From here onward, I started to ponder about the following question: 'does failure actually exist in this world?' Should we define failure as every instance where a person is unable to achieve the results they would ideally like to? All endeavors will produce some sort of result, and in the process, we are also given opportunities to grow. Then, could we say that I failed because I chose to avoid the problem after running into a wall? What exactly is failure?

Some readers may look at my story and think that it does not really fit under the category of failure. Others may think that I had the courage to overcome my failure and achieve success. It is natural for people to have different opinions since the term 'failure' in itself is subjective. If someone asked me, "have you failed before?," I can confidently reply with the following response: "No, I have never failed. Instead, I made an 'attempt,' experienced a 'setback,' and had the 'strength' and 'courage' to overcome it."

Failure, the Misnomer of Effort

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Department of Biological Sciences of KAIST

My
failure
story

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There are always risks involved when one takes on new challenges. When faced with high risk, high reward situations, many people can end up getting cold feet. This is especially true when we are talking about our relationships with others. It is normal for people to hesitate when faced with making choices that could greatly affect their lives. However, if we give up on communicating with others, we will end up isolating ourselves. In my case, I needed to be courageous enough to make a stand so that I could protect my home, which had become a suffocating location to me.

My family became a rather uncomfortable part of my life. I knew I could not exclude them from my life, but I felt uncomfortable and negative emotions whenever I thought of them. Because of the rocky relationship I had with my family, I felt uncomfortable every single day. I preferred the company of my friends, but I did not have a place where I felt at home. It was not as if my parents used violence or if we had a major falling out; instead, it was because of the way we spoke to each other. Of course, my family loved each other, but we would often say nasty things that should not have been said.

My mother is a person of strong character. She took it upon herself to keep the family together when things became difficult, but she never resorted to anger or violence when it came to her children. Whenever she disciplined her children, she would always explain what we did wrong, and she was always fair. Also, whenever we got into trouble – regardless of the severity of the problem – she would tell us to sit in the living room while she went to the balcony to calm her emotions and reorganize her thoughts. I am very proud of my mother, and I hope to become more like her as I grow older.

Despite this, I did not always have the best relationship with my mother. The reason for this is because my mother always chose discipline over praise and understanding over empathy. All of her children have strong opinions and are inherently stubborn, and so we could not stand it when other people became too nosy. Since it was difficult trying to understand and respect the feelings of all four of her children, the conversations in our home became increasingly uncomfortable. While no one in the family did anything that would invite society's ire, the society in our home was falling apart by the day. By the time I matured into an adult and understood the severity of the situation, our family had become deeply scarred.

The first time I looked at our situation and thought something had to change was after I graduated university. My self-esteem was at an all-time low given that I had experienced multiple, consecutive failures, and so I could not stand having conversations with my family. It felt as if my own family – who should be there to support me when I am down – were doing their best to make me feel worse. Looking

back in hindsight, they were just trying to give me helpful advice. However, I was deeply hurt by their words at the time, I so I fell into a deep pit of depression. I truly felt as if I was completely alone in the world with no one on my side.

It was much easier to patch things up with my siblings, since I am usually nice with them as the eldest sister. When I asked them to stop saying things that hurt me, they were very understanding. The real problem was talking with my mother. Whenever we talked, my mother would always drag on about issues related to our livelihood or my failures, and so these conversations always left me in a dreadful mood. Also, since she never suggested any solutions, I would end up cutting myself down since my attention was solely drawn to my problems. Initially, I tried to avoid these situations. I would avoid talking to my mother at all, and I believed that everything would resolve itself if I could achieve success soon.

However, success did not come by easily. A lot of pressure was placed on me to find employ-ment, and due to my hesitation (as I was unsure of the right path for myself), I ended up failing to settle anywhere. This just made my relationship with my mother even worse. While I understand that it would have been difficult for my mother as she needed to ensure all four of her children received a proper education, she would constantly scold me about how I could become a bad influence to my younger siblings or how I was not helping our family's financial situation by being unable to find a job. Because of her attitude, I found it almost impossible to even stay in the house. I started to think that it was foolish for me to try and find a right path for myself; instead, I saw myself as pathetic person who was nowhere close to becoming independent any time soon, and I became increasingly nervous about my future. One day, I found myself being unable to write anything in my cover letter for my resume, and it was at that moment that I realized that avoiding the problem was not the answer.

When I sat down to talk with my mother, I had no idea what to say since I had been avoiding the idea of speaking to her for so long. I usually have no problem speaking my mind, but this was different because of all the pent-up negative emotions inside me. I even struggled to find the right timing to bring up the topic. One day, as I was returning home from my part-time job, I finally got my chance. My mother was alone at home, so I took a deep breath and asked if we could talk.

I had a lot of things that I wanted to say, so I rehearsed the conversation in my head thousands of times beforehand, but none of this helped once I sat face-to-face with my mother. I tried to start the conversation off calmly, but when my mother misinterpreted my intentions and said, "what, you need some money?", my emotions just erupted. Unable to control myself, I yelled in anger and my

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mother responded likewise, and so the conversation dissolved into nothing more than a shouting match. As you can imagine, my first attempt ended in complete failure.

