

**Center for
Ambitious Failure**

KAIST

CAF Newsletter

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CAF

The Two Faces of Failure

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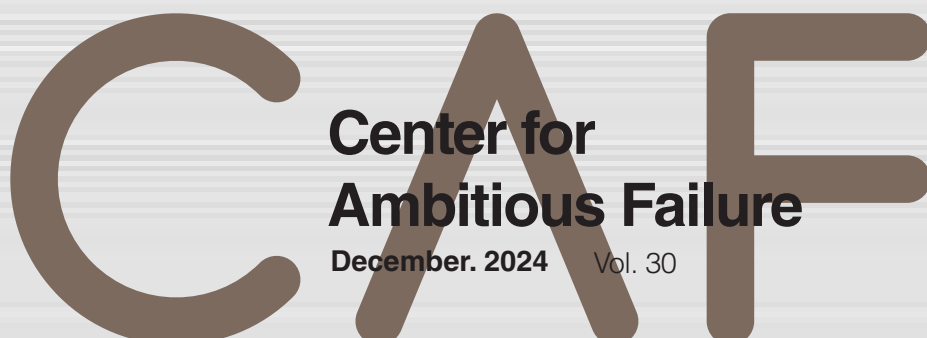
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The Two Faces of Failure” Stepping Stone or Stigma? Diverging Perceptions of Failure and Generational Gaps

Results from the 2024 Public Perception Survey on
Challenges and Failure





“The Two Faces of Failure” Stepping Stone or Stigma? Diverging Perceptions of Failure and Generational Gaps

Results from the 2024 Public Perception Survey on
Challenges and Failure

In October 2024, the KAIST Center for Ambitious Failure conducted a large-scale survey to mark its third anniversary, investigating how Korean society perceives challenges and failure. The survey was carried out with 1,500 respondents born between 1955 and 2005. The survey had a margin of error of $\pm 2.5\%$ at a 95% confidence level. To accurately determine generational differences in how failure is perceived, a purposive quota sampling method based on gender and age was employed.

Survey Overview

- Survey period: October 11 ~ 16, 2024
- Participants: 1,500 Korean adults (born between 1955 and 2005)
- Margin of error: $\pm 2.5\%$ (95% confidence level)
- ※ Generational categories (as designated by the Seoul National University PPRC)

Generation	Generation Z	Generation Y (Millennials)	Generation X	2 nd Generation Baby Boomers	1 st Generation Baby Boomers
Birth Years	1997~2005	1985~1996	1975~1984	1965~1974	1955~1964
sample	300	300	300	300	300

How Koreans View Success: Generational Differences

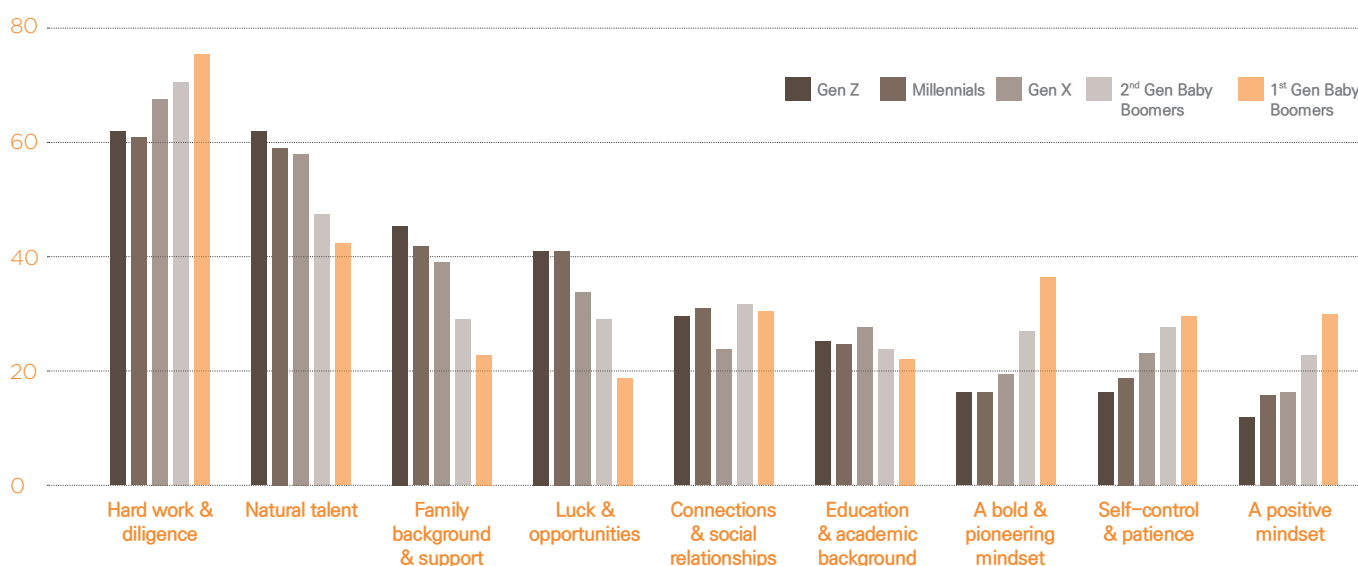
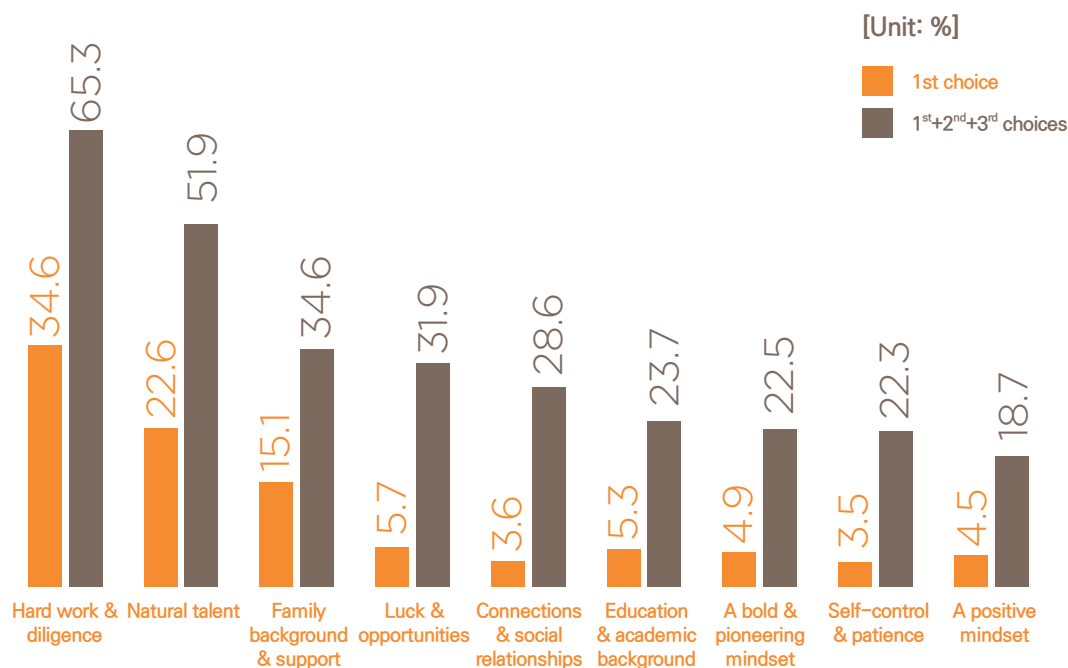
Korean society exhibits a fascinating duality when it comes to attitudes toward failure.

