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DISASTERPIECE

Manual of Generative Failure

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Project n.2024-1-IT03-KA210-YOU-000249099 – "Disasterpiece!"

Manual of *Generative Failure*

Intellectual Output n.5 - *Alpha version* (Dec. 2025)

This document is the first version of an Intellectual Output of the Disasterpiece! project. **It is the result of the collective and passionate work** of the staff of three european organisations —ARES (Italy), Open Europe (Spain), and RESET (Cyprus)— together with youth workers and young people from across Europe. It provides a detailed overview of the project: its objectives, key concepts and activities, and main results. It is intended both as a practical tool for european youth workers and as dissemination and storytelling material.

The content of this manual is the sole responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission or any other European institution. Nevertheless, it fully embodies the European values that the three organisations believe in and promote in order to contribute to the Common Good.

Warning: this project challenges the dominant narrative that frames failure as a destructive and terminal experience. However, reading this manual may lead you to discover that happiness is possible even after failure. In fact, it may reveal something even more radical: *that true happiness might only be possible because of failure*.

Want more? Get in touch at disasterpieceproject@gmail.com, explore https://disasterpiece.eu/, our LinkTree and follow us on Instagram, LinkedIn and TikTok.

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QUICK BOX

- This manual is the main output of the **Erasmus+ project 2024-1-IT03-KA210-YOU-000249099 "Disasterpiece!"** and is intended for youth workers. It includes: research on failure and case studies; an overview of the project, its methodology, and its outputs; and practical guidance for youth workers.
- The project aimed to co-design, test, and validate the BETA version of a Toolkit **to support youth workers in helping young people learn how to face failure.**
- Disasterpiece! proposes a shift in **how we understand failure**: from a destructive, terminal experience to an ordinary part of life—and a crisis in its original sense: a moment for analysis, discernment, decision, rethinking, and a new start. In short: **generative failure.**
- All project materials are open-source and available at www.disasterpiece.eu.
- For information, contact disasterpieceproject@gmail.com.

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FOREWORD

Why this manual?

This manual is primarily addressed to youth workers, educators, trainers, teachers, and professionals working with young people—especially those who meet them in moments of transition, uncertainty, and vulnerability. In educational practice, failure is often present even when it is not explicitly named: it may hide behind anxiety, withdrawal, demotivation, anger, or silence, or behind phrases such as "I'm stuck."

The aim of this manual is ambitious. It does not seek to provide quick fixes or simplified answers; rather, it proposes an educational grammar of failure—a shared framework of meanings, conceptual tools, and pedagogical orientations that support educators in remaining alongside young people when something has not gone as expected.

In dominant social narratives, failure is frequently treated as a private problem—a weakness, a mistake, an individual fault—heavily charged with stigma: something to be ashamed of, hidden, and corrected as quickly as possible. Disasterpiece! begins from a different assumption: failure is never purely individual. It is also a social, cultural, relational, and educational phenomenon.

For this reason, Disasterpiece! does not aim to eliminate failure, prevent it at all costs, or turn it into a motivational slogan. The project rejects both the stigmatization of failure and the equally problematic idea that failure is "simply" a stepping stone to success. Its objective is to restore dignity to failure, recognising it as a natural and ordinary part of life—something we can, and must, move through and inhabit consciously, transforming its destructive potential into an opportunity for crisis in its original meaning: a moment to pause, analyse the situation, understand what to keep and what to let go of, rethink oneself, and decide.

Disasterpiece! emerges from the harshness of reality, from the stories of those - young and not so young - who were unable to navigate failure, turning it into a terminal experience: students who, after receiving a poor grade, lock themselves in school bathrooms and attempt suicide; entrepreneurs who lose everything - often through no fault of their own - and take their own lives; people who are unable to accept the end of a relationship and choose to kill their partner—or themselves.

It also arises from the silence surrounding failure, from the taboo it represents—especially in certain cultures and particularly for young people, among the first victims of today's performance-driven society. This dominant narrative promotes success at all costs and demands that individuals constantly function, produce, and perform. Very often, young people describe failure as definitive, isolating, and identity-defining. When things go wrong—in education, work, or relationships—they feel alone and rarely have the words, stories, or safe spaces needed to interpret what is happening without their self-esteem collapsing.

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This manual is one of the main outputs of Disasterpiece!, a small-scale Erasmus+ project developed by ARES (Italy), Open Europe (Spain), and RESET (Cyprus). It serves both as an account of the project and as a support tool for youth workers working with vulnerable young people who are experiencing failure or are at risk of failure in education, employment (or in the search for it), and relationships. It brings together research, theoretical reflection, lived experience, and practical guidance with a clear ambition: to transform the way failure is understood, narrated, and addressed in youth work—moving from silence to dialogue, from stigma to meaning, from catastrophe to possibility.

This manual does not claim to be a scientific paper, nor does it pretend to offer definitive truths. It is the collective work of researchers, youth workers, and young people who have chosen to take care of failure, their own and that of others, and, in doing so, to take care of themselves and one another.

This manual is organised into five chapters. Chapter I (On Failure) offers a brief reflection on failure and on why a project like Disasterpiece! is needed. Chapter II (Disasterpiece! and the Paradigm of Generative Failure) presents the project's aims, main results, and methodological framework, highlighting the role of stories and the Toolkit as practical support for youth workers. Chapter III (The concept of "failure" through time and space: a short journey) provides a concise socio-historical and cross-cultural lens on how failure is understood and experienced across contexts. Chapter IV (Stories, at the core of Disasterpiece!) brings the approach to life through case studies and storytelling outputs (videos and podcasts). Chapter V (Disasterpiece! an open ecosystem for european youth workers) describes how to use, adapt, and contribute to the ecosystem beyond the project, so the work can continue and grow.

