

# *Analysis of the Causes of Fear of Success Through Literature Review*

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**Abstract:** Fear of success is a common psychological phenomenon, explicitly referring to the fear of winning in a competitive environment. Success generally brings joy to people, but at specific times, it generates joy. Success also comes with a psychological state of fear. This article uses a literature review method to study the causes of fear of success. It mainly collects literature through reading, communicating with people with fear of success, and summarizing the reasons for this phenomenon. It mainly includes two parts: internal and external factors. Internal factors include negative experiences, poor self-efficacy, shyness or social anxiety, and insufficient personal conditions; external factors include the influence of national culture, conformity psychology, and the surrounding environment and finding corresponding reasonable solutions from them, such as boldly acknowledging the existence of the "Jonah complex," achieving self-acceptance, being brave in "volunteering," and taking the initiative to face challenges. The results of this study will help us understand the reasons for fear of success, and based on this, objectively analyze facts, treat problems rationally, actively solve problems, and better achieve self-acceptance to promote human psychological development and create a better life.

**Keywords:** fear of success, self-obstruction, conformity, self-acceptance

## 1. Introduction

Chinese students generally had the experience of asking a teacher a question in class that they were initially eager to try, but in the end, because no one else raised their hands to answer, they still dared not stand up. Generally, success brings joy to people, but at specific times, while generating a sense of joy, success also comes with a psychological state of fear. Psychology calls it fear of success, which refers to the fear of winning in a competitive environment.

The fear of success can have many adverse effects on people, and some may engage in self-producing behaviors due to the fear of success, such as reducing life satisfaction, having difficulty in pursuing goals, lower self-esteem, and lower expectations.

We need to objectively analyze facts, approach and solve problems rationally, and engage in effective self-acceptance to promote the progress and development of individuals and even humanity.

In some cases, we may also develop a fear of success. For example, some people use their after-school time to communicate with teachers about social issues but are baseless and perceived by some classmates as reporting issues to the teacher. Therefore, these people are misunderstood, isolated,

excluded, and even treated rudely by some classmates. So most people choose to remain silent, not be so eye-catching, learn to adapt to the outer environment, and no longer actively strive to improve. What exactly causes the exclusion of regular learning and communication behavior? What exactly causes people's fear of being outstanding?

This mentality is also known as the 'Jonah plot.' Jonah is an image in Christianity whose prototype is the "dove." The dove has a gentle and peaceful temperament. After completing an essential task of transmitting information, he gained a high reputation, but he was afraid, and he hid. This story reflects a mentality of avoiding and shrinking in the face of opportunities and challenges. It is like not being willing to face, being afraid to challenge, looking forward and backward.

Nevertheless, when the author saw others successfully challenge herself, she felt uncomfortable and unconvinced, thinking that others were lucky. The psychology of a person is so complex and strange. On the one hand, they yearn for success, but when faced with challenges and opportunities, they feel lost again. This is the fear of growth, not only of failure but also of success.

Therefore, the author has chosen to investigate and analyze the psychological phenomenon of fear of success, analyze the reasons for this psychological phenomenon, and find ways to respond to it actively.

## **2. The concept and negative impact of fear of success**

### **2.1. The concept of fear of success**

Fear of success is a concept proposed in the 1960s, which refers to the fear of winning in a competitive environment. General success can bring joy and joy to people, but at specific times, while generating joy and joy, success also comes with a psychological state of fear.

Some people believe that after achieving success, they need to face more challenging tasks and bear more significant pressure, and in this mode, they will be afraid of doing things well. They worried that they would fail next time, which may disappoint others' expectations, resulting in a fear of success.

Recent studies have shown that fear of success moderates the impact of goodwill gender bias on "male" occupational self-efficacy, with gender differences in this moderating effect. For males, fear of success plays a buffering role between goodwill gender bias and "male" occupational self-efficacy, while for females, it exacerbates it. Therefore, the relationship between benign gender bias and "male" occupational self-efficacy is regulated by fear of success, and this regulatory pattern varies depending on gender [1].

Other studies have shown that the tendency towards fear of success is more applicable to women. For many women, success has negative implications, such as being perceived as losing their femininity. In the fiercely competitive modern economic society, women should have played an important role in pursuing success like men. However, the role expectations and stereotypes of women in traditional culture make women exhibit different psychological characteristics when facing the problem of success. Men exhibit a calm and positive attitude toward success, while women are more likely to develop a fear of success. Karen Horney pointed out that men often hold the belief during their growth that if they want to achieve a particular wish, they must achieve success in life [2].

