

2023 KAISTian Failure Story 누락작 연재

The CAF News letter publishes winning essays of the 2023 'KAISTian Failure Story Contest'. The two winning essays in this issue are recipients of the "Overcoming Adversity Award." 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



My self-esteem journey: embracing growth and progress

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Having poor self-esteem is not as it seems. Even people who appear to have everything others dream of may struggle with it. It is because self-esteem cannot be determined by external indicators of success or happiness. Self-esteem is about how we see ourselves and what value we think we hold, which can be influenced by many internal and external factors that are unique to each person.

People express low self-esteem in various ways depending on their personality and experiences. For some, it comes out through self-deprecating humor. Others find it difficult to make decisions because they lack confidence in their abilities. Some people may exhibit it through constant self-criticism and negative self-talk, while others may withdraw from social interactions and isolate themselves. Some individuals may engage in self-destructive behaviors as a way to cope with their feelings of inadequacy. Even perfectionism can be a sign of low self-esteem, despite the fact that this may seem counterintuitive. A person may become fixated on every detail and set impossible standards for themselves out of fear of making mistakes and being judged for them.

Furthermore, low self-esteem can make people seek constant validation and approval from others. They may rely on external praise to feel good about themselves. One of the interesting examples of such behavior is something we call “narcissism.” Even though narcissists act grandiose and self-centered, they actually have low self-esteem. They frequently rely on approval and admiration from others to strengthen their flimsy sense of worth. They frequently conceal their ingrained feelings of inadequacy and insecurity using their exaggerated sense of self-importance as a shield.



Low self-esteem manifests as daily self-criticism, frequent tears, and constant fear. It often leads to conflicts with loved ones due to increased sensitivity to their words, making the individuals doubt themselves. If not treated properly, it can become a damaging habit that gradually ruins the person's relationships with others and, most importantly, with oneself.

I have often wondered how I turned out to be one of the people struggling with low self-esteem. I have questioned if it is because of how my parents raised me or if it is something I was born with, or maybe society influenced me in this way. Unfortunately, I could not find the origin of this self-esteem issue. Nevertheless, I have observed that I have struggled with low self-esteem from a very young age and that it has affected various aspects of my life.

I remember when I was just 3 or 4 years old, I used to have fun at the playground, meanwhile wanting to be the center of attention. I felt jealous of a girl who had a nicer dress than the one I had. I would

go home and beg my Mom to let me wear a fancy dress outside, even though she did not want me to do it in order to prevent it from getting stained or from being torn. I constantly felt inferior to that girl, thinking she was better and more attention-worthy than I was. This feeling of not being good enough continued as I grew older.

When I was 7 years old, I watched a cartoon that focused on the impact of bacteria on our organisms and the significance of handwashing and hygiene. This experience sparked an intense obsession with handwashing, making me spend a lot of time every day washing my hands. This obsession made my skin dry, cracked, and itchy. My concerned mother did her best to support me and sought help from psychologists. They provided me with a list of daily affirmations aimed at overcoming my handwashing compulsion and alleviating my anxiety. However, despite their efforts, these affirmations did not seem to make much of a difference. In hindsight, I wonder

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if I unintentionally set myself up for failure by harboring doubts about the effectiveness of these affirmations. Perhaps, deep down, I did not believe they would truly help me, so I would either do them half-heartedly or not at all.

During my time in primary school, I struggled with the perception that my teacher did not see me as good enough, even though I was her best student. Whenever I saw another student being praised, it would frustrate me immensely, overshadowing the moments when the teacher had actually praised me. The pressure and stress in my first year at school affected me physically, causing nausea and frequent anxiety-induced crying.

In middle school, my extreme shyness made it challenging for me to approach teachers with my questions, and I constantly felt like the least intelligent student in the class. This further reinforced my belief that teachers looked down on me. In the meantime, I also developed insecurities about my appearance, making me constantly try to improve it. I have always had curly and puffy hair that is difficult to take care of, which made me feel insecure, particularly when I noticed other girls seemingly not facing the same issues. Throughout puberty, I felt that I lacked a perfect style and body, making me believe I was not attractive enough to be worthy of attention.

Throughout my life, I have had numerous arguments with my loved ones because I did not feel like they considered me good enough. However, I have come to realize that these feelings were more about my own self-perception than their actual opinions of me. I now understand that I projected my insecurities onto them, assuming they thought similarly. With this newfound awareness, I try to approach conflicts with more maturity and understanding.

