

Your Secret to SUCCESS? You Would Never Guess!

It's actually the embrace of failure, says life coach **VALORIE BURTON**. Meet sisters just like you who have turned setbacks into stepping stones and persevered to reap **BIG** payoffs

I'll never forget the November day almost ten years ago that I held my first book in my hand. I savored the moment, my eyes fixed on the author's name printed on the cover, trying to let it sink in that the name was *my* name. From the day Ms. Johnson, my second grade teacher, told me I was a good writer and I believed her, becoming a published author was my goal. I twice failed in my attempts to write a book and get it published. But on the third try, at age 26, I did it. In that moment of personal victory, thoughts of unsuccessful writing projects, multiple rejection letters from publishers and periods of self-doubt made success even sweeter. Each failure and disappointment had helped me find my authentic voice and given me the determination to keep trying.

As a life coach, I am constantly approached by people looking for the secrets to success. The biggest secret is often one they're least likely to recognize: failure. It's counterintuitive, but the most

successful women are the ones who are willing to fail. They know they might fall flat on their face, but the possibility of triumph outweighs the risk of a bruised ego. The age-old saying "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again" got it almost right. Except "the key is not just to try, try again," says Anita Jones Thomas, Ph.D., an assistant professor in counseling psychology at Loyola University in Chicago. "It is to try, reflect and learn—then try again."

What dream have you buried as a result of past defeats? Perhaps it's a career or financial goal, the pursuit of a healthier body or the desire for a loving relationship. You can resurrect your dream, but you must also train yourself to break through the inevitable setbacks, mistakes and failures on your way to accomplishing it. In my years of coaching I've seen that high-achieving women have a different relationship with failure than women who are stuck and struggling. Those who do well don't enjoy enduring a so-called

failure, but they also don't allow for a define the. Instead, they allow it to refine them. I spoke with successful Black women who learned to "fail forward." Their disappointments actually drove them to reach their goals. I believe you'll see a bit of your story in theirs, and gain the inspiration to press on.

Admitting there is a problem frees you to fix it

As a child, Fritzi Woods had absorbed the lesson that she had to be "twice as good" as the competition. But her parents also taught her to learn from her mistakes. Starting as an auditor out of college, she ultimately wanted to run a company, and in 2003 she realized her ambition when she was appointed president of PrimeSource Foodservice Equipment, a firm with annual sales of \$105 million.

Soon after, she made a costly decision to lease a huge warehouse in Las Vegas to provide better service to West Coast clients. But she underestimated the complexity of the move. "I didn't fully understand distribution," Woods, 48, reflects. On a deeper level, the decision just didn't feel right. "My gut told me parts of this didn't make sense," she admits. She asked questions of her management team, but the answers didn't add up. And that's when she began to doubt herself. *Why am I overanalyzing this?* she thought at the time.

University of Pennsylvania. "They've honed their skills in the process." Which may be why, despite her blunder, Woods was soon promoted to CEO. "I think the board of directors was encouraged by how I managed the problems," she says. "Our customers didn't suffer." Woods also learned key lessons during that process: Follow your gut. Don't be intimidated by not knowing. Ask questions until it makes sense. And be humble. Humility empowers you to let go of pride so you can acknowledge and correct a situation.

Success is a decision

Her weight problem needed attention, but it took public humiliation and a health scare to propel Kimberly Floyd to long-term success. Floyd, 43, a former registered nurse, sat speechless on her favorite roller-coaster ride as the teenage boy checking seat belts stood waiting for her to buckle hers. She had tried to get the belt around her expanding waistline but couldn't. "I thought maybe I was doing it wrong and he would fix it," she says. But there was nothing wrong with the seat belt. A size 22, Floyd was simply too big to close it around her. "I'll just pull down the lap bar," she told the attendant. But he wasn't having it. "If you can't get it around you, you can't ride," he said bluntly. Defeated, Floyd quietly got up and walked away. When she rejoined her friends, they were

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Turns out she was right to be concerned. One month after her company opened the warehouse, its largest client stopped building new stores and didn't need the services PrimeSource had anticipated. Immediately the warehouse became a drain on her company's resources. But Woods transformed what could have been a career breaker into a learning opportunity that eventually saved PrimeSource money. The turnaround started with admitting the misstep, taking responsibility, and asking for help. She describes the experience as humbling. She didn't make excuses about why she messed up. Instead she gathered her management team and didn't mince words. "I screwed up," she told them. "We need to fix it, and here's what I need each of you to do."

With the help of a logistics consultant, they maximized the layout of their main warehouse in Indianapolis, eventually increasing efficiency by 30 percent. They also improved customer service. They then negotiated a way out of the costly Nevada lease and contracted with other companies for warehouse space only when needed for West Coast clients. "It was a great lesson in understanding what you don't know," Woods says. Today her company has more than made up for its losses.

