional life that aided in her career growth so far. Post her divorce, at the age of 30 years, she pursued an executive MBA without any financial assistance from her family. This was a mark of resilience and strength displayed by Miss A, and this awareness brought in a spark of motivation in the therapy process.

The two concepts of fear of failure and fear of success overlap with each other. Both create huddles towards goal attainment. Dissecting the difference between the two significantly provides conceptual clarity into Miss A's problem. Fear of failure is relevant to self-perception. It resonates with Miss A's feeling of inadequacy. "I am not good enough" were words that echoed in Miss A's speech. Juxtaposed with fear of success is alignment with others' perception of ourselves. It is associated with increased responsibility, people's expectations, fear of recognition, and changes related to elevated social status.

The cognitive perspective

Cognitive behaviour therapy explains the interplay between our thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. It helps to examine underlying schemas. These schemas account for the cognitive structures that help us infer and process information about ourselves in the social world (Baron and Berne, 2003). According to psychologist Jean Piaget, we constantly organise and reorganise our schemas, and they could be adaptive and maladaptive depending upon the inferences we derive from them. Our self-schema includes real self-schema and ideal self-schema (Beck, 1976). People suffering from fear of failure show a distorted self-schema. Miss A was not different. She described herself as perfectly desiring success—her ideal self-schema. However, she escaped challenges that would lead her there—her real self-schema. Socially, she called herself competitive; nevertheless, in therapy, it was discovered that she envied all those who cleared the test and got promoted. Upward comparisons of self with others in one's known circle have proved to lead to envy and low self-esteem (Major, Sciacchitano, & Crocker, 1993). The negative self-evaluation is associated with poor performance and failure experience. (Taforodi and Vu, 1994), Miss A constantly appraised herself negatively, making room for negative feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and incompetency. Resulting in low self-efficacy—the judgement about one's optimal functioning and motivation to accomplish tasks successfully (Bandura, 1986).

Cognitive psychologists over the years have proved that we construct our realities by forming hypotheses and putting those predictions to the test in our day-to-day lives. Apparently, these constructs could be fragmented. (Kelly, 1955). Downplaying of positives, black and white thinking, catastrophising, and minimisation of self were some of the cognitive distortions echoed in Miss A's thinking.

Aetiology

Miss A's narrative of her childhood experiences and relationship with her parents provided valuable insights into the probable cause of Miss A's maladaptive learning of fear of failure and perfectionism as a defence mechanism to cope with her fears. According to her, during her growing years, her parents gave frequent silent treatments whenever she behaved "wrongly.". This silence was interpreted as "parents don't love me if I fail, so I should be the best in everything I do.". Supporting research suggests that parental withdrawal of love is associated with fear of failure (Hoffman, 1970). McGregor and Elliot (2005) found a positive relationship between shame proneness and fear of failure, as well as a positive relationship between parental shaming and fear of failure. Specifically, individuals who were higher in fear of failure reported greater shame than those who were lower in fear of failure. Miss A expressed intense moments of her experience of shame in her current life and in her childhood. She stated that her parents often compared her with other kids and shamed her for not behaving up to their standards. As a child, she feared parental rejection and tried to be the best in all spheres of her life. She admitted that her decision to marry for the first time came from her need to please her parents. She recalled that her parents seldom acknowledged the positives in her. Contradictorily, her parents were overly critical of her behaviours.

Physiological response

In context to Miss A's fears, she complained of a feeling of choking in her throat, shortness of breath, and a constant feeling of being on the edge, especially when she had an off day at work. Further, she complained of a racing heart, chest pain or discomfort, tremors, and accelerated heart rate indicative of a panic attack. One such incident made her rush to the hospital thinking that she had a heart attack.

Medical and psychological intervention

Miss A was hesitant to visit a psychiatrist. However, episodes of panic attacks led her to seek medical advice. She was prescribed a course of benzodiazepines for a period of fifteen days.

