Our Relationship to Making Mistakes

"An expert is the person who has made all the mistakes which can be made, in a narrow field."

— Niels Bohr

One of the important areas where resilience can be cultivated is in the way we relate to the process of striving to learn new things, and the unwanted but inevitable consequence of making mistakes.

Beliefs Lacking Resilience: *Mistakes are evidence I am a failure and can't succeed in life. I define myself through my mistakes.*

Resilient Beliefs: *Mistakes are learning experiences that facilitate my growth and lead to my success. My mistakes are stepping stones to getting it right.*

When we lack a resilient mindset, we see mistakes as an unacceptable outcome in any given task. Indeed, when we make missteps, it's a signal that we have failed at whatever we are trying to achieve. It is a sign that we are open to judgement from others and often from ourselves. It is easy to develop anxiety about making mistakes as a result, for they are experienced as painful, and

detrimental to our self-image. As such, we seek to avoid situations in which mistakes might occur. We rationalise that we will not be judged if we avoid risk, only sticking to that which we are certain we can do flawlessly. Yet this kind of relationship with mistakes makes us stagnate. We give up trying to push our limits and seek improvement, growth and pursuit of excellence, because such activity often results in errors which are perceived as too confronting. Yet in avoiding them, we avoid the very path that leads to growth.

Instead we conclude that we are not worthy of success. We simply never realise that making mistakes, was always the path we had to take to succeed and achieve worthy goals. Instead we try to live within our comfort zone of what we are certain we know, rationalizing this will avoid the pain and judgement that mistakes bring us. Paradoxically however life often judges us even more harshly because we are no longer trying to succeed, and our avoidance of pain becomes the very cause of it. Now life is seen as a "damned if you do, and damned if you don't" kind of situation. This cycle of fear to fail, and therefore fear to try, is a trapping of the mindset that lacks resilience. To free ourselves, we have to change our relationship to what we believe missteps represent.

The resilient mindset transforms our mistakes from painful and judgmental experiences, to character-building stepping stones that lead us to our desired goal. This new mindset asks us to see blunders as opportunities for learning and growth. To relate to them as necessary components on our journey to maturation and accomplishment. They become signposts that help us to improve, on our way to getting it right, which leads us to a successful life. In this spirit, if we strive in earnest and make an error, our focus should not be on judgement but on learning to become better.

It is true in life that we often don't know what it is that we don't know. It is our errors that illuminate or bring to our awareness this information. Once we do know what we don't know, we can go about the process of learning it so that next time we can get it right and be a step closer to mastery of any given