

A Few Thoughts After Reading Thousands of Fears

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For the past two and half years, I have had the pleasure of traveling the country asking people what holds them back from being the person they want to become. I ask them to write their answer and bring it to the front of the room folded on a notecard. Later, myself and a team member read, type, categorize, and then analyze the responses to help future students and professionals reframe their fears.

When I first started collecting and reading these concerns, I was taken aback by the vulnerability, self-awareness, and rawness of the written responses. I speak to students often, but what amazed me, even more, was having the opportunity to ask the *same* question to groups full of professionals and discovering the same overall categories still apply. Though students and professionals are in different parts of their journey, we still feel the same feelings towards fear.

Here are the top 5 categories in order:

- Fear of Failure
- Fear of Judgment & Rejection
- Fear of Not Being Good Enough
- Fear of Disappointing or Letting Others Down
- Fear of The Future

Here are three things I want to share based on the thousands of concerns I have analyzed:

“You are not alone.” When I’m on the plane ride home or sitting on the floor next to bed reading the notecards from the previous keynote (usually with a few tears streaming down my face), the biggest thing I want to reemphasize to my audience is you are not alone. After reading and cataloging thousands, I want you to know you are not alone in doubting your abilities and wondering if you are good enough. You are not alone in being afraid to take risks or challenge the process in danger of failing or looking like an idiot. Many of your colleagues deal with the same emotions, and in your quiet moments when it’s just you, I want you to know you have thousands of partners in the fight with you.

“You are not an Imposter; you are the real deal.” Imposter Syndrome is the feeling that you’re a phony in a sea of real-deal colleagues — the idea that you don’t belong or don’t have the experience to be in the position you’re in. It’s the question of “who am I to be here” or “who am I to speak up?” When dealing with Imposter Syndrome, I recommend changing the question from “Why me?” to “Why not me?” This simple change opens up your mind to real beliefs instead of the negative thoughts we sometimes let infiltrate our minds. People at the highest levels have the same feelings you feel; it’s not going away, so learn how to work beside it instead of against it.

“You are not your failures, you are what you learn from your failures.” Every notecard collected is typed and then entered into Atlas software where it is analyzed for keywords. The number one keyword is the word failure. We want to be successful in our pursuits, but we want the journey to be almost perfect on the way there. Many of your greatest life lessons come from when you messed up and everything didn’t go as planned. It’s in those moments your fortitude is tested and your confidence is built. When dealing with the fear of failure, get comfortable with forgiving and laughing at yourself when you mess up. A great quote I have heard in the past states, “Believing in yourself is nice, but forgiving yourself is better.” When you learn to forgive yourself when you mess up, you are more willing to take those risks and challenge the process.

As you work through fear in your professional journey, let me leave you with a quote I wrote down while watching the 1991 film, *Defending Your Life*. “Fear is like a giant fog. It sits in your brain and rots everything — real feelings, true happiness, real joy. They can’t get through that fog. You lift it, and buddy you’re in for the ride of your life.” Every day we get the pleasure of serving students. We are already on the ride of our lives. Imagine if your fear was lifted. How significantly would your ride improve?