

A LINE ON LIFE

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Female Fear of Success? *

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Do some people have a **fear of success**? Are women more likely to have this fear? What causes people to avoid success?

In 1969, this "*fear of success*" was noted by psychologist Matina Homer. She asked male undergraduates at the University of Michigan to complete a story that began, "*After first-term finals, John finds himself at the top of his medical school class.*" Undergraduate women were asked to complete the same story, but the name, "*Anne*," was used instead of "*John*." In contrast to only 10% of the men, most of the women demonstrated fear of success. These women were concerned about social rejection indicated by seeing Anne as "*acne-faced*," "*unsexed*," lonely and dateless.

Homer believes that this is due to the socialization of women in our society. As they grow up, young girls tend to hear achieving women being characterized as "*sexless*," "*unfeminine*" or "*hard*." Thus, the prospect of outstanding achievement might make them feel anxious and guilty. Unless women can effectively deal with these feelings, they will not achieve their potentials.

Since then, other studies have come up with mixed results. Most found levels of fear of success about the same in both men and women. A 1974 psychological study used Homer's design, but this time it was with 11-16-year-olds. However, in this later study, half of *each sex* received the "*John*" version and half received the "*Anne*" version. The responses of the four groups were compared.

The majority of both boys and girls imagined happy outcomes for John, but overwhelmingly described bad results for Anne. In fact, the boys gave more negative responses to Anne's version than the girls did. In all, 21% of the boys and 30% of the girls gave negative responses to John's success. In contrast, 68% of the boys and 51% of the girls predicted bad results from Anne's success.

Rather than fear of success itself, psychologists concluded that it indicated fear of punishment for violating **sex role stereotypes** in our culture. The hostile responses from some of the boys seem to indicate that this is a realistic fear.

To check this hypothesis, a 1975 study was done for "*Anne*" in the field of nursing – a sex-appropriate field for women. Responses indicated little evidence of fear of success.

Overall, there is little or no evidence that fear of success is found more with women than men. However, some members of both sexes seem to have a genuine fear of success. You may even know some talented or bright people who have the ability of repeatedly

"*snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.*" One reason may be that they lack **achievement motivation**. However, other people may have less direct causes. In success-fearing people, good performance – noted as such by others – is immediately followed by lowered performance in similar tasks. A 1977 psychological study suggested three other reasons why some people fear success:

- **Increased expectation.** Some people merely desire to avoid high levels of effort continually demanded of someone who is successful. For example, suppose an athlete begins a season with outstanding performances. If performance falls off to an average level, this is usually criticized by others. However, mediocre teammates have not created greater expectations – and therefore will not receive the negative responses from others for average performance.
- **Consistent self-image.** We all want to behave in ways that are consistent with our self-image. If you view yourself as a "C" student, getting an "A" in a hard assignment may seem out of character for you. It may be hard to imagine yourself in a different way – even if it is an improvement. You are more likely to attribute it to "*luck*" than your own ability. Later, you will probably perform at a lower level – just to validate your interpretation of the situation.
- **Avoiding ostracism of others.** Some are concerned about being ostracized by others. People who outperform others may be envied, rejected or pressured to conform. Those who do the ostracizing may fear that higher performance of some individuals may be used as a future standard of performance for all participants. This can be seen in changes in top-flight performances at the Olympics. What was seen as "*outstanding*" performance a few decades ago would not win a medal in an Olympics competition now.

There are always costs for excelling in any area. However, if you are aware of both the costs and the rewards involved, it is easier to decide if success is what you really want.

* Adapted from Charles Morris' *Psychology: An Introduction*, Prentice-Hall, 1988, page 433.