According to the survey results, most respondents demonstrated a positive outlook toward failure, recognizing it as part of the road that leads to success. 73.5% believed that failure contributes to success, and 57.2% were willing to tolerate minor failures if it could help them achieve greater accomplishments. Of particular note was how the respondents viewed the idea of sharing failure experiences. 73.8% considered it beneficial to share such experiences publicly, nearly three times more than the 26.2% who preferred keeping them private. Interestingly, individuals who identified as part of the upper class were more likely to view failure as a stepping stone to success, revealing a correlation between perceived social status and attitudes toward failure.

Another interesting finding was concerned with how the respondents interpreted the role of failure. 75.2% agreed that a fear of failure can motivate people by encouraging better preparation. However, only 24.8% believed that a fear of failure hinders innovation. This suggests that Korean society often regards failure more as a warning sign that forces preventive action and preparation than as a catalyst for innovation.



Q. What do you think is the most important factor for success?



* Multiple response (1+2+3 ranked), percentages are based on respondents who answered each item (%)

Diverging Attitudes Toward Failure

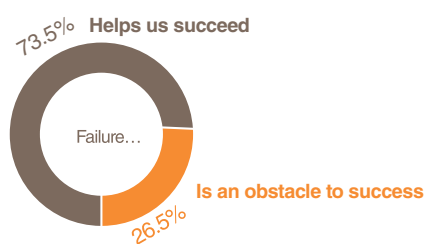
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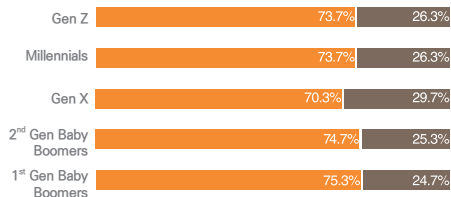
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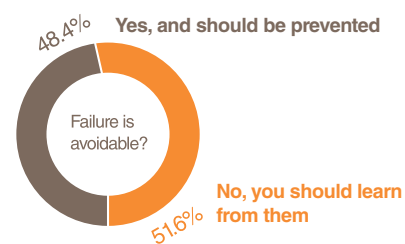
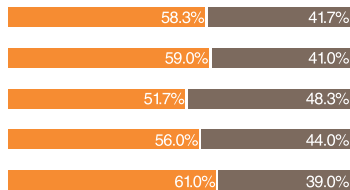
Q. What are your thoughts regarding failure?



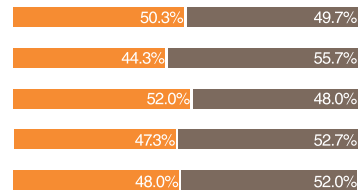
Helpful Obstacle



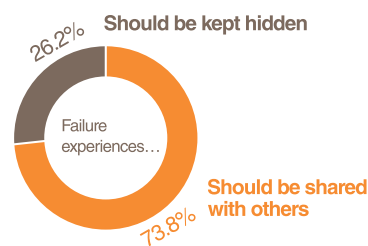
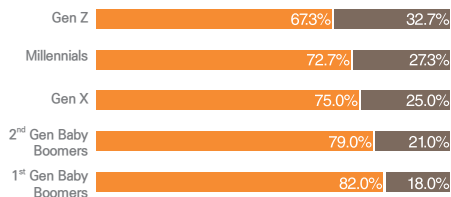
Accept Minimize



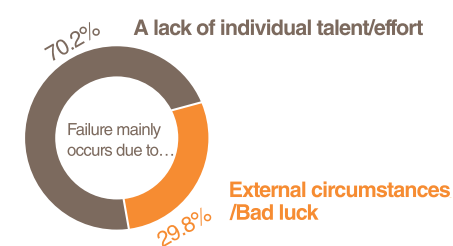
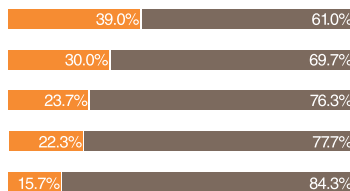
Yes, prevent No, learn



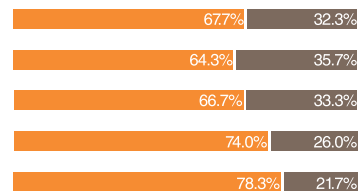
Helps us be prepared Hinders innovation



Should be hidden Should be shared



Lack of talent/effort External circumstances/Bad luck

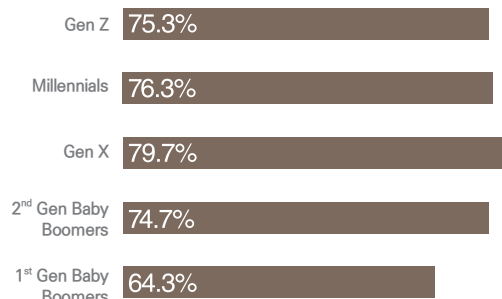
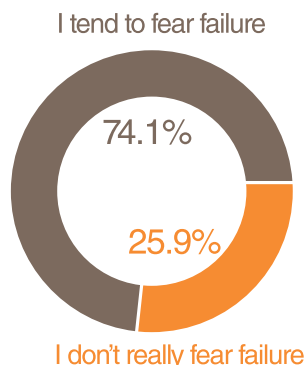


It was clear that there was a significant gap between society's perception of failure and how individuals actually experienced failure firsthand. Despite acknowledging the positive aspects of failure, a significant portion of the respondents displayed a strong fear of failure. 74.1% admitted to experiencing a strong fear of failure, and 63.3% stated that there were occasions when they avoided taking on a challenge due to such fears.

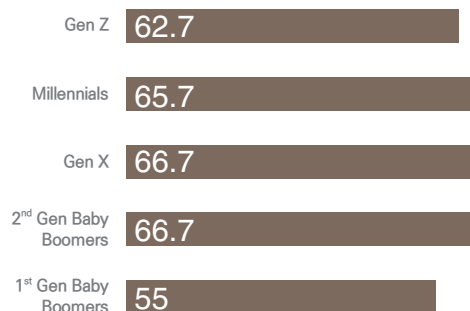
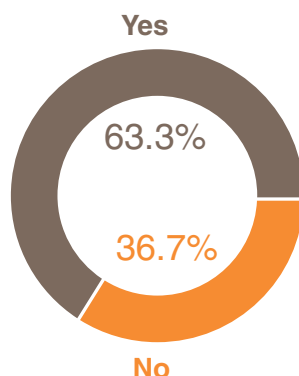
Fear of failure also exhibited striking generational differences. Younger generations, particularly Gen Z and Millennials, expressed that failure brought them much psychological stress and that they were acutely sensitive to the opinions of others. For example, 66% of Millennial respondents and 65% of Gen Z respondents said that they were concerned about disappointing others, and 60.7% of Millennial respondents and 66.3% of Gen Z respondents reported being conscious of how they were perceived by others. These groups were also more hesitant to share their failure experiences.

In contrast, Baby Boomers displayed a more flexible attitude toward failure. Respondents from this group reported lower levels of anxiety about failure and were more open to sharing their failure experiences. This generational divide appears rooted in socioeconomic contexts. To Baby Boomers, who lived through a period of industrialization and rapid economic growth, failure could be viewed as a springboard for new opportunities. Conversely, those in younger generations, who grew up in a society struggling with minimal economic growth and intensifying competition, tend to perceive failure as a nearly irreparable and defining setback.