"My belief is that very successful people have failed a lot," says Karen Reivich, Ph.D., coauthor of *The Resilience Factor* (Broadway) and research associate at the Positive Psychology Center at the

surprised she was back so soon. "I just lied to them because I was so embarrassed," she recalls.

Of course, she thought about eating better and exercising more after that episode, but what would be different? She had tried and failed at dropping the weight many times over the past 20 years. Then came the day when she stood in her apartment with her hand over her chest after waking suddenly from sleep. As a health care professional, she knew chest pains shouldn't be taken lightly. She already had high blood pressure, and now this. Memories of her beloved grandmother, who died at 47. [continued on page 210]

THINGS DIDN'T WORK OUT. WHAT NOW?

Choose a small goal to get you unstuck. Regain confidence with baby steps.

Control your own spin. Optimists see failure as temporary: "I wasn't prepared." Pessimists see it as permanent and personal: "I'm not good enough."

Know your strengths and leverage them. Don't obsess about fixing your weaknesses.

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SECRET TO SUCCESS

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flooded her thoughts. “I decided that day that no matter how long it took, I was going to focus on becoming a fit and healthy person,” she says.

She lost 80 pounds the first year and another 15 pounds in the subsequent six months, going from a size 22 to a size 8. What was the game changer? “I found the thing that outweighed food,” says Floyd, who has kept the weight off for four years. It was the compelling vision of the healthy person she could become. “I took on a different mind-set,” she explains. Instead of seeing junk foods as treats, she considers how they make her feel—sluggish and lazy. Her shift in perspective helped her alter another aspect of her life that had been out of control: her finances. She connected the dots and saw that she wasn’t just an emotional eater; she was an emotional spender as well. “Successful people are alert during success, but also during setbacks,” says Reivich. Floyd is so passionate about the lessons she has learned that she became a weight loss coach, starting the organization Take Back Your Temple to help others. She also wrote the book *MoneyWise Weight Loss* (Wellspring Omnimedia). She understands now that her success began by making a decision to change—and a decision to succeed.

Your greatest failures can lead to your greatest successes

Like Floyd, financial expert and author Glinda Bridgforth, 56, found a purpose on the journey from failure to success: a career that has led to a flourishing business, best-selling financial books and being a part of Oprah’s “Debt Diet” series. Defeat and disappointment in the 1980’s—a broken marriage, career burnout, \$50,000 in unsecured debt, a pending home foreclosure and a rental-property foreclosure—had left her at rock bottom. “The morning that I got on the scale and I was 99 pounds, I realized I was really killing myself,” says the 5-foot, 6-inch-tall Bridgforth, whose perpetual stress at work had led to her skipping meals and sleeping less. At the time, she was successfully managing a \$90 million business unit for a large California bank, yet living in constant fear when it came to her personal affairs attention. “I was in the process of losing it all because I just hadn’t given my personal affairs attention,” she recalls.

Frustrated and confused, she sat on the shores of the San Francisco Bay one afternoon and asked God, “What could you possibly have in my future that I need to be going through this right now?” Even in the face of so many letdowns at once, she wanted to believe something good could come of her struggles. After two more years of soul-searching, therapy and much-needed rest, she discovered that her failures had led her to her life’s work: teaching others the emotional and practical lessons of getting out of debt and staying out. “I am on my spiritual path,” says Bridgforth, author of *Girl, Get Your Money Straight!* (Broadway). It took her ten years to climb out of debt herself, and she did it while building her business. “My biggest issue was taking care of people who should have been taking care of themselves,” she admits.

When it comes to sisters who repeatedly fail financially, she shares what worked for her: Find a person or an organization (a trusted friend, a financial recovery program such as Debtors Anonymous) to whom you can be accountable. Get clear about the behavior that led to your failure. For example, ask, “Why did I spend money on that weekend vacation when I knew I didn’t have it?” Once you identify your triggers, learn to handle them differently. For example, if you know you shop when you are anxious or lonely, find something else to do—take a walk, talk to a friend, go to the gym.

Bridgforth’s experience illustrates an emerging perspective on severe emotional stress, called post-traumatic growth. Researchers Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte suggest that those who have gone through a traumatic event may be able to reflect on their life events, understand themselves better, and find new, more effective ways of dealing with challenges. Post-traumatic growth is a common theme for Woods, Floyd and Bridgforth. They don’t wallow in disappointment; they learn from it. They don’t make excuses; they look for solutions. Whatever your situation, decide to use failure to glean messages, build your character, hone your skills, and catapult you toward a life more fulfilling than you imagined possible. Success will be yours! □

Valorie Burton shares more on success at valorieburton.com.