# LET'S TALK ABOUT FAILURE

## FOSTERING STUDENT SELF-COMPASSION

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

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# INTRODUCTION

Most students experience some form of stress or setback during their education[1], but UofT students **experience academic setbacks in a particular way**. UofT prides itself on its excellence in research, teaching, and its quality of students. However, students—from undergraduate to graduates—do not always perceive themselves as **"excellent."[2]** This **alienation from excellence** is aggravated when **students experience setbacks**, such as an **academic failure**. Worsened by the narrative of excellence, stories of failure do not appear to be **formative of growth and learning at UofT**, even though failure or setback is a common part of learning and life. The Division of Student Life Academic Resilience Initiative has partnered with the Innovation Hub to collect student failure stories. We asked: "How do UofT students experience failure and what are their stories of failure?"

Drawing on equity-centered and empathy-based methodologies, we developed the project: **LET'S TALK ABOUT FAILURE**

We began by exploring existing data in our archive of over 600 interviews, as previous interviewees had shared plenty of discussion about failure. We reached out to the UofT student population with our initial query for participation, which included an open-ended question about their failure experience. From the 86 students who responded, 34 participated in three in-depth, dialogue-based feedback sessions. The students were from all levels of study, from first-year undergraduates to doctoral students. The feedback sessions used long-form, open-ended interview techniques aimed at allowing students to **openly share their stories of failure**. Throughout the project, students **self-defined their failures**—whether it was grades below 50 percent, a C-minus, or something entirely different. We used grounded analytic techniques in order to gain a deeper **understanding of the core needs students have when experiencing failure**.

# FREEDOM TO FAIL

## We found students need the freedom to fail to become compassionate towards themselves.

What does freedom to fail entail? We learnt about failure from student stories—from their reconsidering narrow ideas of achievement, coming to terms with failure and its negative feelings, and feeling free to be themselves fully and more wholly, along with their failures. The freedom to fail involved three themes: Challenging Narrow Measurements of Success, The Self Struggle, Paradigm Shifts.

**Challenging Narrow Measurements of Success**

**Paradigm Shifts**

Students need the freedom to fail to become compassionate towards themselves.

**The Self Struggle**
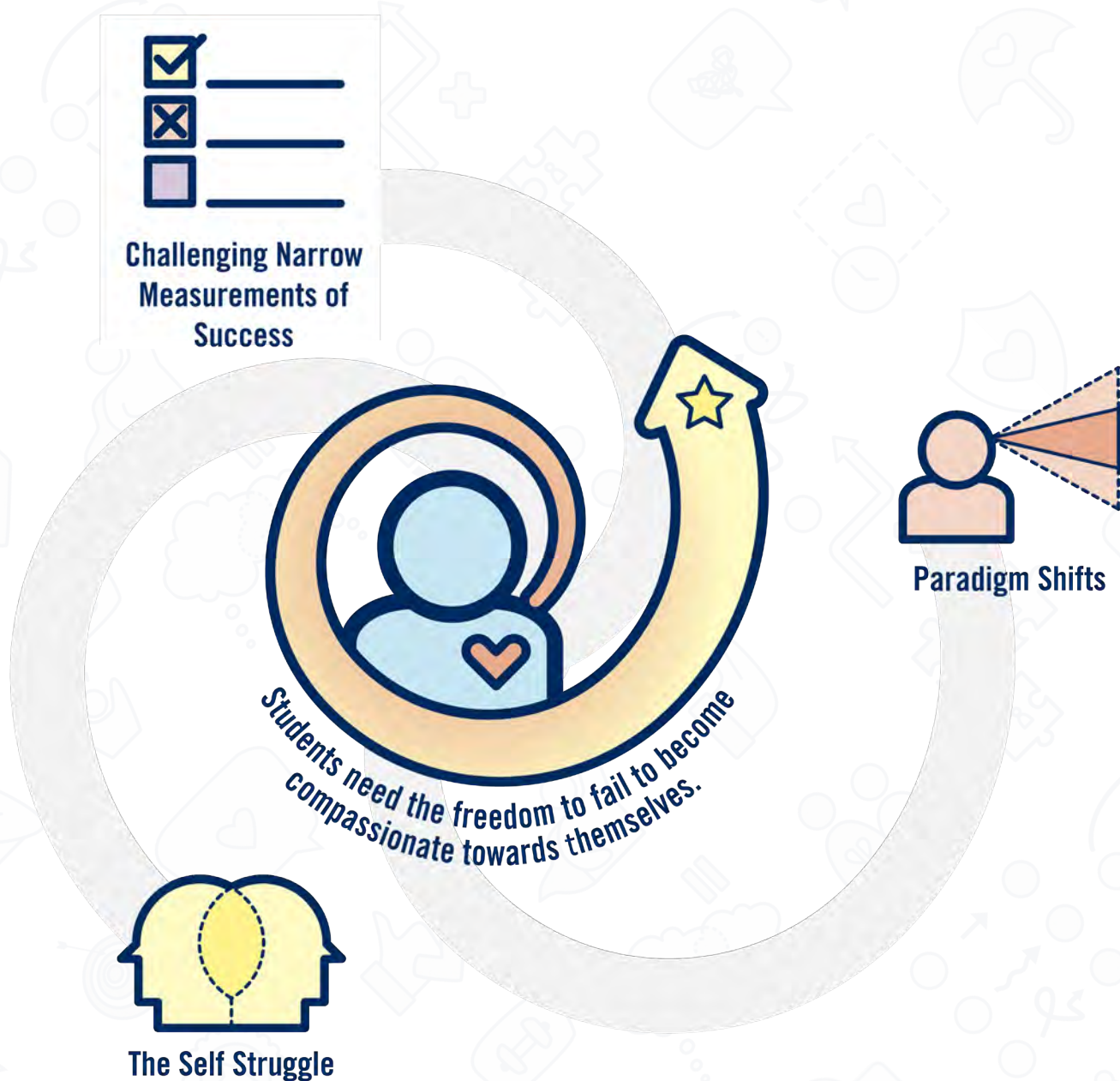
# CHALLENGING NARROW MEASUREMENTS OF SUCCESS

Student failure stories were primarily focused on not achieving academic or career goals that they saw as key to their accomplishment and excellence at the university. Examples of these missed goals include not achieving desired grades on course assessments or not obtaining desired job placements. Students shared that these failures prompted challenging self-evaluations, arising especially from the comparisons and expectations that they already hold.

