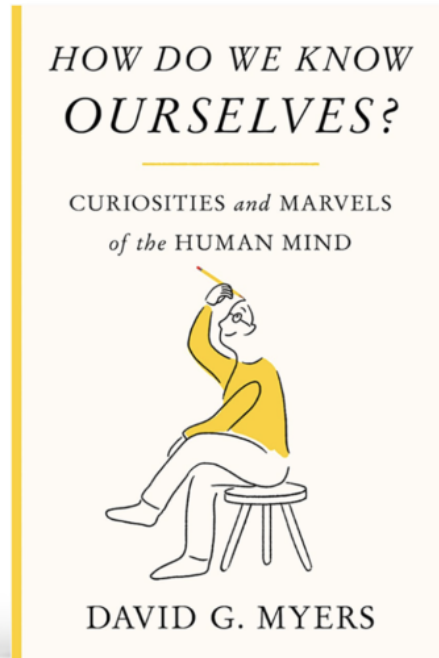


Failure and Flourishing. Part 3 of 3 With David Myers

November 17, 2022



In the final discussion with social psychologist David Myers, a professor of psychology at Hope College in Michigan, APS's Ludmila Nunes talks with him about the third section of his book, in which he applies his psychological insights to the larger world around us.

Listen to the previous episodes featuring David Myers and his latest book, [*How Do We Know Ourselves? Curiosities and Marvels of the Human Mind*](#). You'll get to know more about David's career and his goals of helping his readers and students think critically, savor the world, and develop a sense of wonder and respect for "the human creature."

[Read more about David Myers's new book, including an excerpt of the chapter "Failure and Flourishing."](#)

Unedited Transcript

[00:00:12.410] – Ludmila Nunes

David Myers, social psychologist and professor of psychology at Hope College in Michigan, joins us in the last two episodes to speak about his latest book, *How Do We Know Ourselves? Curiosities and Marvels of the Human Mind*. In the previous episodes, we got to know more about David's career and his goals of helping his readers and students to save the world by thinking critically and to savor the world by developing a sense of wonder and respect for the human creature. We also talked about the two first parts of his book, *Who Am I?* Which focuses on the self. Specifically, how do we get to know ourselves and who are we? Which explores our relationships. Today we invited David Myers to come back to under the Cortex and speak about the third section of his book, *What in the World?* In which he takes a psychological eye to the larger world around us. It's great to have you back, David.

[00:01:11.460] – David Myers

Thank you so much. Ludmila, I've enjoyed being with you.

[00:01:14.440] – Ludmila Nunes

So today we are talking about the third part of your book, *What in the World?* Specifically one of the essays *Failure and Flourishing*. In this essay, you wrote about how in certain fields, such as academia, only victories are visible and the dangers of not making our failures more visible.

[00:01:35.670] – David Myers

Yes, that is true. I sometimes said to my college's basketball coaches, the difference between you and me is your victories and defeats are out there for everybody to see. But for us scholars, only our victories are publicized and we only see other people's victories, their announcements of publications and so forth, and not all their failures and rejections. And so actually, there's a couple of academics that have suggested that we should have an alternative CV of our rejections. I love one by neuroscientist named Bradley Voidk, who at the end of his actually very impressive CV lists his failed grad school and job applications, all his unsuccessful award and grant applications, the multiple rejections that preceded many of his publications. And it's just kind of heartwarming to think, oh, you too. And so maybe we should be a little more open about how rejection often accompanies success in our vocation.

[00:02:38.950] – Ludmila Nunes

Yes, because even the most successful people have experienced rejection and they still do.

[00:02:44.890] – David Myers

Oh, absolutely. There's a wonderful little book that was published some years ago. It's out of print now. It was entitled *Rejection*. It's just a little story, one after the other, of famous works that have achieved a claim or even Nobel Prizes after repeated rejections. JK. Rowling, as is famously known, was rejected by loads of publishers. I love the story of the great New Yorker cartoonist Tom Toro, who finally made the magazine on his 610th try. And then there's the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 2019, which was awarded to Peter Radcliffe for work that *Nature* magazine had rejected. So there's all kinds of stories and they're actually kind of encouraging to read.

[00:03:30.190] – Ludmila Nunes

And what's your personal experience? Do you have any striking rejections that if you could, you would share with others? Because we can all learn from these rejections.