I was able to calm myself down once I was alone, but then I felt a flood of regret wash over me. "Why did I say those things? That was not what I wanted to say…" I felt terrible knowing that I did not even get to say the things I wanted to talk about. I felt as though I would never be able to find peace if I left things like this. I knew that if I did not try again, I would still be the same person as before, running away from the situation. I wanted to at least be able to say that I tried.

However, it was difficult trying to approach my mother again after what transpired during our previous encounter. Ironically, I was only able to try again because of my previous disaster of a conversation. Thinking that it could not be worse than last time, I approached my mother again to talk. As expected, she gave me a cold response. When she replied, "what, are you going to cry and yell again like last time?", I calmly responded by saying, "I want to talk because I never got to finish what I wanted to say." Upon hearing this, my mother agreed to sit down and listen.

"I am well aware that you trust and love me, and I fully understand that your disappointment in me is equally as great. However, I need your support and praise. While it is important to compare myself with others to find my weaknesses, let me do that myself. If my own mother does nothing but pick out my bad points without a single mention of my good points, all that does is hurt me. Whenever you compare me with other people, I can my heart sinking to the floor. Maybe I was okay with it in the past, but I am going through some serious self-esteem issues right now, so your words do nothing but make it feel as if you aren't even respecting me as a person. I understand that you are saying those things because you love me, but your words are like a cold sword piercing through my heart. So please, give me your praise and support me. I will try my best somehow."

Once I had finished, I waited for my mother to reply, but no words came out of her mouth. Instead, my mother chose to walk away from the situation. I honestly thought she would be mad or retort back at me, so I became rather confused. I said everything that I wanted to say, but instead of feeling lighter, I was left disconcerted. After a while, my mother returned from her solitude after calming her pounding heart, but when I saw tears in her eyes, I went inside my room, unable to do anything except reflect upon what had transpired. The image of my mother – who had always been our steady rock during the most harrowing storms – showing such weakness was such a shock to me that it remains engraved in my mind to this day.

I fully understand the fact that I was not the only person who was hurt from this conversation. However, I was unable to see beyond my pains at the time. I would be making excuses if I said that I simply was not in a state where I could look out for others. But the more I thought about it, I too said some terrible things. I wanted others to care about me, but did I care for them as well? Was I considerate of others? Was I really being thoughtful? Once I looked back upon my actions with an objective eye, I felt shameful of myself. There was no excuse for my actions, which were more childish than mature. I did not show my mother respect or thoughtfulness; instead, all I cared about was the bitterness of feeling as if I was not being respected or cared for.

After our second conversation, it was now my mother who asked if we could talk. I often said things like "I don't like you," or "I hate you" as a childish form of defiance, but my mother told me that she was deeply hurt whenever I said these things. My mother and I talked about the changes we expected from each other, and we promised to accept them and change accordingly. Fortunately, our relationship improved from that point on. Even when faced with difficult circumstances, I felt happier than I did in the past. With this newfound strength, I was able to make a fresh start and achieve success by being accepted into KAIST.

From here onward, I started to ponder about the following question: 'does failure actually exist in this world?' Should we define failure as every instance where a person is unable to achieve the results they would ideally like to? All endeavors will produce some sort of result, and in the process, we are also given opportunities to grow. Then, could we say that I failed because I chose to avoid the problem after running into a wall? What exactly is failure? Is failure the act of being unable to meet a certain standard, or is it when we experience a setback? If we looked at it from the other side, what exactly is success? What is true happiness? Everyone has different standards and values, so why do we try to endow all-encompassing definitions to success and failure? Why did we end up defining setbacks resulting from effort as 'failure?'

Some readers may look at my story and think that it does not really fit under the category of failure. Others may think that I had the courage to overcome my failure and achieve success. It is natural for people to have different opinions since the term 'failure' in itself is subjective. If someone asked me, "have you failed before?," I can confidently reply with the following response: "No, I have never failed. Instead, I made an 'attempt,' experienced a 'setback,' and had the 'strength' and 'courage' to overcome it."

There are few words out there that can bring down a person's self-esteem like the word 'failure.' Everyone experiences setbacks when they give something a try. However, as long as you have the strength and courage to get back on your feet after failing, then you too can grow as you overcome these hurdles. You may not succeed right away, but what you do today will lay the groundwork for you to succeed in the future. Don't worry if you do not have the strength or courage right now, since you can always learn to develop your inner strength. However, our society does little to give us strength or courage; instead, society makes us feel even worse when we are down. We are told that our journey ends when we 'fail.' People become even more dispirited when they are branded with the mark of failure, and this depression prevents us from seeing the truth. Just like that, the 'failure' piles up to the point where we can no longer grow or shine. I hope that society can change so that it is tolerant of 'trying,' able to encourage those who are 'depressed,' able to value 'effort,' and ready to welcome 'achievement.'