## IT'S ALL ABOUT GRADES AND JOBS

Student failure stories focused primarily on a narrow space of academic or job-related achievement. In other words, failure was about not achieving a desired outcome—most often a bad grade—rather than the actual behaviour that led to the situation. For many students, this academic failure occurred earlier on in their academic journey, or in an area of study they were not familiar with, while others struggled with continued failure.

*"I received a grade that I was not very happy with in my first year of undergraduate studies. This seems like forever ago, but I was very used to—in high school—achieving high grades and then—when I got to my undergraduate studies—I was recommended—on the basis of some other folks in my program—to take this particular course which they coined a bird course in gender studies. So, I took it thinking, 'okay, it's an easy grade,' and I found that I was completely challenged […] by the material. So, the very first project that I submitted for grading I got a C-minus and I'd never before gotten this, a C, in my entire life."*

*"On my second or third year […] I was taking a core course—something that was for my major—and what happened was that my final grade was 43. So obviously when you go to your transcript it says that 'oh it's a failure, didn't pass the course.' "*

*"My failure story is just, currently, I'm probably looking to fail […] one or two courses this year. And so, going forward, I'm not sure how that's going to affect my studies. I might have a suspension, or my GPA will suffer, but it's happened to other people in the past, and they move on. So, I guess, I just have to try and look at it from that perspective."*

Many students also spoke about failing to be selected for the placements, internships, research positions or jobs they had applied to. This kind of failure story was more common in upper-year undergraduate or graduate students. Graduate students also spoke about failure in their research, especially with the idea that failure might have been acceptable before graduate studies, but no longer was.

*"And the worst thing is, I couldn't figure out which step is wrong [in the experiment]. Because there are so many steps—and there's room for error in every step and it's just so hard to figure out—and that day [...] it just felt so frustrating, because in undergrad I know I was actually good at this. In my undergrad research, I haven't experienced anything like this, where you learn something for several times, and you still can't do to the extent that you expect. But it happens in grad school, and I guess it's not something too new—it happened to somebody as well I know. Like, that's kind of typical experience, but the first time you experience this it's just a lot difficult to handle, I guess."*

*"I'm also a grad student and I also was unable to find any summer internships, which is funny because I was promised that as a grad student a lot of opportunities open up for you."*

*"It's so odd that whenever something bad happens—like a family member's sick, or some family member passes away, or whenever something bad happens in general—the first instinct is to think about your courses and to immediately go, 'I need to email my professor for an extension.' Or that, 'I need to look at the policy and see if I can reschedule this exam' and that really made me think that the school environment is so ingrained in us where that's what we think about all the time. And I wonder—when people graduate—what happens then, because for four or five years you've been thinking in this way. I just think about how that might affect us in the future."*

In sum, while the sessions were not intended to narrow in on academic failure, the stories primarily focused on these areas of student life. Students were self-reflective about the narrow conditions of their self-assessment and notions of failure, even if they recognized the conditions consistent impact on their lives.

# COMPARISON IS THE THIEF OF JOY

Comparison and competition with classmates and peers figure prominently in student failure stories. Students explained that they see their peers achieving better grades or job placements and that this contrast causes hard feelings, including alienation. Other times, the comparison was with an ideal version of themselves, provoking a negative relationship with themselves.

"That's the academic culture at U of T, it kind of makes it a norm that you should be working hard and also, plus, the workload you have. So, sometimes, me and my friends measure ourselves by how many hours we are productive. So, if we are procrastinating or not spending time doing the right thing, it's kind of a failure. Um yeah, try to just work hard all the time, it feels good doing that and feels bad not doing that."

"In my first year, I didn't do really well and it wasn't just for one course it was multiple courses over and over, not getting the As that I had in high school. So that really brought me down in first year. And especially seeing other people around me and their grades—they were significantly better so that really brought me low as well."

"Similar to what everyone said, I feel like—when compared to my peers—I always feel like I'm not as good as they are so that's one failure."

"Whatever I want to do, I want to do good in it, you know. Sometimes, my friends say, 'why are you competing yourself with everyone around you on everything?'"

Many students noted that even if they became aware that narrow and competitive self-assessments were not useful, this awareness did not make the hard feelings generated go away.

"As I've gotten older and moved from undergraduate studies into a master's degree program and some full-time work in-between there, I think I've learnt […] if I'm doing something that makes me happy and makes me feel accomplished and good, then it shouldn't really matter what anyone else thinks of that. And those folks who […] create that sort of culture of competition or ranking or stratification or whatnot then that's not someone that I want to be associated with and that's been a really hard lesson to learn, but I think probably one of the best ones that I have learnt over the past few years."

"A friend of mine yesterday just told me that she got rehired back to her internship place which is not the same place, but I got more sad because of that, which is unfair, because sometimes when you see someone succeeding you get jealous which I do all the time and I try not to, but we're on the same boat, we both graduate at the same time, we both work for a year, and we both came back. So yeah, that's I feel like others' success kind of adds on to your own sadness."