Psychologists have found that the so-called "boutique women" in the workplace are not as glamorous as they appear on the surface. They are starting to experience more and more psychological crises. For example, work dependency disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and emotional isolation. Some people have a mentality that they do not deserve when faced with the beautiful things of success, and eventually, give up the good opportunities [3].

Horner's hypothesis is based on her analysis of gender culture and gender roles. She believes that women's expectations of adverse outcomes for success mainly have two aspects: one is fear of losing

their female image, and the other is fear of being rejected by society. She pointed out that although our society is condemning the loss of women's potential and resources, it has not indeed recognized professional women [4].

## 2.2. The negative impact of fear of success

The fear of success can have a severe negative impact on people's lives, which may hinder people from getting what they want in life, including:

**Reducing Life Satisfaction:** A study found that this fear can significantly reduce satisfaction with life;

**The difficulty of pursuing goals:** Research has also found that fear of achievement is related to the difficulty of initiating and maintaining behavior. Due to the difficulty of taking these first steps towards the goal, those concerned about success may find it challenging to get started. Otherwise, they may find themselves starting projects without the motivation to complete them;

**Reduced self-esteem:** Although achievement is usually associated with solid self-esteem, it may not be the case for those who are afraid of success. This is especially true for people who also suffer from impersonation syndrome, as they do not attribute their achievements to their skills, knowledge, or hard work;

**Low expectations:** Researchers also found that people concerned about success tend to adopt lower academic and career goals than their abilities.

Some people may be hindered due to fear of success. Self-obstruction refers to a behavior or thinking pattern in which people set obstacles for themselves, preventing them from achieving goals or success. This behavior pattern usually stems from an individual's internal anxiety and insecurity, as well as questioning their abilities and values.

Failure can threaten an individual's self-worth, inspiring them to fight against threats and protect themselves. One of the commonly used strategies is self-handicapping, also known as self-limiting, which means finding ways to attribute one's failure to external factors rather than oneself, such as poor environment, loud noise, physical discomfort, difficult exam questions, and so on.

Self-obstruction may also manifest as procrastination, excessive analysis, self-criticism, constant repetition of mistakes, and avoidance of challenging one's actions. In daily life, self-sabotage may also manifest as fear of trying new things, giving up opportunities to challenge oneself, being overly harsh on oneself, and so on. This behavior pattern will prevent people from fully realizing their potential, leading to their inability to achieve their goals and dreams. So why do we use this harmful way to hinder our success? The answer is to maintain our self-image, which is self-esteem.

The core element of self-esteem is emotional experience. Self-acceptance is one of the main components of self-esteem. Through correlation analysis, it was found that self-acceptance can significantly predict academic self-handicapping in high school students, indicating a negative correlation between self-acceptance and self-handicapping. The main reason for the above results is that self-evaluation reflects an individual's understanding of themselves. Students with higher self-evaluation may be individuals with stronger abilities, and they can clearly recognize and accept their strengths and weaknesses. The author will not use academic self-handicapping strategies with negative emotions due to failure. According to the definition of academic self-handicapping, the higher the tendency towards academic self-handicapping, the more individuals are unable to accept failure in unknown situations. Therefore, self-acceptance affects an individual's perception of failure, their level of acceptance of their abilities, and, thus, the self-protection mechanisms they adopt to avoid failure due to their abilities. College students with a high level of self-acceptance have a clear understanding and acceptance of their ability to complete tasks. Therefore, they can also moderately accept potential uncertain failures and do not excessively use self-hindering strategies [5].

### 3. Analysis of the Causes of Fear of Success

So, what is the fear of success? The fear of success includes the fear of achievement. Although it is generally believed that success is desirable, there may be a reason for fear of doing too well. It is essential to recognize that people often do not fear success itself. On the contrary, their fear focuses on the potential consequences of success. Because the expectation of success is usually based on the idea that achieving goals means sacrificing or enduring long-term losses, it is not surprising that people may be cautious about the cost that success may ultimately cost them [6].

There may be many different reasons for human fear of success.

#### 3.1. Internal cause

Misunderstanding of success: Excitement and anxiety share many physiological signals. Therefore, sometimes, it is easy to misunderstand the feeling of excitement as tension or anxiety.