[00:03:40.760] – David Myers

Sure. I can think of several. One is I have a trade book that got published after however, it set an agent's house record for 36 rejections. And so ultimately, he gave up and it was published by somebody else. Or I think of a time that I submitted an article that was a critique of the gifted education movement and the labeling of children is gifted or not gifted. I sent it to Today's Education, which was the premier education magazine. They rejected it out of hand. So I submitted it to, I think, four other places. They all rejected it. And then I noticed that Today's Education had an all new editorial board. And I don't know if this is kosher, but now with a co author and a little revision, I submitted it to them without letting them know they'd already rejected it. They not only accepted the article and published it, they asked for more writing, and it got reprinted in all kinds of education magazines. So that's a story for me where persistence in the face of repeated rejection ultimately paid off. And by the way, teachers have this experience too. We get student feedback, and all of us have been dinged by, I mean, even the best of teachers by really hurting comments from students that we think we're likable, but somehow just don't like us.

[00:05:08.290] – Ludmila Nunes

I know I've experienced those for the same course, glowing reviews and really bad reviews.

[00:05:15.780] – David Myers

Oh, absolutely. And, you know, John Gottman, the marriage researcher, says it takes a five to one ratio of praise and compliments to criticism to sustain a good relationship, a good marriage. And I sort of think that to sustain the morale of teachers, it takes at least a five to one ratio of praise to criticism because one stinging student criticism is about the emotional equal of five student compliments.

[00:05:43.920] – Ludmila Nunes

I agree. Those hurt. Those really bad reviews really hurt. But this makes me think of something that I think it's also important, which is, even if we are giving a negative review, if we are rejecting something, for example, we are reviewing an article, and it's not up to the standards of that journal. It's not up to our standards. Still, we can be kind when we are rejecting someone or giving a bad review.

[00:06:12.860] – David Myers

You know, that's absolutely true. And most people have been very kind, I must say. I mean, most of my colleagues in their reviews are very helpful in their criticism. One of the worst reviews I've ever received, he said, I read like an undergraduate term paper. I nevertheless learned some things from him because he did offer some useful criticism. And so, as is my custom, I wrote him a letter of thanks for the criticism because it was valuable to me, it helped make it better. And would you know, he adopted the book and was a longtime user of it. Now, does that just mean as bad as he thought it was, he thought it was not as bad as all the others? I mean, I don't know. Some people just have a more negative critical

style of evaluating work.

[00:06:54.490] – Ludmila Nunes

Of course, it makes a difference.

[00:06:58.390] – David Myers

And by the way, when I share this with other faculty, it always encourages them to know that they're not alone.

[00:07:05.360] – Ludmila Nunes

That's through being more open about the review process, about rejections, would probably help everybody in the field, because after a rejection, there's a series of reactions that we go through after a failure. Right. And this is a bit like the cycle of grief.

[00:07:24.790] – David Myers

Yeah. You know, that reminds me of one of the quotes from Benton Underwood that I use in this new little book of essays. Benton Underwood, by the way, was the great memory researcher from the last century. The rejection of my own manuscripts has a sordid aftermath. One day of depression, one day of utter contempt for the editor and his accomplices, one day of decrying the conspiracy against letting truth be published, one day of fretful ideas about changing my profession, one day of reevaluating the manuscript in view of the editor's comments, followed by the conclusion that I was lucky it wasn't accepted. And that's been, in a small measure, in my own experience, too, of suffering through critical reviews. It's not pleasant to work through them, but at the end of the day, I'm so grateful for them.

[00:08:12.190] – Ludmila Nunes

That's true. I've experienced exactly the same aftermath of rejection. What's funny is that I clearly remember the first article that I submitted somewhere with a co author, and I clearly remember that rejection so well and how I felt after that. It happened so many times that I don't have such vivid memories.

[00:08:35.130] – David Myers

You know what happens. The initial rejections we receive sting the most, and in my case, would cause me to think about maybe I should go back into the family insurance business like my father was inviting me to do. And the initial acceptances and words of praise inflated my ego the most. But over time, as we accumulate a mountain of feedback, both praise and criticism, the power of praise to explode our minds, our heads, and the power of criticism to utterly deflate us and keep us awake at night diminishes.

[00:09:13.910] – Ludmila Nunes

But either way, we can learn from failure. And the last essay in your book is actually about failures, too, but a different type of failures. So, in the last decade, the field of psychological science has seen some of

its most famous effects failing to replicate. And what this means is that when different researchers attempted to do the exact same experiments done in the past, they did not obtain the same effect as previously. Now, what can we do with this information? This has been called the replication crisis and some people started distrusting the science. So the title of your essay is Do Replication Failures Discredit Psychological Science? And spoiler alert, you don't think so. Neither do I. But let's talk about what these failures to replicate might mean for the field in general.