"But I still can't shake that fact that I'm using it as an excuse, even if I think if another person told me that, I'd be like, 'dude, I have a lot of friends who are graduate students.' Schools literally don't care [...] what your course load is. They care about your research, and they care about your overall GPA—the admissions team does not have enough time to look through and compare each of your courses,' you know, I still feel like a failure."

"I think failure hurts the most when you put an effort, because I think we're generally taught, growing up, that if you put in an effort, you'll get what you want. And I see other people who are able to get internships and it makes me wonder, am I just using COVID as an excuse, and it's really just something wrong with me, you know?"

Overall, evaluations—especially rankings or grade cut-offs for program-entry— provoke students into comparison and competition that do not bring them much positive feeling. Evaluations, and the comparison and hard feelings that they might elicit, often lingered even if students tried to rationalise or explain them away.

# GREAT EXPECTATIONS

When explaining their failure stories, students often spoke about grappling with expectations. Many of the expectations were about excellence, emerging from pre-conceived notions of what it means to be a UofT student, who this ideal student is expected to be, and what they are expected to do. In these struggles, students spoke about their inner conflicts with hard feeling about themselves.

"There's definitely a reputation that UofT has. [...] if you look at the marketing of UofT, everything is about the success stories, right? So, there's that coupled with, if you're not doing well at UofT you're like, 'am I ever going to be as successful as Banting & Best?' [....] I do think going to UofT has a lot of pressure as far as trying to be a successful student and [...it's about] imposter syndrome, because I felt like I'm not really being a [... UofT student] you're not representing UofT based on what I see as far as the reputation."
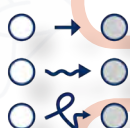
"I'm a person who's always set high expectation of myself so for a lot of people they see me as 'the good at everything person,' but I know I'm not and I kind of want to deny that I'm sometimes not good at something. So, when that failure eventually came, I just couldn't take it. and, last semester, I experienced a lot of emotional collapse."

"What failure really meant to me when I was in first year was not being able to take all five courses in a semester, because that was the full course load, or what's kind of expected. And I took like less than five. [It] felt like I wasn't doing enough, even though I could catch up in future semesters."

"A particular moment that stands out to me about failure was probably, when in my first year […] I took an economic test and I studied really hard for it, and then, when I got it back, I got my very first 56 ever in my life. So, dealing with that was really hard, because it was my first year university and, I guess, coming to UofT, I just have this expectation for myself, and I thought others have this expectation of me. And it was really hard to like kind of grapple with those ideas and like kind of wanting to better myself but also not wanting to like give up."

In addition to abstract notions of excellence, many students spoke of expectations from others, primarily family members. At times, the expectations were further shaped by the context and background of students—for example, being an international student and what it meant to go to UofT. Contending with these expectations were notions that the students had not fulfilled them, were different than they thought they were, or how they thought they should be. Students' failure to fulfill expectations provoked crises of self, disappointment from themselves or their relations, and questioning as to if they fit in at UofT.

"I ended up doing really bad in three of my classes—like I got 50s. And so that, for my parents, was quite a shock. I remember, all my way from home, my parents were just kind of yelling at me […] that's when it hit me, I was like, 'well, I really did bad,' and so, that's my experience with failure and it's probably the worst thing I've ever felt."

"I really need to learn how to prioritize and being a good daughter is, like, the top one of my top priorities and to make sure I'm able to meet that expectation that I have set for myself."

"The language barrier was worse than I had expected because in high school we also learn English—and my high school was kind of specialized in language learning—but, honestly, although I was like the top student in English, when I came here and I couldn't understand a lot of things—even if that's some simple daily conversations—I felt so anxious and sometimes I experienced low self-esteem."

"My parents are also  look at UofT really highly, so to me it feels like if I don't do anything that might match UofT standards to them it kind of seems like a failure in a way."

> *I'm an international student coming from another country [...] I was learning everything with this PhD student in our lab [...] I was trying to make this make these particles, but I couldn't make it, the result is not what should be there. And the worst thing is I couldn't figure out which step is wrong. [...] In my undergrad research, I haven't experienced anything like this where you learn something several times, and you still can't do to the extent that you expect. But it happens in grad school, and I guess it's not something too new [...] But the first time you experience this, it's just a lot difficult to handle, I guess. And especially when somebody else you know spends a lot of time and effort to teach you and you still can't meet the expectation, it feels hopeless at the moment."*

Many students expressed self-reflexivity about how expectations could transform into negative motivations that did not necessarily serve them well. Alternatively, some students expressed that when their expectations are fulfilled, they do not notice their success as much, taking it for granted.

> "I know a lot of us set really high requirements for ourselves, and the fact is that we can't be as good as everybody else in everything. But sometimes, I guess, we fall into that thinking track without knowing."

> "I find it difficult to use success as driving force because, to a lot of us—like [participant 1] and [participant 2]—success, it's just part of the deal, it's not something that is worth celebrating when we achieve it, because we were expecting that already."

> "I was so disappointed by my family and friends—I was not able to get my work done, like, at all. So, using negative emotions to drive you will not help either, so [...] don't use negative emotions, because one way it won't work, and the second thing is that, even if it does work, it won't last and it will just be even worse, every time. Like, if you just look at your anger and your frustration to do something, even when you achieve it, it was based on negative thing."

Overall, academic and career success occurs in the context of others' expectations and achievements, including that of class-mates, peers, family, as well as a student's own sense of self. This context produces comparisons and expectations that further complicate the self-evaluation that occurs with a 'failed' achievement and the resulting shame. Despite being recognized by many students as a narrow and not fulsome account of learning, failing grades and other achievements can have serious consequences on their lives, whether that is succeeding in their desired program or avoiding academic probation.

