

'This personal, witty and insightful book teaches us about the fears that drive failure and the self-awareness that can help to navigate it'

Luke Johnson, Chairman, The RSA, FT Columnist, serial entrepreneur

What's Stopp^{pp}ing You?

Second Edition

**Why Smart People
Don't Always Reach
Their Potential and
How You Can**



Robert Kelsey

Foreword by Luke Johnson



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"This book will help you navigate the barriers you've built."

The Sun

"An engaging and entertaining read. Worth a look."

BA Business Life

"I couldn't help but admire the bravely personal experiences and stories shared by the author."

Management Today

"A readable but intelligent book."

The Market

"I would recommend the book to anyone from apprentices to entrepreneurs who would like a practical perspective of psychology and self-help."

Edge Magazine

"This personal witty and insightful book teaches us about the fears that drive failure and the self-awareness that can help to navigate it. The great point about this book is that it is both philosophical with regards the nature of fear and its impact on achievement, and practical. For those that may be paralyzed by a fear of failure, it offers a way through."

**Luke Johnson, Chairman, Risk Capital Partners and
The RSA, *FT* columnist, and serial entrepreneur**

"Robert Kelsey has combined thorough research, careful thought and the lessons of his own experience to produce a valuable, original and eminently readable book. I can strongly recommend it to anyone whose progress has been impeded by fear of failure."

John Caunt, author of *Boost Your Self-esteem*

"This is a must-read book for anyone concerned with achieving long-term professional success. Not only does Kelsey explain our common insecurities in the most

readable and entertaining ways, he delivers strategies and tactics that really work.”

Martin Yate CPC, *NY Times* bestseller of *Knock 'em Dead: Secrets and Strategies for Success in an Uncertain World*

“Why do talented people sabotage their own chances of success? Often the answer is that they are afraid of failure. Kelsey provides a practical guide for overcoming this common problem. Clear, engaging, and to the point.”

Dylan Evans, author of *Emotion: The Science of Sentiment*

“This powerful, insightful book shows you how to unlock your unconscious brakes and step on the accelerator to achieve your true potential!”

Brian Tracy, author of *Goals!, Eat That Frog, and Maximum Achievement*

“In this wise and compelling book, Robert Kelsey helps you think your way out of fear of failure not only by appreciating its hidden virtues but by discovering the most original and enlightening routes to self-confidence. *What's Stopping You?* is a brilliant guide to the art of living in the twenty-first century, written with literary flair and personal insight.”

Roman Krznaric, author of *The Wonderbox: Curious Histories of How to Live* and co-founder of The School of Life

“Kelsey offers a successful and eloquent analysis of fear of failure as a mass condition in the modern world, and one we ignore at our peril.”

Donald Kirkpatrick, psychoanalyst and a founder of the London Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

“Confidence is the ultimate secret weapon of any successful entrepreneur. If Robert’s book can help you find yours then it will be worth its weight in gold.”

Rachel Bridge, *Sunday Times* Enterprise Editor and author of *How I Made it, My Big Idea* and *How to Make a Million Before Lunch*

“It’s a bestseller for a reason – buy it!”

Hag Hughes, author of *Mr Right: The Smart Girl’s Guide to Finding Him*

What's Stopping You?

**Why Smart People Don't Always Reach
Their Potential, and How You Can**

2nd edition

Robert Kelsey



CAPSTONE

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To Lucy

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

I had high hopes for *What's Stopping You?* when it was first published in April 2011. But I also nursed many doubts. As a High-FF (all explained within), this was perhaps inevitable. Fear of failure makes our doubts cast long shadows over our hopes and, before long, we are sabotaging ourselves with our negative self-beliefs.

For those with a high fear of failure this is a well known cycle. And one that, usually, results in arrested endeavour – potentially followed by frustration, depression, anger and resignation. Well not this time. Encouraged by my agent (Isabel Atherton at Creative Authors), my publisher (Holly Bennion at Wiley) and my wife (Lucy), I took the plunge. I wrote about the fears and doubts and insecurities that have plagued me since childhood, and about the research I've undertaken over many years to try and fathom out my condition.

What's Stopping You? is the result and, so far, its reception has bowled me over. Originally published in April 2011, the book reached Number One in a major retail business book chart around May and stayed there until January 2012. It also won positive reviews, professional praise and, literally, hundreds of emails from readers that felt the book spoke to them personally and was helping them understand their condition and plot a more productive path.

Fear of failure is a mass condition, although one that often goes unrecognized in sufferers. And, after reading the book, many of those writing to me expressed the feeling that they now felt equipped for the (far from easy) journey ahead. They better understood the fears and doubts that prevented

them making progress in their careers and personal pursuits and were more willing to accept who they were, including their own faulty wiring. And this realization was helping them chart a more sustainable, as well as positive, path ahead. It was also helping them deal with the inevitable barriers along the way.