[00:10:08.740] – David Myers

Sure. So, first, I think you're quite right that there has been some crisis of morale and it's come as a result in part of some famous researchers actually faking data. And so there was a lack of integrity. I think of greater concern is a lot of popular psychological results like supposed brain training for older folks or teaching to learning styles or even implicit bias training programs have been found just not to be effective as people have proposed or declared. And then we have research phenomena like the effects of teacher expectations or power posing or willpower depletion or stereotype threat, growth, mindset, benefits. Even the Marshmallow test has come under criticism as maybe only partially replicable as a more modest phenomenon than has been claimed. And so all this builds up and people become cynical. Sometimes students read this and they say it's all a bunch of malarkey. Study neuroscience. And so that's the crisis that we've lived with is these occasional fake data, some questions about famous experiments and other phenomena that have been modestly replicable. Sometimes yes, sometimes not.

[00:11:36.490] – Ludmila Nunes

I would say that when researchers are faking data, that's a completely different issue.

[00:11:41.320] – David Myers

Yeah. And that's a very small part of the problem.

[00:11:43.950] – Ludmila Nunes

Yes, I think that's what led the researchers to start investigating and being interested in replications and trying to show if the effects are there or not.

[00:11:56.190] – David Myers

Sure. And the whole open science movement with pre registering data and methods and everything, is shoring up the integrity of the scientific process.

[00:12:06.040] – Ludmila Nunes

And that's a good outcome of this questioning of psychological science, is that researchers are more and more concerned with being open and transparent about their practices, with sharing their materials, sharing their data. Which leads to a lot of collaborations and enriches the field, I would say.

[00:12:27.490] – David Myers

Absolutely. And we also need to know that the ups and downs of science is how science works. It's a self checking, self replicating enterprise. It's like mountain climbing. It's an upward march that comes with occasional downslopes. And so we should expect some things to replicate and some things not to replicate. And as a text author, we try to winnow the pile and report on what is truly a human phenomenon that applies consistently and powerfully enough to be worth knowing about.

[00:13:03.710] – Ludmila Nunes

But even the effects that fail to replicate, they probably at some point push the science forward. Push the field forward.

[00:13:13.840] – David Myers

Yeah, absolutely. So that there are phenomena that are genuine, but they're more situation specific. So in some situations they replicate and some not. In our first podcast, I mentioned the facial feedback effect, the happy pen in the teeth versus the pouting pen in the lips. Effect? Well, there's some studies that found that that effect didn't replicate, but it turned out it does replicate if you do it the way the experiment was done. Many of the replications put a video camera on people that made them self conscious and distracted their attention. Those experiments didn't replicate. And so we now have actually several hundred phenomena that have been where there have been attempts to replicate, and a majority of them have replicated, but a fair number of them haven't. I should say on behalf of textbook authors, that what we're reporting on is mostly research that has been solidly replicated in response to I think there were like, initial report of 100 replication attempts with 65 or so didn't replicate. I think that affected one sentence in my textbook. And I bet that was true for other introductory text authors as well because.

[00:14:28.170] – Ludmila Nunes

We can still speak of general effects in psychological science, right?

[00:14:32.680] – David Myers

Oh, absolutely. If you indulge me just to read one long paragraph from this book. It's one of my favorite paragraphs and it's the last paragraph in the book. What endures and is left to teach is everything else. Memories really are malleable. Expectations really do influence our perceptions. Information really does occur on two tracts, implicit and explicit. Partial reinforcement really does increase resistance to extinction. Human traits really are influenced by many genes having small effects. Group polarization really does amplify our group. Differences in group bias really is powerful and perilous. I'll stop there. I can go on with as many more examples. So the bottom line here is let's teach the importance of replication for windowing truth. Let's separate the wheat from the chaff and encourage critical thinking, encourage healthy skepticism, but not science scorning cynicism. We can be skeptics without becoming cynics. And let's be reassured as psychology students and psychology researchers, that our evidence derived principles of behavior are really, truly, overwhelmingly worth teaching. And they help us and our students appreciate a truly wonderfilled world. And that's what animates this book.

[00:16:05.610] – Ludmila Nunes

This is Ludmila Nunes with APS, and I've been speaking to David Myers, author of the book *How Do We Know Ourselves? Curiosities and marvels of the human mind*.

[00:16:16.120] – David Myers

Thank you, Ludmila. It's been a great pleasure to be with you.

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