Q. Have you ever felt a strong fear of failure?



Q. Have you ever given up on a challenge because of the fear of failing?

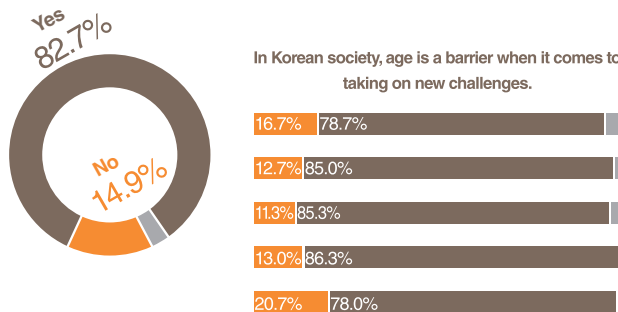
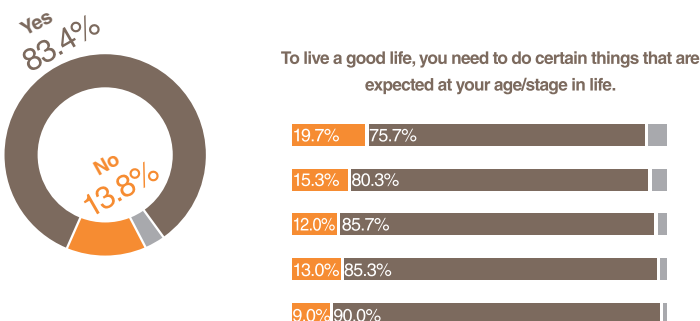
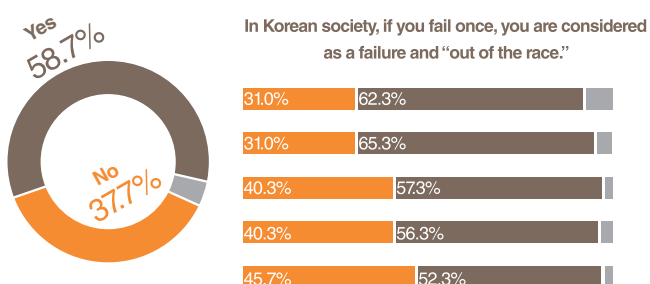
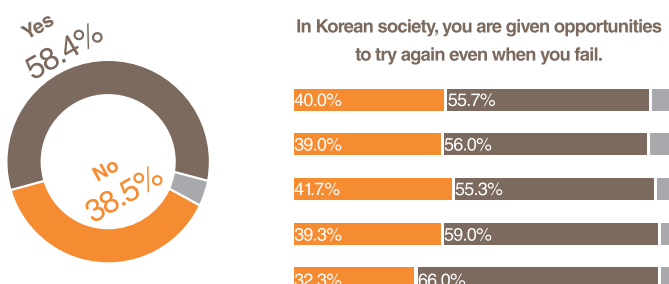
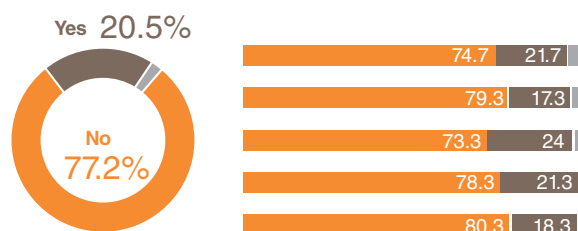
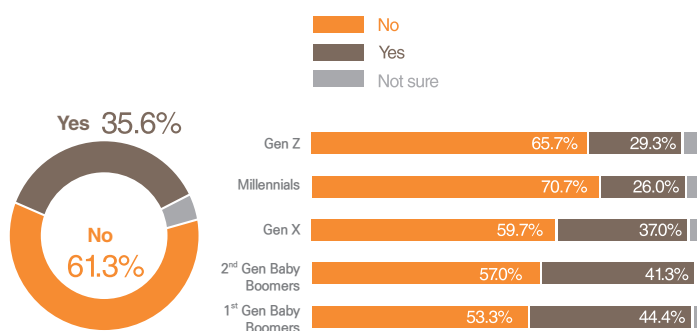


How Open is Korean Society to Challenges?

What underlies this duality in attitudes toward failure? Insights can be gained from the survey results regarding Korea's culture around taking on challenges. The results paint a picture portraying Korean society as having a highly conservative attitude toward those who seek out bold challenges. Only 35.6% of respondents believed that Korean society encourages new challenges, and a mere 20.5% felt that Korean society is tolerant of failure. Moreover, 58.7% agreed with the statement, "In Korean society, you are considered a loser if you fail once," underscoring the strong social stigma surrounding failure that persists to this day.

“Korean society generally encourages people to take on new challenges”

“Korean society is tolerant of failure”



This dichotomy was also apparent in the survey results regarding opinions on second chances. While 58.4% believed that you are given second opportunities to try again after failing, there were stark differences in the results across generations. 1st Generation Baby Boomers were most optimistic about second chances, while younger generations believed that society was less willing to accept and tolerate challenges and failures.

One striking discovery was concerned with the perception of social age barriers when it comes to taking on challenges. 80% of respondents agreed that people could face age-related constraints when attempting to take on new challenges, and 83.4% believed that it was necessary for people to follow a textbook life journey to enjoy a stable life. While younger generations showed slightly less agreement with these notions, the difference was minimal, reflecting the lasting influence of age-based norms in Korean society.

Barriers to New Challenges: Excessive Competition and Meritocracy

The analysis results concerning barriers to new challenges reveals fundamental issues in Korean society. Notably, all generations identified 'excessive competition and meritocracy' as the primary obstacle, as agreed upon by 46.7% of respondents. This result points to how Korea's hyper-competitive culture stifles innovation and new endeavors.

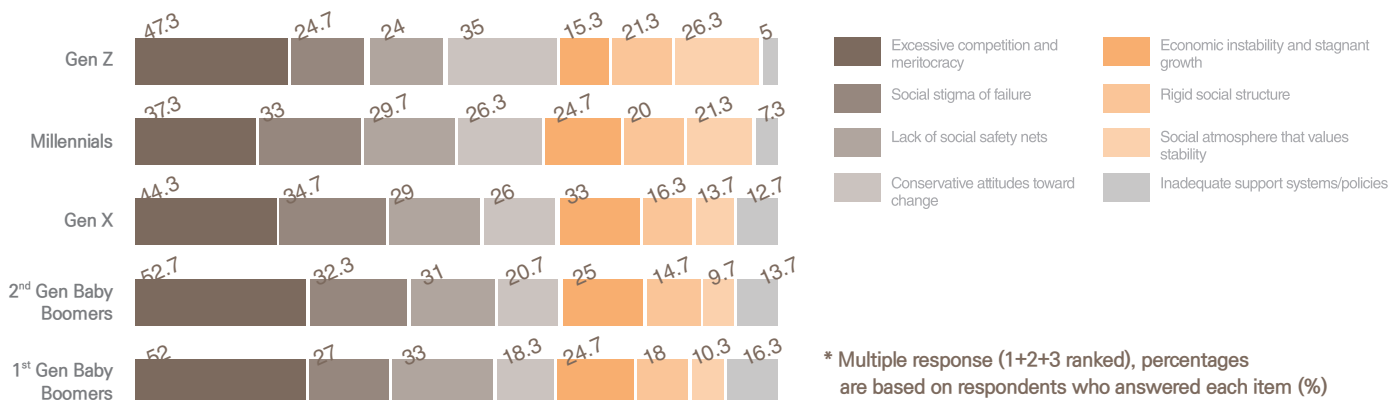
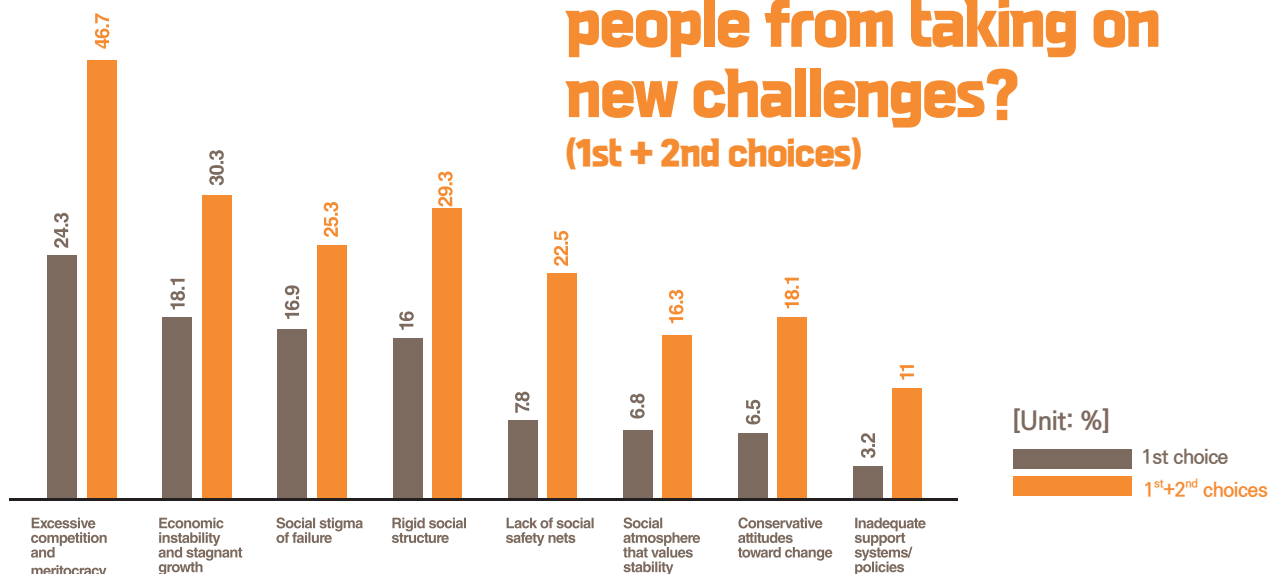
The second and third most common responses were 'economic instability and stagnant growth' (30.3%) and 'rigid social structure' (29.3%). The high placings of these choices suggest that barriers to new challenges are rooted in systemic societal issues rather than individual tendencies or a lack of willpower.