Despite all the aforementioned problems, there has been significant progress in this aspect of my life. It has been a transformative process, and I have come a long way from where I once was. One of the most profound changes I experienced was learning to love myself. As time passed, I gradually started realizing that I am deserving of love and respect, just like anyone else. This newfound self-love has been the foundation on which I built my self-confidence. Rather than constantly seeking validation from others, I focused on validating myself, recognizing my achievements, and being proud of my progress. I no longer sounded self-conscious when expressing my opinions or thoughts. I used to be hesitant and unsure when speaking up in a group setting, fearing that my ideas might be dismissed or ridiculed. But with time, I realized that my opinions mattered and that my voice deserved to be heard.



I started believing in myself. I acknowledged that I had talents and abilities worth celebrating, and I focused on nurturing them further. I have fought my fear of approaching teachers with questions. I acquired the courage to seek clarification and assistance when needed. I discovered that teachers were more than willing to help and that asking questions was a sign of strength, not weakness. I have come to embrace the uniqueness of my hair, accepting that it is different from others, and I learned to take care of it appropriately.

I thought that during my high school years, I had established an unshakeable self-esteem that would accompany me for a long time. However, when I entered university, I faced new challenges and experiences that shook my confidence to some extent. While I still have moments of strength, I also encounter ups and downs in my self-esteem regularly. I struggle with anxieties and continuous doubts that invade my thoughts. I still find myself getting obsessed over washing my hands when I experience some external stress like upcoming exams and etc. I excessively judge myself and compare myself to others frequently. Even though I now realize that it stems from how I feel about myself and not how others perceive me, I still feel like people frequently look down on me.

I made an inference that I failed to build the confidence

I thought I did. However, upon further reflection,

I realized that this was not actually the case. Even though I failed to attain absolute confidence as I expected, I made huge progress and I am proud of myself for this.

Despite regular self-comparison, I have learned to use it for personal growth, avoiding its negative impact.

Admittedly, it has not been easy, and I have encountered many challenges that have led me to tears and struggles, affecting my mental health. Comparison is a double-edged sword that can either drive or consume you. Recognizing its potential power and pitfalls has increased my awareness and caution, empowering emotional control and using comparison for self-reflection and growth.

I have learned what self-care is about. It is about practicing daily gratitude, which has taught me to appreciate the positive aspects of my life. It is about limiting time spent on social media because it instills negative thoughts in my brain that influence my mental health adversely. It is about being

patient with myself, and with others around me, which helps me navigate challenging situations with a calmer mindset. It is about avoiding emotional triggers, which is crucial in maintaining my mental well-being. It is about knowing my worth and respecting my boundaries.

Now I do not only avoid the people who abuse my mental health but also, in the first place, try to exclude self-abuse. Now as I have become more mature and self-aware, I have learned to reflect on my behavior effectively, which empowered me to make healthier choices and navigate life's challenges with greater clarity and strength.

Indeed, I must admit that I have not achieved the perfect self-esteem I once believed I had. I still encounter failures while trying to overcome my bad mental-health habits. However, I have come to appreciate the progress I have made. Rather than solely focusing on reaching a final outcome, I now value the journey and the incremental steps toward improvement. Throughout this journey, I have encountered methods that do not work for me, but this has been a valuable learning experience. Overcoming fears of being judged because of not knowing something has been a challenge, and I am still not flawless in doing so, but I am determined to not be afraid of appearing clueless, as it is a natural part of the learning process.

Now, I prioritize embracing the learning process. My perspective has changed, recognizing that the establishment of a healthy self-image is an ongoing and evolving journey rather than a fixed destination. I have come to value every step forward, understanding that growth and learning demand vulnerability and openness to new experiences.

I learned that when I failed, I was presented with countless opportunities to explore different approaches and methods that do not yield the desired outcomes. This process of trial and error allowed me to refine my strategies and ultimately discover what works best. Failure has shifted my focus in a unique way. Instead of solely fixating on the end results, I started paying more attention to the core elements of my endeavors. I became more aware of the process of building the self-perception I needed, the methods, and the actions I took to reach my goal. This emphasis on the journey rather than just the destination gave me a deeper understanding and appreciation for the efforts I put in. Experiencing failure instilled the habit of looking beyond the surface in me. It encouraged me to delve deeper into the causes of my problem and to analyze my decisions and actions critically. I realized that even though I have not fully battled the self-esteem issue that I have struggled with for a long, I value the progress I have made so far and I know how to do better in this aspect of my life in the future.