As stated within, praise is a valuable currency for those with fear of failure, so my heartfelt thanks to those that offered it.

The book's warm reception and strong sales has led to this second edition. In some cases the new edition tackles the "constructive criticism" offered by readers (usually a contradiction in terms for the High-FF). Though mainly it includes additional content based on reader requests. Primarily, this means the inclusion of 19 case studies. Mostly, these are people who contacted me following publication, although I do occasionally take a punt on a well-known or historical name, highlighting behaviour that is useful for illustrating the book's needs.

Another addition to this edition is the *Seven Steps to Navigating Fear of Failure*. To be honest, I shied away from adding exercises in the original book. In my view, too many self-help books lapse into pointless and even nonsensical exercises, almost as an alternative to constructive prose aimed at understanding our frailties. "Say 'I am loved and I am loveable' in the mirror 25 times each morning" – that sort of thing (an actual exercise in one of my source books, I kid you not) – will soon have the reader feeling confused and mildly humiliated, which is exactly the sort of emotion High-FFs spend their lives avoiding. And, anyway, I was writing primarily for a British market (by which I mean for the Brits' natural reserve more than our geographical location) that may find such emotionally charged and self-regarding activities, frankly, silly.

That said, the book's stated aim is to help readers draw their own map of the future – something authentically theirs as they forge their own path through the jungle. This, indeed, involves “exercises” such as calculating our *true values* and visualizing ourselves in 10 years' time. So I've added a final section that summarizes these needs. This means that the narrative of the book remains – allowing the reader to absorb the text in the knowledge that any required proactivity on their part will be handily reiterated at the end.

There are also some amendments to the narrative itself – mostly based on reader feedback. For instance, entrepreneurship is far from the only *Me Inc.* route, so there are added sections on freelancing and franchising or simply on adopting a new attitude within your current employment. And I have been more exploratory regarding High-FF traits – especially my own – many of which (such as rebelliousness in childhood) are far from obvious.

So please keep the feedback coming (via my website at www.robert-kelsey.co.uk). Or perhaps attend one of my “fear of failure” events. But most of all please keep pursuing an *understanding* of who you are, which should be part of a process towards *accepting* yourself – including your insecurities – and *navigating* your way towards a better future.

Robert Kelsey, recovering High-FF

FOREWORD BY LUKE JOHNSON

Most of us know that the secret to success is confidence. Good looks, intelligence, qualifications – all these help, but with many of the highest achievers I've met, their greatest asset has been their world class chutzpah.

Unfortunately, many of us don't possess such bountiful self-assurance. We are racked with doubts. We focus too much on the losing shots, not our aces. So Robert Kelsey has written a book for the rest of us, everyone who lacks confidence, who can be too self-critical, who isn't sure if they're up to it or going to make it. And I think it's a winner.

The truth is that such feelings are self-fulfilling. Just as the confident person creates the mental conditions for their own success, the person who lacks confidence creates the mental conditions for their lack of progress. This makes fear of failure a debilitating condition but also one where improvement is possible, not least because failure is the very thing that confident people don't fear. As Robert Kelsey proves, the ability to fall flat on your face without it undermining your desire to keep trying is perhaps the most important quality those high-chutzpah types possess.

Certainly, success is not about being ambitious – that's easy. It's about overcoming adversity. And in my experience, what separates the winners and the losers in life is how they handle disappointment. Achievement in any field is impossible without setbacks. What separates the field is not the setback, however, but the response to it.

This book offers help to those that, up until now, have been stymied by setbacks – indeed, may have even avoided participation for fear of encountering a setback. Yet the great point of the author's advice is that it is both philosophical with regard to the nature of fear and its impact

on achievement, and practical. For those who may be paralyzed by a fear of failure, it offers a way through – not through the impractical nonsense of many self-help books, but through step-by-step advice on the fears that attack us at each stage, and how we can think and act differently for a better outcome. The remarkable sales of the first edition of this book are proof that Robert's message has resonated with thousands of readers.

The author has not invented a new philosophy or programme for living. Rather he has summarized the contents of scores of relevant self-help books – picking the bits that work, ignoring the elements that don't. His aim is to create a tailored route for those who may simply be trying to avoid failure – helping them get a better result. There are, after all, reams of such volumes in print. And while some are useful, many of them are not. The author has covered the waterfront, and has selected the most useful and reliable advice from his research of hundreds of psychologists, therapists and self-help gurus.

What's Stopping You? is also a highly personal book. The author talks in depth about his career journey, how he overcame his own demons by studying the literature, by really analyzing his own issues, and by developing techniques to deal with them. Sometimes amusing, sometimes cringing, sometimes painful – his own experiences add to the impression that this is a book written from the heart, even if it is aimed squarely at the head.