# THE SELF STRUGGLE

Students spoke about how the process of working through their failures impacted their sense of self and their mental health. Students described internalising and identifying the negative emotions of failure to themselves, such that at times an act of failing became an identity of failure, alienating and isolating the students from others whom they felt were succeeding. This internal struggle became external when students spoke about their attempts, and often challenges, with seeking help, and how this process was complicated by stigma about help-seeking.

## WHO AM I NOW THAT I FAILED?

Many students described how their experience of failure resulted in them feeling confused about their identity, given that they might not have had a devastating experience previously.

*"We all go through a lot of different experiences, especially even moving into university. First year was really rough for me, in that sense. And it got to a point where I just started to associate myself with the wrong people, I was always a go-getter in high school, but then in university I felt like I just started to give up on myself—I didn't really have that motivation to better myself. So, even though I knew I was fully capable, and I was always getting 90s in high school and I got to UofT in first year, I didn't know what to do with myself. I just felt like a failure mentally, and then that leaked on into my studies and actually failed two classes in my first year."*

*"For the first while I was in denial about it, I was like, 'no, I was a really good student and the professor's wrong.' I just didn't want to accept it [...] I think it's starting to recognize that it's not about trying to make you feel bad as a person, it's not about trying to make you feel less of yourself, it's more to help you grow and learn. And that's what I took from that experience. So, I've actually started to utilize a lot of the services offered at UofT to get me to the next level as far as my writing goes, so it was a tough journey to accept that I wasn't as great of a student as I thought I was."*

*"I've been an organized person whose pretty academically oriented, but last semester was just a lot of deadlines, and I started mixing up deadlines and forgetting them, and I felt really like I'm not supposed to be this kind of person."*

The feelings of identifying with failure, or having their identities changed in the face of failure, were compounded by situations where students were coming to learn more about their own identity. For example, students reported that their failure interacted with what they thought of themselves and the labels they had about themselves. Navigating these parts of their identities made students' failures more complex, but could also help them as, at times, a label or context made sense of the failure and led to help-seeking.

"Sometimes things get diagnosed very late; I had another friend who was diagnosed with [a developmental disorder] at like 20. And, you know, there's no shame in finding a label if it gives you comfort and gives you better access to resources."

"I'm now a first-year undergraduate student and am now in China, which is like 12 hours ahead. So last semester was my first semester at UofT, and I felt like so overwhelmed because of the transition from high school to university and also because of the cultural transition and language transition, and you know the time zone difference kind of made it worse."

Such challenges to identity sometimes resulted in feelings of disconnection or isolation. Even though students spoke about how they understood that failure is common, they still explained feeling alone in their failure experience, given its particularity to their situation and themselves.

"In first year, I had a bunch of coding courses, and I never coded before entering university, and I remember I always got like 50s and 40s on my midterms. At that point, I stopped caring about my grade, but every time I entered the lab room for the coding assignments, I would become traumatized—I know that sounds over-dramatic, but I would start crying because I didn't know what to do for a lot of my coding assignments. And eventually I started going to a separate lab by myself just because I think I couldn't handle being around other people who did the assignment without problems. So that was something I went through."

"Within the UofT context, it feels almost like beginning to question whether you belong at UofT just because there is a competitive feel to UofT as well. So, when you do experience failure, I found that you begin to doubt your skills."

"Even more so in these times where, again, working from home, I feel like in my classes I can't get a good sense for how the rest of the class is doing or if anybody else's having the same trouble, as I am with a specific question or assignment."

Thus, students go through a change in their identity when experiencing failure, which is alienating and even traumatizing. Often, this change is encountered first with aversion, resistance, and crisis.

# FAILURE FOCUSED

Students explained that they often ruminate on their failures and the resulting negative feelings, such as fear, anxiety, and depression. Many students described how their negative feelings from failure had wider, lasting impacts on their mental health.

*"Most of my failures are related to mental health. […] It's been a long struggle […] I'm either going to get [the assignment in]—it's the perfectionism, so it's either going in and it's done properly or it's not going in at all. And that's obviously had a significant impact, sort of cascading throughout not just school, but little life. […] I still struggle with that dynamic of perfectionism and fear failure. It's a pervasive factor in everything I do."*

*"When you try so hard and you don't get what you originally intend to, anything else, even if it's something that you know you should be proud, just doesn't feel as good."*

*"When you're in a season of failure, and you feel like everything's going wrong, it makes it hard for you to believe that something could go right."*

*"For me [failure is] more like I feel a sense of disconnect when I'm going about my day sometimes. Some days I can have high, and I can, like, be having the best day my life. Other days it could be such a low, and I feel like in those lows—no matter how good something happens—it's like I can't see or appreciate what's happening and I don't really like that, because I know like I should be appreciative of it. […] I know what I should be feeling and if I'm not feeling that. It really bothers me. […]  It's to the point where I feel like, sometimes, I can carry that on for days and it just spirals downward. I could, from one bad day, can go to a bad week, to a bad month and then I really need something to pull me out of it and really be like, 'okay, you know what? It's not that bad.' […] But it's like, at that moment when you're going through it's just so hard to get out of it."*

Focusing on failure also made students unwilling to share their successes, for fear that they might make their peers feel further hard feelings. Some students mentioned that the focus on their failures, as opposed to their successes, was based on cultural values of humility and not being boastful.

"In my culture, we've been taught not to share our experiences [...] like, 'oh someone's going to give you evil eye,' [and] you don't know, your success might just take a hit."