One particularly notable finding from the generational analysis is the distinctive perception observed among younger generations, especially Generation Z. Respondents from Generation Z were more likely than other generations to highlight 'the stigma of failure' (35%) and 'a social atmosphere that values stability' (26.3%) as significant barriers. This underscores the tangible and specific nature of the social pressures and anxieties experienced by the younger generation.

Another striking discovery is the relatively low importance assigned to policy-related factors. Issues such as 'a lack of social safety nets' and 'inadequate support systems/policies' were not prioritized by the respondents. This suggests that the fundamental barriers to taking on challenges in Korean society do not merely stem from policy shortcomings.

Q. What is the primary obstacle that prevents people from taking on new challenges?

(1st + 2nd choices)



Conclusion

The survey revealed that there are stark generational differences in how challenges and failure are perceived. Moreover, it highlighted the intense anxiety and burden felt by younger generations. These findings underscore the need for tailored, generation-specific policies and long-term efforts to drive cultural change across Korean society.

In a world that increasingly values innovation and boldness, fostering a culture that accepts failure and encourages second chances is not optional-it is a necessity. To achieve this goal, Korea will not only need to offer institutional support, but also bring about socio-cultural shifts grounded in intergenerational understanding and dialogue.

2024 KAISTian Failure Story

The CAF News letter publishes winning essays of the 2024 'KAISTian Failure Story Contest'.

They share experiences of KAISTians who are constantly attempting, challenging themselves, experiencing failures and setbacks, and learning valuable life lessons as a result.

Winning essays from the CAF contest

KAISTian story





The Life of a Bat

Juneyoung Ro
(KAIST Graduate School of Data science)

KAISTian story

Boring doesn't even start to describe the feeling of having to wait in line for airport immigration checks, especially when the line is long. But in my case, I have a unique advantage—I can choose to stand in either the domestic or foreigner queues. Why? Because I hold dual citizenship. I am both a citizen of Korea and the United States, and with two passports, I have the option to choose to wait in either line. People often tell me that they envy my dual citizenship status. They admire my fluency in English, the fact that I was able to live in the U.S., and the opportunities I had as a result. But what many don't see are the hidden struggles that come with this identity. I am, in a sense, a bat—caught between two worlds, not fully belonging to either. Let me share a bit about what that feels like.

I was born in the United States but grew up moving back and forth between the U.S. and Korea. Due to my parents' work, I spent a lot of time in the U.S. and quickly learned English during my childhood years. I lived in America for about eight years, completing both my high school and university education there. Even with such an upbringing, I still held on to my Korean roots. Determined to preserve my native tongue, my parents made it a family rule to speak only Korean at home, and this thankfully helped me become fluent in both languages. While I sometimes find it more comfortable to speak and write in English, I also feel deeply connected to Korean culture, food, and humor. I am proud of and grateful for my dual cultural background. But why, then, am I writing an essay about “rejection”? Because people who are part of two or more cultures often find themselves being left out of all sides. If you have your left foot in one camp and your right foot in another, you may not fully belong to either.

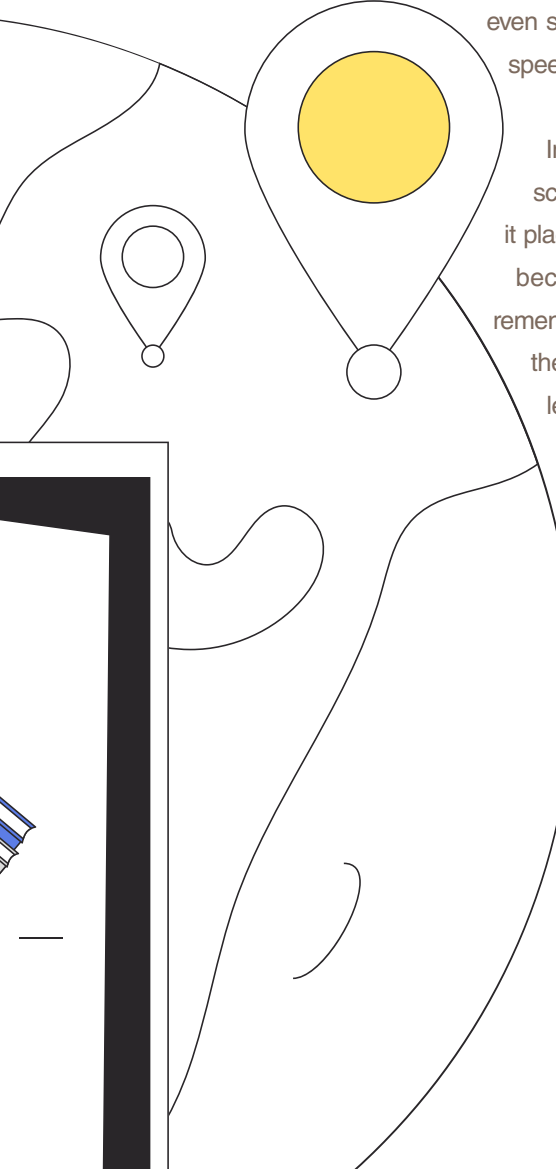
As a child, I attended elementary school in San Antonio, Texas. As a naturally shy child, I didn't speak to anyone on my first day of school. I remember when my teacher said, “Introduce yourself to your classmates Juneyoung,” I burst into tears and was



sent home early. I hated having to introduce myself to strangers, but over time, I managed to open up to my classmates since they saw me for who I was and welcomed me with open arms. Thanks to them, I enjoyed three happy years in San Antonio.

When I returned to Korea, I was labeled “the kid from America.” My peers were curious about my background and showed interest in the stories I had to tell. Fortunately, I was able to fit in quite easily because I was well versed with Korean dramas and music, which I had enjoyed even while in the U.S. I spent six fulfilling years in Korea before making the decision to return to the U.S. for high school. This time, I wasn’t following my parents—this was my own decision.