Robert Kelsey is a rare beast because he runs his own business – but he can also actually write. He participates and he also reports – and thinks deeply about the challenges. Word processing has enabled everyone to churn out reams of material. But few who tackle these types of subjects actually have any literary ability: in reality their prose style can be awful. Poor writing makes a book hard to read and difficult to remember – and more than anything I

enjoyed reading this book. And that makes a difference when so many business and self-help books are bought and never read – partly because they are essentially unreadable. But Mr Kelsey's text is highly enjoyable and eminently fluent.

Not all the tips here will work for everyone. But there is a sufficient range of topics for any reader – and especially any reader that has suffered from a debilitating lack of confidence – to find something relevant to their situation: from goal setting to handling work colleagues, from discovering your true values and motivations to starting a business.

So I wholeheartedly endorse this book, and encourage the casual reader to put it on their bedside table and browse it at regular intervals: for inspiration, for understanding, and for pragmatic advice. I've enjoyed reading it, and I think you will too.

Luke Johnson

Chairman of Risk Capital Partners and the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce

INTRODUCTION

“Failure is not an option,” said the actor playing Gene Kranz, flight director for Mission Control in *Apollo 13*, the 1995 movie dramatizing the near-disaster of the third Apollo mission to the Moon. But he was wrong. It *was* an option, which is why he said it. Kranz knew that his team had to think the unthinkable, invent the uninvented, do the undoable. And this meant employing classic alpha-male posturing to force them beyond their *fear of failure*.

He knew that failure was staring them in the face but, given the consequences of failure, any other option was not only preferable but imperative. Had he said “failure is almost certain, but let’s have a go anyway” his team would have been unable to get beyond their fear of public humiliation for suggesting a potentially daft idea. Yet daft ideas were the only thing that could save the astronauts, so Kranz had to find a way of getting them on the table – hence upping the stakes in order to overcome his team’s individual fears.

Fear of Failure

Yet *Apollo 13* is a movie and those words were written by a script-writer (despite the real Gene Kranz later adopting them for the title of his biography). The fears that prevent us from achieving our goals are usually private, mundane, nuanced and sometimes so subtle that many of us may not fully accept their impact on our thoughts and actions.

As Kranz knew, fear of failure can change our behaviour in ways that render failure a near certainty. Fear paralyzes our decision-making, throws our judgment, destroys our creativity and removes previously easy fluidity from even

everyday movements. Yet as mental conditions go, fear of failure is not only one of the most common – with millions of sufferers in the UK alone – it is also one of the least acknowledged or acted upon, partly because those with the condition are so paralyzed by their fear of humiliation or public embarrassment they suffer in silence, or even in self-denial, rather than seek treatment.

They are chained to the seabed, unable to swim towards the sunlight above due to their fears and insecurities. Of course, some may express their fears through depression or anger without even realizing what lies behind such symptoms – making them hostage to behaviour that further confirms their inner fears and further destroys their potential for progress.

And while the actor playing Kranz unlocked the potential of his team with one powerful phrase, we are unlikely to be so lucky. Even if we acknowledge our fears and seek to overcome them, we may find ourselves bewildered by the hundreds of self-help books offering more confidence, higher self-esteem, greater success and even “unlimited power.” Some deal directly with fear of failure. Others focus on related or underlying conditions such as lack of confidence or low self-esteem. Many offer a near-instant cure – the banishment of our frailties and the certainty of success – through a mental realignment injected into us via some, admittedly strong, motivational words and techniques.

But a health warning is required. Promising the chance to be born again as a new, more-confident, even fearless person is a false promise made to afflicted people desperate for a cure. Conditions such as fear of failure – as well as antecedents such as low self-esteem – are, as we shall see, innate. Once and however inflicted they are here to stay.

That’s the bad news. The good news is that we can understand our insecurities, accept them as part of us and

make strong progress while taking them into account. In fact, in my opinion strong sustainable progress is *only* possible once we have accepted that our fears and primary beliefs are here to stay. We can develop a strong self-awareness of our fear-driven behaviours – and their root causes – and we can learn to live with who we are. We don't have to banish our fears forever in order to move forward. Indeed, we can achieve our goals. As long as they are the right goals, *our* goals – not false goals potentially fed to us by external influences or our own faulty thinking.

And that's where this book comes in. People with a fear of failure need a map. This book is not a map. In fact, we have to draw our own map and even that will require many redrafts before being even vaguely accurate. What this book provides, I hope, is guidance on how to go about drawing such a map: in draft, fuzzy at the edges, containing plenty of “here be dragons” elements, but a map nonetheless. Something we can grasp and regard as we cut through the thicket. Something that allows us to take those all-important next steps.