"I've been brought up to be humble, so I wouldn't go out of the way to tell other people, 'oh I got this job,' or something like that, or even little successes in my life. I wouldn't go and share it with other people just because, I guess, the way I was brought up to not be boastful about these things."

"When I was little, my grandpa always told me that I was, I'm an elite—I have to get 100 in tests. But when I reached middle school, I realized that I had this tendency to kind of show off my achievements. So, I did my best to kind of suppress that, and now I just had that idea that sharing my successes like showing off. But I do try to share little stories with my friends and also I do try to share more with my family, but sometimes it's just a little bit hard."

"I think that a lot of people right now are feeling crappy, and a friend can love and care about you very deeply and also still feel shitty when you tell them about your success. And it's not because they think you don't deserve it, or they hate you, but because seeing someone else succeed, especially someone very close to them, can make them feel more like a failure. So, when it comes to things like that, I honestly don't share, and it has nothing to do with me not trusting them or thinking any less of them, but because I want the best for their emotional well-being. But I do share things that are less traditional metrics of success with people I care about."

Even when students wanted to refocus on success, failures still occupied focus, given that failures are intended to be a source of learning and redefinition of success. This occupation with failure had a tendency for some to return to negative feelings.

"I guess it's a little bit hard for me to also recall success, especially after we go through all the failures."

"I tend to wonder about my failures more, maybe just because it's negative experience and you tend to think about it more. And for successes, I'm less grateful about it and it's more so like, taking your successes for granted as in, 'oh yeah, I know, it was expected for me to do well.' I think, for failure, I tend to analyze a bit more and be able to be more picky about what went well, what didn't, and what could be improved for me."

> *"I'd love to be able to say that I think that I can regard the failures and successes equally in terms of taking things away from those experiences and learning from them, but I think it's just sort of ingrained within our society to ruminate more on the failures and, sort of, I guess, see them as this narrative of failures as sort of a pivotal moment and sometimes. It's not that for everyone, and so I think that's something that I personally have struggled with."*

Overall, ruminating on failure multiplies students' hard feelings and distracts from other aspects of their lives. Many spoke about turning to mental health supports since these primarily help them hold and acknowledge the negative feelings without necessarily rushing to problem-solving.

# HELP CAN BE HARD

Students spoke about how, when experiencing failure, seeking help can be a challenge. For some, asking for support was difficult because they were so focused on the failure itself and could not get past it to seek help. For others, help was associated with feeling weak, incapable, and thus a sign of failure itself.

> *"I think that there is room to for failure at UofT. There are resources that are there, available to help, like office hours and stuff like that, but I feel like there's just this stigma that everybody is so successful at UofT and everything. And also, especially, I guess, in upper year it's even more difficult to see past the failure because of graduate school, medical school, and other professional schools and stuff like that which makes it really difficult to see past the failure and learn from the failure."*

> *"I wish I talked to someone. I wish I admitted to someone, 'hey, I'm dealing with depression right now. I don't know how to handle all this pressure on me.' That, to me, I think, was the biggest failure in my mind."*

> *"For me, I guess it's the ability to see past my failure, and to be able to look at my failure, and learn if there's any lessons to be learnt from the failure. And also seek help when appropriate, because sometimes I feel like it's because I didn't seek help that led to my failure."*

> *"Just the notion of seeking out the supports, the notion of stigma that comes into play, at least it did for me. I don't think that's necessarily unique now. I found there's a lot more resources going on first, and when I was initially [starting school] I was playing varsity sports too. So, there's a lot going on, and the notion of seeking help in that sort of environment, it's sort of viewed as the notion of weakness."*

Help-seeking was hard in multiple ways. For some students, navigating help resources at UofT was a challenge. Other students reported being able to find help, but that they found it harder to feel supported once in their upper years when they were expected to no longer be failing.

*"I didn't find any support at UofT, and what I would like is if there was one place which would have all the support systems or everything together, because I just feel like it's all over the place and it's really hard to get any sort of help. I tried to speak to my registrar, the academic advisor, and I didn't feel like I got any guidance from there."*

*"From my experience there is room for failure—I mean, it just depends, though. Like my context relating to mental health—we have accessibility services, petitions for extensions, late withdrawals, so there is definitely the combinations available in place. That doesn't negate the feelings you have when you have to resort to them necessarily. They're in place for a purpose, however, you still feel like having to access them or use them is failure in and of itself."*
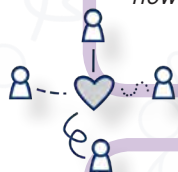
*"There are resources available, but sometimes you don't know how to find them or where to go for help. And especially, I also noticed professors at UofT, that they don't advertise them well enough. They don't encourage you to go for support. They just have a list of resources, but it's not encouraged and that makes you a little reluctant to go seek help."*

While many students recognised that there were support resources at the University, and that they could help problem-solve their issues, students also recognised that the supports do not necessarily take the hard feelings associated with the failure away. That said, many students still struggled to accept these hard feelings and their internal struggles with themselves.
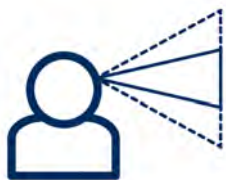
# PARADIGM SHIFTS

Many students spoke about the personal development and changes in perspective that came about with failure—how they began to see their situation and themselves differently. These perspective changes were helpful once they had accepted the failure and moved on from it, such that it was a part of their story but not focus of their entire identity.

## NOT EXPECTED BUT ACCEPTED

Students spoke extensively about learning from and accepting failures. For example, some students learnt to accept their failure and let it go. Other times, students learnt that 'their failure' had not to do with them at all.