Negative Experience: People who have experienced some negative outcomes in the past after doing well (such as being ridiculed for being "showcased" or enduring hardships due to success, as listed in the background section of the author's life examples).

Poor self-efficacy: Self-efficacy refers to a person's beliefs and ability to achieve goals. Research has found that people afraid of success often have lower self-efficacy.

Shy or socially anxious individuals may fear success because they do not want to be the focus of attention.

Insufficient self-conditions: Due to insufficient self-conditions, one may develop a sense of inferiority and withdrawal, believing that "I can't" or "I can't," resulting in a withdrawal mentality. They also fear facing challenges and do not want to see the success of those who start the same journey. In short, this withdrawal and avoidance mentality hinders growth, and the "pigeon" mentality of fear of success will even hinder these people from achieving success.

#### 3.2. External cause

##### 3.2.1. The influence of national culture and conformity psychology

Under the traditional concept of the Doctrine of the Mean (manifested as a supreme morality, as well as a way of thinking and principles that emphasize "moderation," "persistence," and "application," and more politically manifested as a mixed political system of "co governance" logic), we have been educated from childhood to adulthood not to think we are superior to others, but to believe that there are people outside of us. Even if we achieve good results, we should not be complacent [7]. Both parents and teachers will tell us not to be proud but to continue working hard. Over time, we will feel that even if we make some achievements, it is not something to be happy about because there are still many people who are better than us. So, as we grow up in this environment, we will gradually lose interest in success, maintain a humble and ordinary attitude, and even deliberately cater to the public, trying to smooth out our edges and corners, ultimately leading to complacency and mediocrity. This is like the 'pigeon' that hides itself, hiding its edges and potential simultaneously and ultimately achieving nothing.

##### 3.2.2. The impact of the surrounding environment

If the surrounding environment does not provide security and growth opportunities, people become "anxious about gains and losses," thus losing favorable opportunities.

In a larger environment, the probability of hidden traps under interests objectively educates a person's courage. If there are traps everywhere and seemingly visible benefits, there is a trap awaiting.

People have to choose cautious and timid strategies to deal with complex and dangerous environments in this environment.

On the contrary, if the environment is very open, there is a high probability that people in this environment will choose aggressive strategies and achieve corresponding achievements.

#### 4. Solutions to Fear of Success

To overcome the "Jonah complex" is a very complex psychological, cultural, and social issue. However, what we can do is to understand ourselves, believe in ourselves, face ourselves, and achieve the goal of "following our own path and letting others talk!" The author can provide the following suggestions for this:

Boldly acknowledge the existence of the "Jonah complex," but when facing responsibility and pressure, analyze oneself and believe in oneself. Have the courage and confidence to know that tigers are in the mountains and lean towards them.

Self-acceptance: Allow oneself to make mistakes, allow oneself to fail, but be sure to try. Nothing is complicated in the world; achievements are made by only those who have a heart. As long as we confirm, we can then take action. Even if we fail, we are still proud to be defeated.

Be brave enough to "volunteer" and take the initiative to face challenges: the more one retreats, the more fearful one becomes. However, when one takes a step forward and faces fear, they are less afraid. It is often necessary to take the initiative to try step by step in order to overcome fear gradually.

In short, if a person wants to achieve success, they must recognize and overcome their own "Jonah complex," admit that they also have a mentality of avoidance, analyze themselves more, believe in themselves, seize or try their best to create opportunities, take the initiative to try, and be brave in taking responsibility and pressure. Only in this way can they truly grow up and truly succeed [8].

Research suggests that the stronger an individual's ability to manage and regulate their emotions, the more reasonable and practical they will be in the face of stress. They tend to adopt more appropriate behaviors and measures to adapt. Therefore, they are less likely to develop self-sabotage. If an individual's emotional intelligence is low, they often adopt negative coping strategies to avoid failure when facing stressful situations, which is more likely to lead to self-sabotage.

#### 5. Conclusion

Some people may engage in self-hindered behavior due to fear of success. We need to objectively analyze facts, approach and solve problems rationally, and engage in effective self-acceptance to promote individual and even human progress and development. However, this article only cites the research of other scholars for argumentation and analysis, and there is not yet sufficient experimental exploration scale to strongly prove this result. Therefore, future research can create a scale to scientifically and effectively prove the research results and make its contribution to human development [9].

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