High school in the U.S. was nothing like the American life I remembered. Gone were the carefree, accepting friends of my elementary school days—instead, I found myself surrounded by teenage classmates, which made it difficult for me to adjust to the new environment. I even had to face overt racism from some of my peers. Once, a classmate whom I thought was a friend asked me, “How do you even see with eyes so small?” Needless to say, I was left utterly speechless.



In my second year of high school, I left Texas to transfer to a school in Virginia. This school had more cultural diversity, and it placed a greater emphasis on academics. However, perhaps because of my introverted, overly self-conscious nature, I remember feeling scared during lunch and break times. Although the blatant racism I had experienced before was thankfully less frequent, I still felt a nagging sense of not belonging to any group, like an uncomfortable outsider. Whenever someone asked me, “Where are you from?” I would answer, “I’m from the States” or “I’m from Texas.” But the follow-up question was always “No, where are you actually from?” Despite being born and raised in the U.S., holding U.S. citizenship, and receiving an American education, I was never seen as fully American in their eyes. They saw me as an Asian immigrant, even though I was just as American as they were. It wasn’t even like I was lying about my identity, yet it felt as though I’d said something wrong.

I couldn't shake this feeling of rejection—the sense of being an outsider—for a long time. Since I was still young and immature, I became increasingly timid and often avoided others. I even remember eating lunch in the restroom. Now, that is not to say that I didn't have any positive memories from my time in the U.S. I found my passions, made lifelong friends, and gained invaluable experiences that I wouldn't trade for anything. Even now, I dream of returning to the U.S. to continue my studies or just to travel. Yet a part of me still feels a little melancholy when I remember that feeling of being an outsider, as though I will never fully belong.

Once I graduated high school, I stayed in the U.S. for college but returned to Korea during the COVID-19 pandemic. While being back in Korea brought comfort and familiarity, I still couldn't shake the feeling of not fully belonging here either. Whenever I described my background to others, I found myself saying that I had moved back and forth between the U.S. and Korea, unable to pick one country as my true home. While working, interning, or volunteering in Korea, I was sometimes referred to with the derogatory term "black-haired foreigner." Despite paying taxes like everyone else and not enjoying any of the benefits other foreign residents might receive, I was treated differently as though I were an outsider. When someone needed help with English, I was viewed as fully American, but when it came to adhering to certain conservative norms, I was expected to conform to the rules like a Korean. With these experiences piling up, I felt increasingly like a bat darting between two identities without truly belonging to either. As a result, I felt my connection to both cultures deteriorating, leaving me in the middle of nowhere.

I wrote this essay to compare my long-standing struggle with self-identity to the feeling of being rejected. Yet, the important thing to note is that the rejections I've faced have not been outright denials—I've always had the choice to start over and reshape my journey. With each struggle my perspective widened, making my life that much more colorful as a result. In addition to being bilingual, I find that I am able to immerse myself in different cultures and connect with others. When I was in the U.S., I experienced the pains of racism, but they strengthened my resolve to never become like those who discriminated against me. When I was in Korea, I felt confused due to my identity crisis, but it taught me to focus on the present, giving my all to what I love doing.

Everyone faces rejection in one form or another. We all understand that the world doesn't revolve around us, and that things don't always go our way, but this awareness does not make it any easier to overcome the emotional wounds of rejection. Yet, if rejection is inevitable in life, perhaps our wisest choice is to face it with resilience. One day, when you look back at your moments of rejection, I hope you can see that they were stepping stones for greater growth as I have come to see them now.

Planting the Roots of One's Life

Chae Yeon Lee
(KAIST Department of Biological Sciences)

KAISTian story

The stock price of S, the gold standard of blue chip stocks, has plummeted yet again. This time, it's due to the poor quality control and defects of its latest wireless earphones. The public backlash was intense with an avalanche of scathing reviews flooding the internet. The company just announced that they would temporarily take the product off the shelves. No doubt this means that the stock price will decline even further. My earnings are firmly in the red.

I've been sick quite often recently. In my twenty-some years, I had never been hospitalized—that is, until grad school. For the first time, I found myself admitted to the hospital, battling a ten-day fever and surviving only on thin porridge. The doctors had to drain pus from abscesses in my mouth. When I was discharged, I was fever-free but utterly drained, hollow, and frail. A full month slipped by as I focused on recovery.

A colleague who had been with me for seven years left the lab. Now, I'm the longest-standing member. Yet after all this time, I am nowhere close to submitting my research paper for publication, even though I've been working on it for seven years. Meanwhile, my colleague left after publishing three papers. I am growing increasingly anxious as I fall further behind.

My grandfather passed away. He taught me arithmetic and Hanja. He showed me how to use a soldering iron and explained the principle of levers. We worked on my elementary school summer assignments together. My education began with him. I can vividly remember the look on his face when I entered graduate school—a beaming smile filled with pride and joy. Back then, I always imagined my grandfather being beside me during my graduation ceremony,



even picturing myself placing my graduation cap on his head. That scene now remains only in my imagination—a dream that will never come true.

Why do so many things in life not go as planned? Was my desire not strong enough? Did I not try hard enough to achieve what I wanted? Am I simply not talented enough? Or was I just unlucky?

Sure, maybe I can attribute my failed stock investments to the luck of the draw. But what about my illness? I didn't neglect my health in any way I entered grad school. I even exercised regularly. What about my slow progress compared to my colleague? Alright, fine, I should stop comparing myself to others. What about my grandfather's passing—was that simply a matter of fate, as they say?

In research, there are causes and phenomena. Once you identify the cause and understand the phenomenon, you can start seeing the bigger picture as long as you follow the fundamental principles. But in life, even when I try to make sense of things, it all just seems so futile. Life goes on, and new challenges constantly arise. Ultimately, the only thing I can do is accept and acknowledge everything that happens.

Acceptance isn't about giving up. It's about understanding what cannot be changed and taking the next step forward.

In the summer of 2021, a paper on the same topic as my research was published in Japan. The content was identical to my work, and the results were the same. For a time, I became an emotional wreck, engulfed in the sense of futility, self-pity, and self-doubt. It felt as though everything I'd done had been erased. I questioned myself: would the outcome have been different had I worked a little harder? Fortunately, my friends and colleagues offered comfort and practical assistance. I can't remember exactly how long it took, but one day, I realized something important. If I stopped right



here and now, that would be the end of my research. It wouldn't be someone else ending my research—it would be an end by my own doing.

I needed to move forward. I couldn't stop here. There was still so much more I could try. I was just afraid—afraid of failing and falling behind again. But I know that my goals aren't beyond my reach.

Fear can grow in our imaginations or manifest as a brutal reality. Either way, we cannot eliminate fear entirely. All we can do is face it and accept the truth as it is.

The research topic that I've been working on for seven years is the same topic as before—the one that had already been published in 2021. Now, I've taken that topic to levels beyond what was covered in that paper, and I am nearing the conclusion of my research. I don't know what will become of my paper—the future is shrouded in uncertainty. Though the fear of failure lingers, I am still persevering with my research.

My dream of celebrating my graduation with my grandfather lives on only in my imagination. Still, I am grateful that he was with me at the start of my journey. Every time I start something new, he is with me in my heart. Although he is no longer with me, I journey onward toward the finish line.

This essay may not be particularly meaningful, but I hope it can bring comfort to someone out there. At the very least, I found comfort as I was writing it. Lately, I've been revisiting this passage from Kim Keum-hee, and so I share it with you in the hope that it can conclude this otherwise clumsy essay on a high note:

“When everything feels overwhelming and depressing, it helps to start from the very bottom, climbing back up one step at a time. As long as the roots remain, we can plant them again. Summer days worth waiting for will come, so wait for those summer days we will.”

— Plant-Like Optimism, 2023, Kim Keum-hee.