*"I definitely think there's room to be able to do bad, because in first year, I did not do as well as I expected myself to do, but then I feel like I grew from that and I did a lot more. Like, I worked a lot harder and then I learnt how to learn, which helped a lot, and then I was able to do a lot better in upper years."*

*"If I failed, it's not because of me, but it is because of so many other factors that have contributed to that being the outcome. It's definitely not easy, but I just felt the way grad school has taught me is just to be resilient and patient because it's a long way."*

*"I guess resilience is just a matter of not focusing too much on the bigger details. Because if we only rely on something like an acceptance to make us happy, well, that doesn't even happen that often […] and knowing that, hey, so much of finding a job, graduate school, medical school, law school—it's just plain luck."*

*"I was very fortunate to be in a good lab, working with great people, and those mentors have really made my life much easier and I was able to progress. But the concept of failing through achieving grants and awards always made me question, 'what is the problem with my application on my research?' And some of my advisors would tell me, for example, it might not necessarily be about my research, but it could be probably that the call [for the awards] is in regards to a specific type of topic that my topic is not within that frame."*

Students spoke about how failure, and hard feelings, are universal. At the same time, they recognized that the fact that failure is common does not make their individual feelings go away nor any easier to manage.

*"Talking about failure feels like an individual story, but it's a collective experience that everyone through grad school kind of goes through. If not through a course, it's through grants, and through award competitions, and things like that."*

*"Once you experience failure once or twice it gets a lot easier to be less disappointed, or be more accepting of it, and then just move on to the next thing. I think definitely at first, if we've been very coddled or very, always successful, it comes as much more of a shock, then if, even just for applying for jobs, you'll get rejections just because there's so much competition. So, I think, as time goes on, it becomes a lot easier."*

*"It's just after a number of failures, success will one day come on, and you will see success, but the road will never be full of success or full of failure. It's going always to be a mix of both, and it's just having that faith and resilience to keep working at it and believing that with every problem, and with every struggle, there's something to learn. Even if you learnt that, that's a huge, huge professional development to oneself and to their career and future."*

The main barrier to acceptance was the perception of UofT as an institution that was not formally conducive to this perspective change.

*"I definitely think failure is a part of life, especially academically, but I feel like at UofT it's […] like everywhere I go some sense of failure just creeps in […] Sometimes you can do everything and still fail [….] I feel like it's been very nice to say, like, 'oh, out of every failure, I learnt something,' because that's not true. Sometimes I just push under the rug—it's like it didn't happen."*

*"When I do learn something out of my failure it's so liberating, it's like, 'oh wow, I didn't even think of this,' and it really changes your perspective. So, I think failure is needed, but I do think that, in terms of failure from a UofT perspective, it's really on you. And I feel like it's really hard to keep up with the constant failure, because at UofT it's one thing to get one failure and try to improve on that, but I guess it's one after the other, but can be very hard to navigate."*

Nevertheless, many students spoke about how they eventually accepted their failures in order to learn about their successes.

# THE LITTLE THINGS MATTER

Students shared that learning about failures caused a perspective change on what they deem to be 'success' in their lives. Some students spoke about how such shifts in their learning surprised them.

*"Success kind of comes when you least expect it. That you plant a seed a few years ago, or a few months ago, and you don't really expect anything to come, and then 'bam!' It just comes back, and then you look back in life and be like, 'oh hey, it happened because I did that thing so long ago.' So, it's not something so mathematical where you put in an input and then there's an outcome, but more like you just cast your net and do a bunch of random things and you don't expect anything and then, when they come back, it's a nice surprise."*

*"There's certainly a lot of success in one being able to be competitive amongst that group of people, but also a part of it, you know—the definition of success is not necessarily just about mastering, of course, concept now, but more so learning and developing, gaining perspective from these people. There is a wealth of knowledge and experience that no one person could ever have figured out on their own, and it's all there. And it's certainly getting the chance to share a bit in that perspective, and to take that as an addition—as a secondary learning opportunity—is certainly helpful and certainly changed, broadened, and made my definition of success much more attainable and much more interesting."*

When students shared their successes, their accounts were generally wider and more personal than the grades or achievements they spoke of earlier. They commented on how these successes usually focused on small moments that made them feel good about themselves and others, often in terms of process and not necessarily linked to a big achievement.

*"It's about appreciating the little things in life and knowing that, 'hey, so much of finding a job, graduate school, medical school, law school,' it's just plain luck. And to know that a rejection doesn't mean you have any less merit and that if your chances are only one percent, eventually you'll be that one percent."*

*"So many folks sort of default to interpreting success in terms of either money, or occupational status, or educational achievements, and I think that one thing that I'm trying to do these days is to try to find success in other places—in small spaces—like that lower scale that [another participant] was mentioning. So, for example, you can choose to see a healthy relationship with someone, whether that be a friendship or otherwise, as a form of success."*

"I used to feel like success was just all about grades, and if you didn't do well in school, then you are not successful. But, as I've gotten older, I realized grades don't define you at all. It's just one aspect—it's really hard to surround yourself in grades all the time. So, I think, for me, would be just overcoming small obstacles—they could be everyday obstacles or something that you didn't look forward to, but you accomplished any way—even if it's like a really simple thing, I think that's what success means to me."

"For a long period throughout my schooling, I was so focused on getting the results that I wanted that I treated feeling good inside as an afterthought. 'Okay, if I feel good inside, yeah, that's great too,' rather than it being the main focus. And nowadays, I know I'm feeling well inside if I can appreciate small things."

In other words, while learning about failure and success is inextricably linked, what students shared suggested that failure and success are also in many ways different.

