

LONELINESS

When the pursuit of your dream is going well, excitement abounds. Everyone wants to join your effort. The sense of purpose, meaning, and belonging can be extraordinary. Supporters come alongside you, celebrate your accomplishments, and contribute. You bask in the affection and camaraderie.

When setbacks become more than setbacks, everything changes. Your relationships are tested like never before. Many unravel.

You find yourself alone, trying to hold it together while contemplating the hardest decisions of your life.

Your sense of isolation lingers even in the presence of others. Nobody can understand the weight you carry. You shrink down, retreat deep within yourself, alienated by your own sense of inadequacy.

If you are a leader, failure isolates you from your team.

Any entrepreneur relies on cofounders, partners, colleagues, employees, or volunteers. In the early days you bubble with excitement, eating late-night takeout together while charting your future. You have so many dreams and ambitions. You will change the world.

Your first setbacks draw your team even tighter. Nothing forges a band of brothers like shared hardship. You rally the troops,

remind them of the stakes, and renew their determination to fight until victory.

As failures compound, however, this magical synergy evaporates. Fear infects like a cancer. Desperation strains your relationships, as each of you—under the greatest pressure imaginable—grapples with difficult, high-stakes decisions. Critical disagreements arise. Emotions run hot. Rivalries emerge.

At some point, an insidious feeling takes hold that the ship is sinking. Personal survival becomes the imperative. Key members of your team depart for other jobs. Supporters melt away. The phone stops ringing. Email slows to a trickle.

As the leader, you are left holding the bag.

Failure also isolates you from your support network.

You have family, friends, and supporters who cheered you on when you took that first, brave step into the unknown. Now that the damage is mounting and you are contemplating quitting, an awkward silence stands between you. They have no idea what to say.

Well-intended conversations can isolate you even further. Enthusiastic supporters urge you not to give up, which is great advice up until the moment that it isn't.

Other supporters will problem-solve for you. A friend will offer to connect you with his friend's brother-in-law's boss, who knows someone in the finance industry, and will be hurt when you don't jump at the chance. You will patiently listen to woefully ignorant suggestions. "I'm not so sure that will work," you will say in the kindest tone possible, your deflection based on years of deep experience. Your supporters may seem bruised by this disillusioned cynic who refuses to accept help.

You may have accepted funding or practical help from your supporters, which introduces another kind of alienation. You both

know the loans will never be repaid. Every once in a while, the news profiles parents who take out a second mortgage to finance their nineteen-year-old's successful new startup. I have to wonder what happens to such families when the startups fail.

The largest donations we accepted from friends and family still haunt me. My relative who made the last-minute \$5,000 donation claims no hard feelings. I hope he is telling the truth. To this day, I feel ashamed every time I see him. I withdraw deeper within myself.

Failure can wound your closest loved ones. Even if they do not directly contribute to your effort, they are typically the ones who share your burden during the hardest times.

When you are failing, you are hardly at your best. You are exhausted, stressed, and scared. Your mood swings wildly. You are never far from tears and can erupt in anger at the slightest offense.

You are fighting for survival, which makes you calloused and self-centered. You might become emotionally distant. You might snap at your partner or kids, which can fuel a cycle of guilt and resentment.

Your failure can impose practical stresses on these loved ones. Your partner might shoulder the load at home while you manage the latest crisis. You might be too exhausted for intimacy. If your health suffers, your partner might pick up the slack. You might take a catastrophic financial hit or lose your home. Your loved ones might grow depressed or angry with you because of the stresses you have imposed on their lives. You might feel angry back, or you might feel guilty for dragging them into this mess.

For years, Uplift's failure left a sore place in my marriage. Wendy gave her heart to the project, and our family made many sacrifices along the way. She also managed our donor relations during the crowdfunding campaign, so felt personally responsible

when it became clear that Uplift would not recover. The trauma of that season affected us in different ways, and the memory still remains tender to the touch.

Failure damages your broader ability to connect socially. Even as the pain creates a longing for meaningful relationships, it erodes your self-confidence and creates protective barriers against being wounded again. It undermines the generous reciprocity that lies at the heart of satisfying relationships.

You are never sure how to handle yourself in social interactions. You continually debate whether to smile and say everything is fine, or show vulnerability and risk saying too much. You constantly feel on edge. You worry that your anxiety makes others uncomfortable.

Your heroic effort likely pulled you into a broader community. You got to know an industry, joined a writer's group, or made friends with other moms starting small businesses. You were all on similar journeys, all aspiring, all encouraging each other onward.

This community loves a good success story, so when you are succeeding, you find abundant opportunities to network and share your experience. Your first press coverage sets off an avalanche. Speaking invitations pour in. Budding entrepreneurs write you. Friends offer up connections. Your LinkedIn network grows.

And then, suddenly, you are a pariah.

When we dissolved Uplift Aeronautics, I envisioned receiving invitations to conferences to speak about our lessons learned. No invitation ever came. Nobody invites failures. At least, not until they've become successes again.

It's like that old trope from war movies. As fresh, smooth-skinned soldiers arrive on the battlefield, they congregate around braggarts who regale them with heroic tales. But the grizzled

veterans, the ones who have looked into the dark abyss of war, who have watched friends erased from existence by a mortar round or gunfire, who carry the eternal burden of taking another man's life, sit alone by peripheral campfires.

In summary, failure can bring an encounter with loneliness like you have never known. This shadow falls during your greatest trial, when you need strength and support, when you feel trapped but have to keep showing up to fight new battles each day.

Loneliness does not endure forever. In the aftermath of failure, you will begin a long process of healing and growth. Not every relationship will heal, but many will. You will find rich new relationships as well.

However, this process cannot be rushed.

You might be here for a while.

In the meantime, you will spend a great deal of time alone. Failure takes you on a journey deep within yourself.

We turn to that journey next.

EATING GLASS



*The Inner Journey
Through Failure and Renewal*

MARK D. JACOBSEN



CONTINUAL ASCENT

Learn more and sign up for my newsletter at
www.markdjacobsen.com