The Little Things that can Overcome Lethargy

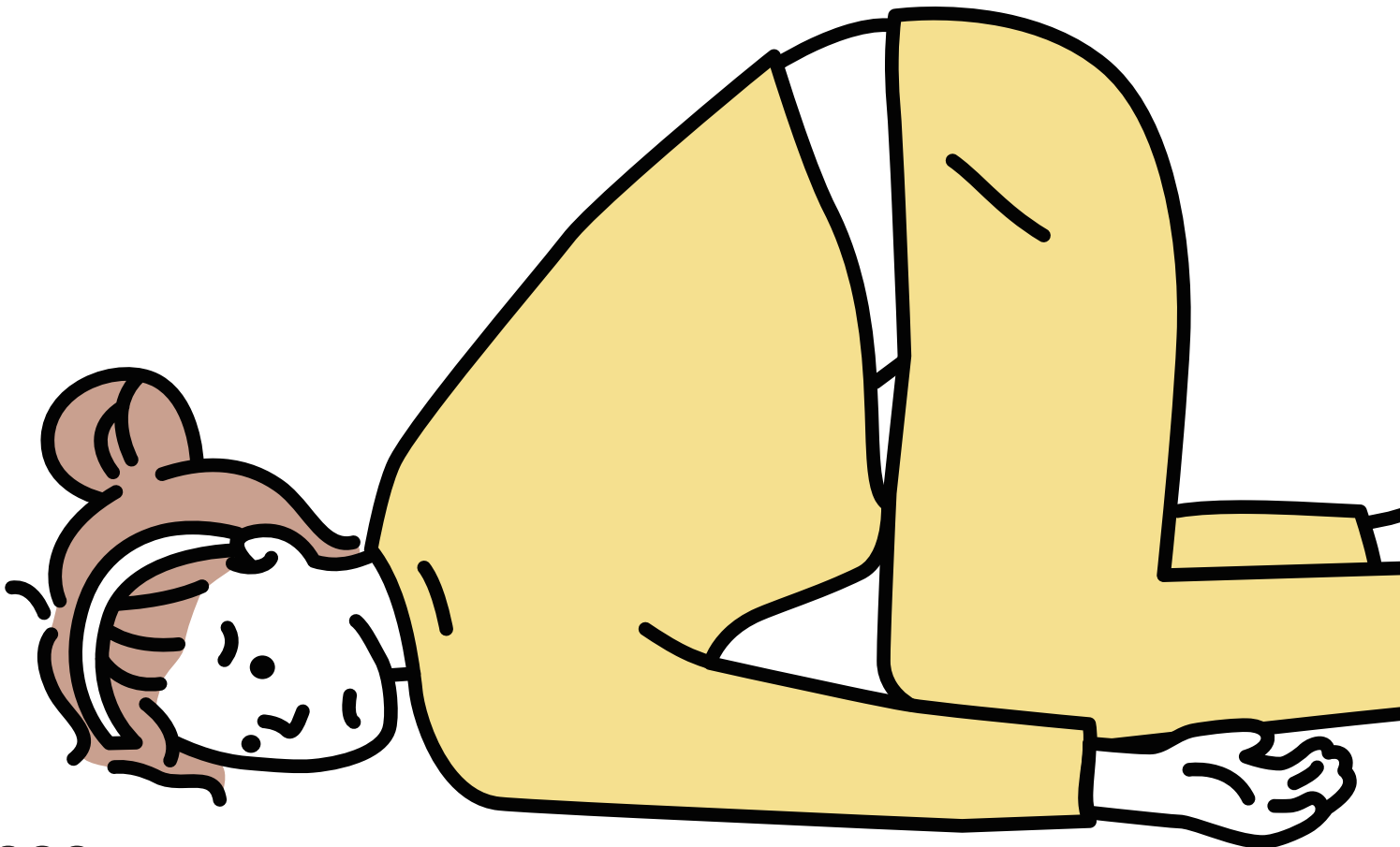
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(KAIST Department of Biological Sciences)

KAISTian story

On lazy weekends, I often find myself watching the EBS program [Extreme Job]. As the title suggests, it introduces occupations that require extreme physical labor or involve dangerous risks. The stark contrast between the hardworking individuals on TV and myself lying in bed on a weekend often leaves me with a sense of disconnect. At the same time, I feel a growing sense of admiration for these professionals. Regardless of their job, people who are at the very pinnacle of their field are truly inspiring. Upon witnessing such professionalism through others, I felt like there was an inner voice in my head questioning my own place and expertise.

If I had to describe myself, I might call myself a scientist (or science expert). In a broader sense, I would say that I am a "professional learner." My journey began in middle school, in a place neither fully urban nor rural. I went through a grueling and intensely competitive process to gain admission to a science high school. From there, I once again had to give it my all to enter university, which fortunately resulted in my admission to KAIST. That wasn't the end, though. I advanced to graduate school and am now continuing my studies as a postdoctoral researcher. This has been a long, winding road spanning over 15 years, and the journey has been winding as it is long. The idea that a longer river has more bends and curves aptly describes my academic journey. Naturally, I've experienced periods of stagnation and fatigue during my time as a professional learner. These moments

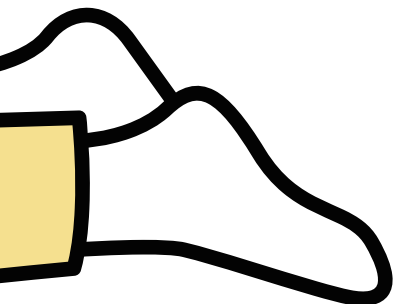


often resulted in feelings of lethargy and self-doubt. Through this essay, I want to share the methods I've discovered to overcome such lethargy. By doing so, I hope to provide encouragement and practical solutions for others who may be facing similar challenges.

To determine whether my strategies might work for you, it's essential to understand my background. Like many KAIST students, I achieved good grades throughout middle and high school. During this period, there was a generally strong correlation between the success I had achieved and the amount of effort I had put in. While I was rewarded with a great sense of accomplishment whenever I succeeded, I also suffered from a rush of anxiety and self-reproach whenever I fell short. On days when I achieved nothing of worth, I often spiraled into a whirlpool of self-doubt. Another trait of mine is that I'm not good at multitasking. To be more specific, if my to-do list becomes too long and exceeds a certain threshold, I lose motivation and fall into a state of lethargy, even if the tasks are trivial. For instance, a list of tasks like (1) conducting experiments, (2) cleaning the house, and (3) writing reports feels manageable to me, but I can be pushed over the edge if I also have to worry about minor things like (4) repairing clothes or (5) planning a trip. If I feel overwhelmed, I fall into a lethargic trap where I do not want to do anything at all. In such a state, I end up spending entire days in bed, wasting time watching YouTube, rereading books I've already read, or rewatching familiar movies because I cannot be bothered to watch anything new. This lethargy led to even less accomplishment, creating a vicious cycle of self-doubt and further inactivity. Despite this, I've managed to remain strong as a professional learner for the past 15 years because I've developed my own methods for clearing away this mental block. While some of my approaches might seem unconventional (I've often been told I do quirky things), I've found a few that are particularly effective.

The first method is something I call the “YouTube-style auditing approach,” which I used during a period of lethargy in university.

If I describe the setting, it was the summer semester of my junior year. Many of my peers were busy preparing for exchange programs, traveling abroad, or participating in internships. Motivated by their drive, I too started preparing for an exchange program while simultaneously researching graduate schools. But this overwhelming combination left me feeling unmotivated. I forced myself to attend classes to earn the necessary credits, but I was uninterested in everything and often slept through lectures. This resulted in a multiplicative loss where I wasted the tuition I paid, did little with the time I had, and missed opportunities to listen to stellar lectures from outstanding professors.