# TUNING INTO FAILURE FEELINGS

Students spoke about how sharing their failure stories was relieving, allowing for the realisation that failure is common to 'hit home'—not only through the sharing of specific stories, but through the commonality of the suffering that is entailed in failure. Being free to share failure, both the commonalities of the stories and the negative feelings, fostered compassionate responses in students towards each other and themselves.

"There is a kind of a culture where we allow for people to talk about their failures, then we can all feel it's not alone, and we all have to go through failures to, kind of, like, succeed in future. But I guess this is not what is happening. So how can we shift gears a little bit to be very helpful for people not to feel isolated and perceive failure as something individual, rather than something that we all have to go through, and it's about how we navigate that."

"Failure is something everyone goes through, and sometimes it's so scary because when you really break it down, everyone has had some form of the same aspect of some failure in their life. And just sharing how you got there—that is such a powerful conversation, and I'm so glad we're having this right now. But I also feel like that's what's needed in order for people to know that you're okay, like, 'what you're going through, that's totally normal.' "

"It has a cathartic aspect and the therapeutic aspect when everyone's together, sort of in the same boat. So that notion—to share experience in community and dealing with them— those are very helpful and maybe that's something to explore."

"As long as you start to realize that, yeah, you can take these failures as learning opportunities and realize that you're not the only one going through this. Because that's the hard thing too. You don't normally hear about other people going through failure at UofT because people hide it, or it's just not something that's talked about. So yeah, I think that's what it means."

Some students shared that merely sharing their failures in a compassionate space was helpful in enabling them to gain perspective.

"My definition of failure is so different now than when we signed up, and I don't even know if the experience that I described when we first signed up even holds up at this point. [...] Before, I just was so results-oriented, and if I didn't get what I wanted it felt like the end of the world. But now, when I look back at the things that I consider failures, it's when I didn't feel like I presented the best version of myself, or I didn't put enough effort in, or even parts of my personal life."

"Is something to be available for students? Just as an ongoing workshop right around this time. I think that would be—I'm sure you probably already considered it—but it'd be a valuable initiative to explore. "

Some students reflected on this process of learning compassion in their own lives and how they had found freedom through failure, transforming such negative experiences into successes or something unique that shapes oneself later in life.

"I think a lot of my success stories have common theme of failing the first time and then still pushing myself to try again. So, for instance, an example was with a work-study position: I didn't get the first one, but the second time I applied I got an even better position [….] I would consider these success stories, because I was able to push myself for a second time, try it, and know that I was still capable to do it, or know that I could find another opportunity."

> *"I think failure is liberating, in the sense where you're given an opportunity. For me, for example, I was a 90s student in high school, and so I always thought the worst thing that could happen to me was I'd fail a test. I never failed a test before, but I thought that was the worst thing, and once it happened, it's done. It hurt, but I realized: this isn't the worst thing that could happen to you. There's so many other things that could happen, right, and it created a grit in me—created this sense where I'm, like, no matter what life throws on me I'm always going to make it. Even if it hurts, I'm going to make it. I'm determined to make it through."*

> *"It's kind of a different perspective of seeing failure, but the way I see it is to think about someone who's really motivational to you. All of them, without a doubt, probably went through some sort of adversity. I just think it makes my story unique, [...] it gives me a chapter in my life that shows that, hey, I got through it and my end result is not going to reflect that one little failure that happened."*

Students experience failure at UofT, failure entails hard feelings, and there is no getting around these hard feelings. The themes above speak to students contending with these hard feelings, from their critical self-evaluations and expectations and their crisis with themselves, towards a change in perspective. By having the freedom to contend with—and to have the space for—this whole process of failure—especially the hard feelings—students can become compassionate towards themselves.

1  Martin, A. J., & Marsh, H. W. (2006). Academic resilience and its psychological and educational correlates: A construct validity approach. Psychology in the Schools, 43(3), 267-281.

2  For example, in the context of mental health, see: Innovation Hub. (2019, June). Student Mental Health at the University of Toronto: Insights and Data from the Innovation Hub. http://blogs.studentlife.utoronto.ca/innovationhub/files/2019/08/StudentMentalHealth_Report_June2019.pdf

**We learned that students need the freedom to fail in order for them to become compassionate towards themselves. Here we consider how they can be supported in managing failure and its hard feelings through their own self-compassion. How might we design supports, services, spaces, and more for students to give them freedom to fail and become compassionate towards themselves?**