The Monkey on My Back

I have suffered from a debilitating fear of failure all my life – itself the result of poor confidence brought about by a low self-esteem developed in early childhood. At key moments in my life fear has led me to doubt my abilities to succeed, which has profoundly changed my behaviour in ways that made success less likely: often snatching a humiliating defeat from the jaws of victory. And I have read scores of books in an effort to shift what I call the “monkey on my back” – the creature that whispers fear and self-doubt in my ear at critical moments.

But the monkey hasn't disappeared. In fact, there was no shifting him, which didn't seem to compute with the

literature I was reading, much of which promised both a cure for my insecurities and the certainty of dream fulfilment. Clearly, I was doing something wrong: perhaps not applying the methodology diligently enough or maintaining destructive behaviours and beliefs. Yet I now realize it was their prognosis that was flawed because it took too little account of the fact I am who I am, and that the monkey comes too.

Surely a more powerful book would describe a route towards progress from our own flawed perspective – answering the question “what’s stopping you?” with the answer: you are (and the monkey of course). Yet it would also state that we must accept the monkey as a fellow passenger and plan to make progress anyway. It would spot and describe the likely barriers preventing progress, as well as the false assumptions they may generate.

Certainly, if we could see that it was our responses to those barriers that were producing the poor results, not the barriers themselves – nor was it poor luck, innate ineptitude or even prejudice against us – then we may be able to generate better results.

We don’t need a miracle cure injected into us. We just need to take account of our insecurities and navigate our way forward accordingly.

A Practitioner in Failure

I am a practitioner in failure with a childhood and early adulthood punctuated with one self-fulfilling educational and career disaster after another.

Written-off as stupid by low-grade village-school teachers, and traumatized by the immediately preceding break-up of my family, I failed the 11-plus and ended up in an Essex secondary-modern turned comprehensive school. I left aged

15 with just one O level. Directionless, I was taken on by a local building surveyor needing someone to hold a stripy pole in muddy fields, although he kindly enrolled me on a day-a-week diploma course. Inevitably, I bunked the course – instead spending the days walking the streets of London with a day-return ticket in my pocket.

This eventually landed me a job looking after the vast residential property portfolio of the London region's gas board. I was 18 at the time and loved it. I was working for a large West End surveying firm full of graduates and professionals, who were nice to me despite my gruff accent and manners. They encouraged me to return to education, so – realizing I was as capable as them – I enrolled on an evening A level history course and, five years later, graduated from the University of Manchester with a high 2:1 joint-honours degrees in Politics & Modern History.

But I was, again, directionless, other than a vague notion of going into journalism – a highly competitive trade rarely conquered through the application of vague notions. Yet after a few false turns I managed to land a staff-writer then editor's role for a banking-focused magazine, which ultimately resulted in me becoming a banker in what the City describes as a "gamekeeper turned poacher move."

As I relay in Part One, I was not a great banker. Paralyzed by fear, I worked in both London and the US before realizing I was simply not cut out for finance. Once again without a plan, I was recruited by a friend with a plan – for a dotcom "incubator" (this was the height of the dotcom boom) – and together we founded *Metrocube*, an "e-business community" that incubated over 200 companies before being sold a few years after the dotcom crash.

Cured of my journalistic and banking ambitions, and somewhat bitten by the entrepreneurial bug, I then combined my skills and experiences to start *Moorgate Communications*, a financial public relations agency aimed

at banks, which has been a sustainable and fulfilling enterprise ever since – even growing through the financial meltdown of 2008–09.

Oh, and I wrote a book on my banking experiences in New York, which was published in 2000 and had me all set – I thought – for a career as a humorous, laddish writer in the Nick Hornby or Michael Lewis mould. However, the book sold less than I'd hoped and my dream was dashed.

An Addiction to Self-Help

The book-writing career aside, it is possible to read the above and think I am, in fact, a long way from a practitioner in failure. But that's because I have edited out the fears, frustrations, moods, paranoia, anguish and temper tantrums that have punctuated every one of the above experiences. Terrorized by my own insecurities, I have been a nightmare to work with and apologize now to any colleagues that had to suffer my nonsense.

But I have also made considerable progress in facing up to my fears and insecurities. Perhaps surprisingly given my earlier comments, much of this has been due to my ongoing addiction to self-help books. This began while in the US – where the acres of shelves dedicated to the genre suggest an openness that the UK is only slowly adopting – although it took a deeper hold of me back in the UK as I began to realize the problem was not a particular job or person or set of circumstances. The problem was me.

Ultimately, and as described within, this landed me in the hands of a professional psychotherapist. Yet far from complementing the work of all those self-help gurus, the therapist – plus further research of my own – opened my eyes to the gaping hole between what the psychologists state about our innate (but treatable) personalities and the