One day, while lying in bed watching YouTube, I asked myself: why was it so easy for me to spend hours mindlessly watching videos but so hard to stay awake in class?

Upon reflection, I realized it was the pressure and responsibility of having to focus in class that exhausted me. So, I decided to let go of that burden. The “YouTube-style auditing approach” involves attending lectures with the same casual mindset as watching a YouTube video. The history course I was taking at the time seemed perfect for this experiment; after all, history (if you remove the need to memorize dates and names for exams) is essentially an exploration of past events, much like those YouTube videos that tell a story. I adopted this new, more lighthearted mindset whenever I entered the lecture room. It didn’t matter if I stared out the window or watched my classmates, I simply listened to the professor’s “storytelling,” letting my mind wander when I got bored and naturally returning to the lecture when the daydreaming itself became dull. Instead, I made it a strict rule not to take out my phone. I was already used to spending hours zoning out on my phone, and there was no way that my YouTube-style approach would work if I started browsing actual YouTube videos.

The biggest advantage of this approach was that I retained more from my lectures than if I had slept through the class entirely. Even if I absorbed very little information, bits and pieces of memorable historical facts stuck with me, which meant that I had learned something to reflect on later. Also, since I received less input from each lecture, I found that I could recall all the classes I had listened to lightly. When I am in a state of lethargy, being able to feel even a small sense of accomplishment is very important. Later, during exam season, when I managed to overcome my lethargy by focusing solely on studying for exams, the fragments of information I had gained through the “YouTube-style auditing approach” proved very helpful. For the record, I earned an A0 grade in that class. That said, this approach works best for humanities and social science courses, and it is likely less applicable to major courses. Nevertheless, I recommend this method as a way for lethargic college students who’ve grown tired of lectures to gain a small boost.

The second method is what I call the “Taereung-style Study Method.” I believe this approach can be useful not only for university and graduate students but also for working professionals. In fact, it is the method that has helped me the most throughout my academic career. I developed it during my early years in graduate school when I was overwhelmed by a sudden influx of projects, various administrative tasks from my department (I was a safety manager at the time, so



I couldn't avoid these duties), and some personal family matters. I was in such a severe slump that it felt like the worst days of my life. I remember barely managing to drag myself to the lab and sit at my desk. One day, during this slump, I came across a YouTube video about life at the Taereung Training Center. It was awe-inspiring to watch the athletes undergo their rigorous training regimens: starting with basic physical conditioning at 6 a.m., then continuing to train in morning, afternoon, and even evening sessions. I've always held professions outside my field of expertise in high regard, and this was no exception. I deeply respect athletes who work tirelessly on their craft. When I heard that someone from KAIST ran from Daejeon to Daecheon Beach over the course of three days, I couldn't help but admire their dedication.

That's when it struck me: if the fulfillment of achieving something by working hard for prolonged periods is admirable, the same can be said for studious pursuits like teaching oneself immunology. To combat my lethargy, I decided to create my own daily routine, inspired by the athletes' regimen at the Taereung Training Center. Just like how basic physical training is essential for athletes, as a professional learner, studying the fundamentals of my field is equally important. We all start to forget things we've learned in the past, so I revisited subjects I had learned as an undergraduate student and explored topics from courses I hadn't taken in the past. Next came the equivalent of fundamental skills training. Gymnasts, for example, don't just practice complex techniques like 540-degree spins—they also rehearse simpler moves like cartwheels. Similarly, I practiced experimental techniques such as injecting and sealing. During the hours that athletes would dedicate to their practical training, I worked on ongoing projects or conducted experiments, and during their stretching sessions, I took care of mundane administrative tasks. This small but structured change to my daily routine helped me become more active and get through my tasks at a steady pace. As I saw my life coming together bit by bit, my lethargy began to dissipate. When you first implement this method, you may question whether it might be too much, but once you set up a plan and start acting on it, you will find yourself making it happen. By repeating this habit, you will inevitably start to see change unfold, so I encourage anyone to give it a try. You've got nothing to lose.

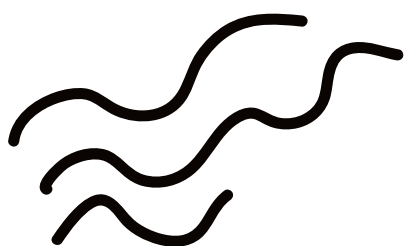


The last method is what I call "No Thinking Days." While the previous methods involve actively combating lethargy in new ways, this one is about simply embracing it. Those who often experience lethargy will know that one of the most frustrating aspects is the constant awareness that there is something needing to be done. Even as you waste time binging YouTube videos or procrastinating, the thought of "I really should start working on my tasks" doesn't leave your mind completely. Whenever I felt this way, I would go on a metaphoric strike for a day—or, if necessary, for a week—and decide to do absolutely nothing. I called this the "No Thinking Day" because I would literally think about nothing. Of course, this approach sometimes meant earning disdain from my seniors or professors, so I didn't use it often. But when I did, it was undeniably effective.

Freed from the pressure of needing to be productive, I could rest in a way that felt restorative rather than draining. I would lie down, watch a movie I felt like watching, do some cleaning if I wanted to, or simply do absolutely nothing if that's what I felt like. Instead of engaging in the complex act of "thinking," I focused on the simpler act of "responding" to my immediate needs. I was the kind of person who couldn't even rest during vacations that had a set time frame, whether it was a couple of days or a week. This turned the vacation into yet another task on my to-do list. However, through these "No Thinking Days," I learned how to live each moment without constant pressure. If you feel overwhelmed by too much work and find yourself wandering without purpose, I recommend giving this method a try. It can be a surprisingly valuable experience.

The three methods I've introduced all stem from personal experience—namely, the many lethargic moments I've faced since beginning my university studies in Daejeon. I sought to make small changes in response to the self-reproach I felt whenever my plans fell apart or my daily life seemed to end in failure. That nagging thought of "I really should be doing this" often finds us when plans fall apart, and this can make the entire day feel wasted. But as someone who has lived through ten turbulent years in Daejeon, I don't see "failed days" as entirely bad. Looking back, these moments were tough, but they also passed by quickly—perhaps because I didn't achieve much during those times.

I'll be leaving Daejeon in less than a year. Wherever my postdoctoral journey takes me, I know my life will continue to have its ups and downs. My only hope is that I can manage those fluctuations so they aren't too extreme. To anyone who feels like they've wasted a day in a slump, I want to say this: it is not as big of a failure as you think. Take small steps forward, and you will find your way.



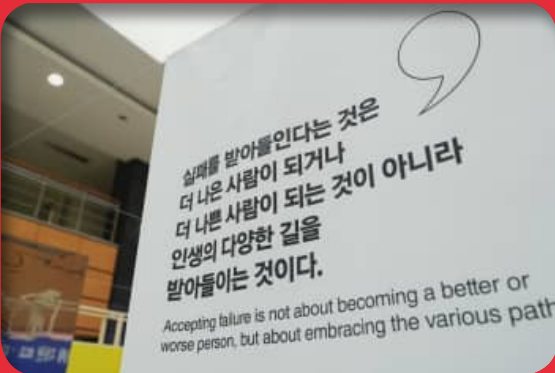
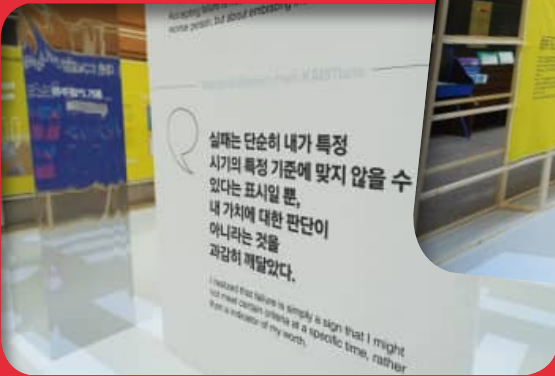
CAF Event

2024 k▲ist f▲ilur=ity s●oci=ty

In November 2024, the second KAIST Failure Society conference was held on the Daejeon main campus. At the conference, KAISTians could share their experiences and thoughts on failure, confronting the rejections and failures they have long ignored or hidden away while also gaining new perspectives and insights from one another.