# DESIGN FOR COMPASSION

This journey map charts critical moments of hard failure feelings, and what students need in these moments, based on the stories shared with us above. Given the difficulty students have naming these hard feelings, breaking the process up into this map of what they need in crucial moments allows for a step-by-step approach for students to grow self-compassion.
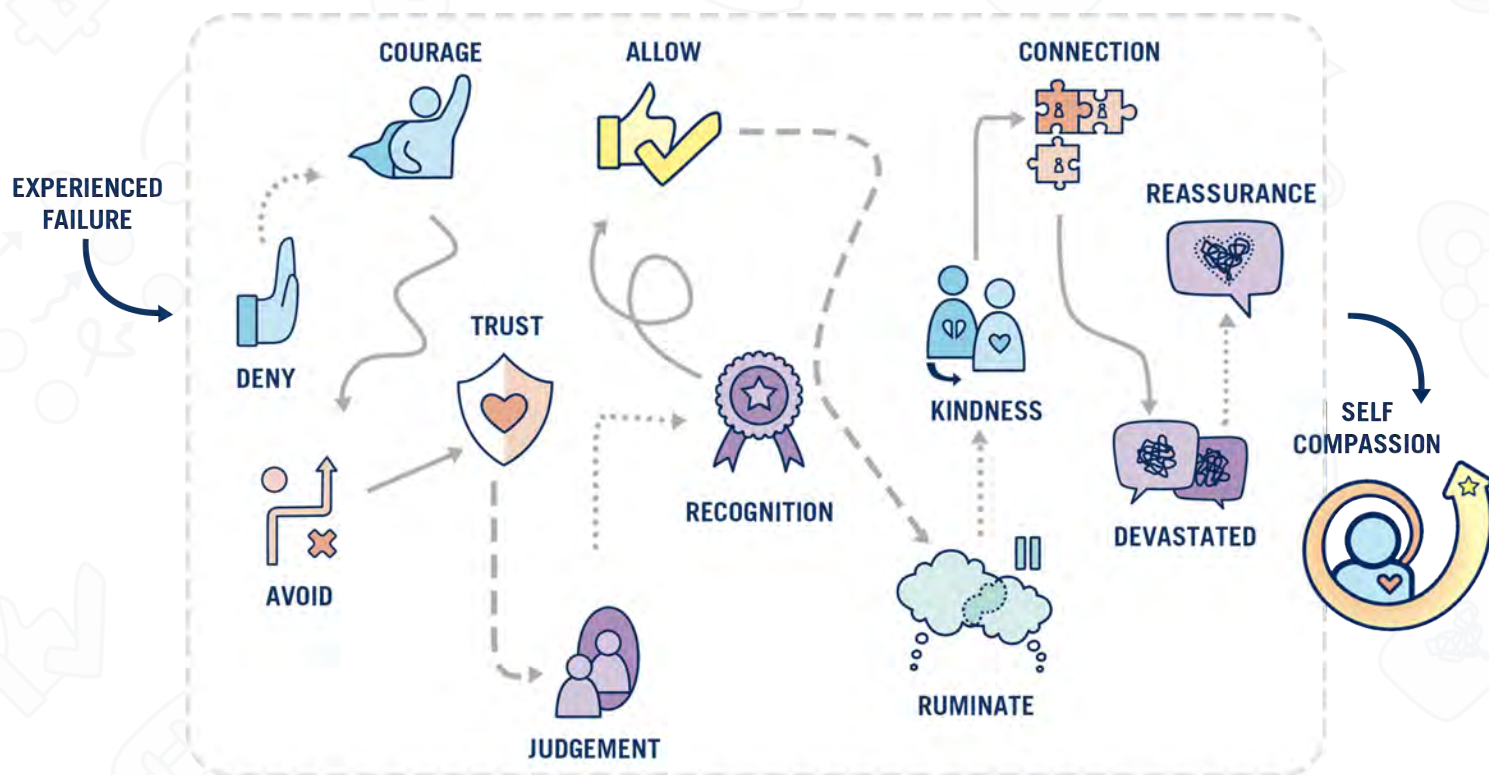


When I **deny** my failure, I need **courage** to face the hard feelings fully.

When I **avoid** my failure's hard feelings, I need **trust** in my capacity to deal with the failure.

When I feel my failure as a **judgement** of who I am, I need **recognition** that failure happens, and it is not about my self-worth.

When I contend with **disappointed expectations**, I need to **allow** expectations to be adaptable to life's unexpected changes.
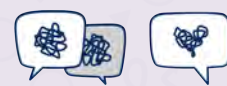
When I **ruminate** on why this is happening to me, I need a **pause** in the repetition to allow a new direction.

When I am being **critical** of myself, I need **kindness** to remind me of how hard failure is.

When I think I am **alone** in my failure, I need **connection** with others to realize that everyone fails and feels bad at points in their life.

When I am **devastated** by my failure, I need **reassurance** that it is hard, that it doesn't feel okay now, and that it will be okay in the end.

# BEST PRACTICES FOR STUDENT SELF-COMPASSION

Fostering student self-compassion is both an individual and collective effort at UofT that can be supported by all staff, students, and faculty to contribute to a broader culture of care. The best practices offered below work to further support students need in the process of feeling the hard feelings of failure and to discover how they might be compassionate to themselves in these challenging times.

| STUDENT SELF-COMPASSION NEEDS | BEST PRACTICES |
| --- | --- |
| Denial needs courage. | When students need to brave the difficulty of failure and its hard feelings, acknowledge students' fears, feelings, and their courage in the face of failure. |
| Avoiding hard feelings needs trust in oneself. | Embolden students further through strengths-based approaches that validate their capacity to take on failure. |
| Harsh self-judgment needs reminders of self-worth. | Share your own failure stories nonjudgmentally, including feelings and their hardship, to showcase how everyone is imperfect and worthy. |
| Disappointed expectations need adaptation. | Normalise the idea that changes in life happen, that expectations adapt, and that life outcomes are still positive. |
| Rumination needs a pause. | Leave time and space for students to tune into and share how hard failure feels in order to allow them to move on. |
| Kindness counters self-criticism. | Respond with kindness and without evaluation. |
| Isolation needs connection and sharing. | Model shared vulnerability for students in order to build connection and empathy. |
| Devastation needs reassurance. | Provide reassurance that it is hard and that it might not feel okay right now, but it will be. |

# CONCLUSION

This project provided insight into what students experience when they fail. Overall, we found that the hard feelings that students experience from failure are challenging to their good feelings about and towards themselves. Students need the freedom to fail, to feel and face these hard feelings, such that they can be compassionate towards themselves. This finding came across in three themes: Challenging Narrow Measurements of Success, The Self Struggle, and Paradigm Shifts. Based on these findings, we developed a journey map for navigating the freedom to fail with compassionate moments for students, as well as best practices for staff and faculty to further support student self-compassion. Designing for student self-compassion can contribute to a broader culture of care at the University.

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