It is imperative for the client to deal with negative thoughts and emotions related to fear of failure. Miss A experienced intense anxiety and shame as her primary emotions and fear of shame and envy as her secondary emotions. She was encouraged to learn the association between her thoughts and her emotions. An awareness was brought into the content of her thought patterns, e.g., "I feel selfish of me," "my problems are trivial," in times when she was negatively evaluating herself and her circumstances, inferring incidences, and judging and criticising herself. Further, monitoring thoughts of self-criticism and replacing them with compassionate ones placed a focal point on therapy. A letter to her 10-year-old self, providing safety, compassion, and courage to navigate through negative experiences of parental comparison, helped to silence her inner critic and soothe her anxiety. Mindfulness exercises like square breathing were incorporated into daily self-care practice. As well as simple grounding exercises that were practised to bring her attention in the here and now, included paying attention to sounds in her environment, spotting different colours, and mindful tasting/savouring of food. Lastly, a metaphorical tree root grounding imagery exercise was used to improve focus in the present moment. Here Miss A was asked to imagine herself as a tree whose roots are deeply rooted in the ground, thus making it unshakeable.

As sessions progressed, Miss A was gently nudged to actively work on herself. Moving further through sessions 6, 7, and 8, Miss A's fear of failure was apparent in the therapy sessions. It was observed that she rushed through talking about different problems in her life, deviating from the goals agreed upon during sessions. She blamed herself for being inefficient. This behaviour prompted cues into her struggle, metaphorically, an artist who wished to paint a masterpiece but feared the first paint stroke. Miss A was stuck in a vicious cycle of self-minimalization and self-criticism accompanied by anxiety and shame. Realising this cycle turned out to be a eureka moment for both of us. The tool of empathy was employed to acknowledge the difficulty. Miss A showed resilience when she understood the cause of her maladaptive behaviour. She was encouraged to trust herself and soothe herself when in self-doubt. Further, it was reflected that because she left the tasks unfinished, she was deprived of the pleasure of completing the tasks, and the feeling of accomplishment never came by. That may have been one of the reasons for the feeling of inadequacy. Her helplessness was acknowledged. Time and again, It was conveyed that therapy was a safe space to experiment. If she succeeded, it would be a moment of celebration, and even if she failed, she was accepted. This modelling of a nurturing parent helped motivate change in Miss A. Miss A stood committed to change and overcoming her negative emotions.

CONCLUSION

Therapy continued for thirteen sessions, sixty minutes each, spread over a period of seven months. Miss A learnt to attempt and accomplish her tasks by coping with her anxiety and shame. Further, Miss A attempted her test for promotion; however, she failed it. The pain of failing was evident. To my surprise, this time Miss A had an awareness that she survived the failure and it wasn't as bad as she thought it would be. She expressed her desire to do it again with better preparation, as the promotion was important to her. Also, she dealt with office embarrassment of the failure by telling her office folks that she gave the test on a trial

basis. The courage to attempt the test was cheered. Post the final therapy session in December 2021, Miss A got married to her friend with whom she was in a relationship.

Limitations and Future Scope:

- This article attempts to combine theoretical constructs of fear of failure with a client's experience of overcoming this fear. Data, in this context, was derived from a dialogic process of online therapy that included client experiences and reflections as well as the learnings and insights gained through the therapeutic process. There was no psychometric test administered. Hence, giving a scope for the same in the future.
- Further, considering the nature of counselling is slow, it may be pondered upon that chances of client drop-out cannot be ruled out. Navigating through client resistance and the possibility of disruption in the therapeutic alliance were some of the challenges faced.
- Lastly, the current focus in the area of fear of failure is largely focused on building theories and finding related factors and dimensions in this area. Applications of this phenomenon lie in diverse fields like academics, sports, and management. Attempts have been made to develop self-report inventories to identify probable persons having fear of failure and gather relevant data. There is wide scope for qualitative research in the field.

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Conflict of Interest

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