We share with you our journey of broadening our understanding of failure by reflecting on our own failures and sharing those experiences with others.





Seminar

2024 Fall Semester Failure Seminar

From "Why Do I Live?" to "The Fate of Humanity": A New Perspective on Failure Through the Lens of Science

From "Why Do I Live?" to "The Fate of Humanity": A New Perspective on Failure Through the Lens of Science

On Friday, November 8, 2024, the Fall Semester Failure Seminar was held at the Fusion Hall in the KAIST's KI Building as part of the first day of the KAIST Failure Society conference. The "Failure Seminar" is the Center for Ambitious Failure's flagship lecture series, inviting leaders from diverse fields each semester to share their experiences and insights on failure, inspiring the audience to embrace challenges. The sixth edition of the seminar was themed "The Science of Failure: An Invitation to New Perspectives" and featured speakers Professor Kwon Jeong-tae from KAIST's Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences and former Gwacheon National Science Museum Director Lee Jeong-mo. This article outlines the highlights from the event.

“Our Ability to Predict the Distant Future Allows Us to View Failure as Part of a Larger Process”

A Neuroscientist's take on the question of 'the meaning of life'

Professor Kwon Jeong-tae began by exploring the existential question of ‘the meaning of life’ through the lens of neuroscience, drawing on his own contemplations from high school. He describes life not merely as something physical, but as a phenomenon. The human brain is composed of intricate neural networks. As our brains evolved, humans gained the capacity to predict and infer increasingly distant futures, even contemplating events beyond death itself.

One particularly intriguing insight was the evolutionary reversal of human self-awareness. Originally, self-awareness was a tool designed to aid in the biological phenomena of survival and reproduction. However, it has since grown powerful enough to override these aspects, enabling choices such as self-sacrifice or actions contrary to our fundamental survival instincts. In this context, Professor Kwon offered a new interpretation of failure. He argued that since our advanced cognitive abilities allow us to look far into the future, we also have the capacity to redefine failure as something more than just a simple outcome and as part of a larger process.



“No Extinction,
No Evolution—The Key Question
Is How We Go Extinct”

Humanity's Fate Through the Lens of Natural History

Former Gwacheon National Science Museum Director Yi Jeongmo illustrated the intricate relationship between extinction and evolution by guiding the audience through the history of planet Earth. He explained that throughout natural history, the emergence of new species has always been preceded by the extinction of existing ones. “Extinction isn’t inherently tragic. It’s only tragic if it happens to you,” he remarked, emphasizing that extinction is a natural mechanism fostering new opportunities for evolution.

Humanity currently finds itself in the midst of the sixth mass extinction. Unlike the previous five, which were caused by natural phenomena like asteroid impacts or volcanic eruptions, this current crisis is directly linked to human activity. Sharing alarming statistics, he noted that humans and their livestock now account for 97% of all biomass on Earth, leaving just 3% for wild animals. This imbalance underscores the fragility of ecosystems as biodiversity declines.

Despite this sobering reality, Yi also presented a hopeful message. Unlike prior mass extinctions, today’s crisis is one we can actively mitigate. “Homo sapiens should stick around for at least a million years on the Earth to make things better,” he quipped. He highlighted solutions such as transitioning to renewable energy and changing our lifestyles, urging humanity to choose a sustainable future over a “glorious extinction.”





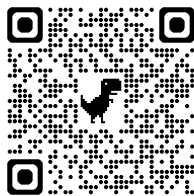
Replay the talk (video)



Prof. Kwon Jeongtae

(Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences)

Using Brain Science to Answer the Question "What am I Living for?"



Yi Jeongmo

(Science Communicator, / Director of Various Museum by Penguin)

A Glorious Extinction – The Most Beautiful Kind of Failure



2024 KAIST Failed Task Festival



On Wednesday, November 13, the 2nd “Failed Task Festival” was held at KAIST’s John Hannah Hall in the Academic Cultural Complex on the Daejeon main campus.

This year's event broke away from the former on-stage speech format and adopted a booth exhibition event. A total of seven participating teams shared a wide range of failure experiences, from marathon attempts that fell short to research setbacks. The participants recounted their honest and engaging failure stories, highlighting the insights and lessons they gained along the way.

Are you curious about the kinds of failures experienced by KAIST students? What do you think they have learned through those experiences? Watch the video below to learn more about their vivid and inspiring stories.



✖ 2024 Failed Task Festival highlight video
<https://youtu.be/x22EZTLLSM?feature=shared>

Source : KAIST official YouTube channel

2024 Failed Task Festival Presenters

Ali Syed Sheraz

Everything comes to you at a right time

[What Are You Looking At That's My Afterimage Award]

Doyoung Heo

The story of the total number of days the assignment was delayed 219 days

[Grand Prize]

Junhyeong Jeon

Research Projects Entangled in Controversy : Medical School Quota and STEM Feilds

[Heartbreak Award]

Seheon Kim

Failed Marathon [Your Beyond Imagination Award]

David Kim

The Empty Book: A Story of Unmet Promises, Resilience, and the True KAIST Spirit

YooHwan Kang

The new member of the precarious club, how did he become vice-president?

[Soaring High Award]

Photsawee Faengpong

Onvilasinee Leekumnerdthai

Thanyaporn Pusitdhikul

Rejected, Realigned, Ready to Work: Our Course Proposal Journey



CAF in the Media



[HelloDD.com] **“The Beauty of Youth Failures”**

<https://www.hellodd.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=106013>

November 13: KAIST Holds the 2nd “Show Off Your Screw Ups Celebration”
From 219 days of overdue assignments to canceled U.S. events
Youths share how “failure is the foundation for greater success”

[JoongAng Sunday]
Deep Dive Report

“Proudly Presenting My Botched Research”

<https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25292413>

“If You’ve Never Experienced Failure, that’s the Real Failure”

<https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25292454>

“Fear of Failure Deters Challenges” - 22% of Baby Boomers vs. 39% of Gen Z

<https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25292455>

[Kyunghyang
Newspaper]

“Is Failure Really the Mother of Success? Sharing One’s Experiences Matters More Than a Thousand Words”

<https://www.khan.co.kr/article/202411192052015>

Students hold a “Show Off Your Screw Ups Celebration” event and even organize an photo exhibition featuring moments of rejection
Our society’s obsession for efficiency fosters a fear of failure
Hopes for the initiative to spread to other universities and companies

[Maeil Business
Newspaper]

“The Medical School Trend: A Result of the Fear of Failure” - The Man Calling for Korea’s Brightest to Experience Failure

<https://m.mk.co.kr/news/economy/11184592>

Sharing experiences of rejection and failure, participants gain the strength to rise again

[SisaIN]

Share Your Bold Failures

<https://www.sisain.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=54419>

From November 20, KAIST hosts a two-week-long “Failure Society” conference, a platform for KAISTians to share and discuss their experiences with failure. Why does a university for science prodigies emphasize the importance of failure?

The CAF Newsletter is a newsletter published by the KAIST Center for Ambitious Failure.

Through the newsletter, we give readers a better look into the activities of CAF and share a wide range of perspectives regarding failure by featuring case studies, interviews, and expert columns.

Please send us your thoughts on the CAF Newsletter. CAF is always looking to apply feedback sent by readers to provide better and more engaging content. Feel free to send us your thoughts on the topics introduced in this issue. We would also love to hear your suggestions for subjects that CAF should look into and any feedback that can help us improve.



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