Happy reading!

The project staff

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CHAPTER I – ON FAILURE

Introduction

This chapter lays the conceptual foundation of the manual. It explores what failure is, why it hurts so deeply today, and how it can become destructive when it turns into shame, silence, and isolation. By reframing failure as a lived process, not a final verdict, this chapter offers the key lenses and vocabulary needed to understand the Disasterpiece! paradigm and to prepare the ground for the project's methodology, Toolkit, and stories (Chapter II).

1.1. Failure is everywhere, since the Beginning!

Failure is born together with the human being and has always been part of human nature and existential experience: to be fallible means to be imperfect—therefore not divine, but earthly, fragile, human. Although failure evolves throughout history, it is socially constructed: it is a cultural phenomenon, something that is interpreted. As such, the way it is judged and experienced has changed over the centuries. It is also judged and experienced differently across latitudes and longitudes.

In many contemporary contexts, young people grow up within a culture that celebrates achievement, visibility, efficiency, and constant self-optimisation. Success is not only valued; it is measured, displayed, compared, and ranked. Failure, by contrast, is often hidden, denied, or moralised.

Within this now-dominant cultural framework, failure is no longer perceived as a temporary setback or a moment of learning; it becomes a totalising identity label: if you fail, you are a failure. What is an event—an action—turns into being. One does not simply fail; one begins to perceive oneself, and others, as failed. Thoughts such as "I am not enough," "Everyone else is moving forward," or "There is something wrong with me" can quickly emerge and strike with force at an age when identity is still under construction. Young people are among the primary victims of this system devoted to continuous performance.

This paradigm is transversal: it crosses the boundaries of different areas of human existence, from family to work, from intimacy to school. At times, educational systems themselves become the physical and symbolic spaces within which these mechanisms are reinforced, replicating stigma and suffering while promoting a rigid, linear, and meritocratic idea of life: if you are a good student, you will access good higher education, then a good job, and ultimately success—the clear sign of a fulfilled life. Any deviation from this path—a slowdown, a setback, a change of direction, dropping out, struggle, failure, a bad grade—is rarely understood and even less often legitimised. When a young person steps outside the socially expected trajectory, they often lack the cognitive tools to interpret the experience as an objective, potentially resolvable event, rather than as an endless source of shame, a condition of inferiority compared to standards, or a tunnel with no way out.

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Similar mechanisms regulate the world of work, particularly the labour market. Structural precarity, competition, and instability are systemic conditions; yet the inability to "make it" is often internalised as personal failure. The opposite is also true: dysfunctional work environments that oppress rather than value, that clip wings rather than foster personal and professional growth; workplaces characterised by envy, favouritism, and a focus on the human being merely as a factor of production—an interchangeable part in a mechanism that negatively affects physical, mental, and relational health. A means, not a person.

Likewise, in relational and emotional life—including intimate and sexual dimensions—breakups, rejection, loneliness, and dissatisfaction may be experienced as proof of inadequacy rather than as opportunities for relational learning, growth, and transformation. This sphere is particularly delicate, as it touches one of the most brutally and mistakenly romanticised dimensions of human history: the myth of doomed love and toxic relationships that are "violent but sincere"; of abuse in its many forms—physical, psychological, economic. It touches the other face of love: death, often violently inflicted by the stronger upon the more vulnerable, sometimes justified with phrases such as "I loved her too much to lose her" or "If not mine, then no one's." Yet it also includes fraternal love, parental love, friendship. Love is a mysterious and complex dimension—chemical, physical, mental, human and divine—so powerful that it can draw out both the best and the worst in the human being.

For youth workers—the primary target group of Disasterpiece!—who work every day in close contact with young people experiencing failure, silently or openly, or at risk of failing, the educational problem is not failure itself, which is a human fact. The problem is the absence of an educational culture of failure and of structured pathways for learning how to face it. Young people are educated to succeed, but not to fall—not to pause, reorient themselves, ask for help, or begin again. No one is born with a ready-to-use manual for navigating failure, nor with an innate capacity to manage it.

Disasterpiece! emerges within this void as an attempt to help fill it, and it poses a simple yet radical question: *what if failure were treated not as an exception, but as an ordinary experience of human existence and a central educational theme, one to which dignity should be restored and time deliberately devoted?*

1.2. Failure: event or process?

In everyday language, failure is often reduced to a single moment: an exam not passed, a job not obtained, a relationship that ends, a project that goes wrong. This perspective can push educators toward a narrow objective: helping the young person "bounce back" as quickly as possible, to overcome "a bad episode" that should simply be left behind, in order to "come back stronger than before."

Disasterpiece! proposes a broader perspective. Failure is approached as a process—something that unfolds over time; indeed, something that requires time to be observed, interpreted, experienced, metabolised, and navigated. Something that must be inhabited. It includes what precedes the fall

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(expectations, pressures, fantasies, comparisons), the rupture itself (shock, loss, confusion, pain), and what follows (interpretations, silences, suffering, identity shifts, new directions).

This process-oriented perspective is crucial because failure does not hurt only because of what happened, but because of what it may come to mean. A failed exam can become "I am stupid." A rejection can become "No one will ever love me." A dismissal or an unsuccessful interview can become "I am finished." In other words, failure becomes destructive and inescapable when the event merges with the person's identity.

The educational work of Disasterpiece! begins precisely here: **separating the person from the event and reopening the space of meaning.** It is not about denying pain. It is about creating the conditions for pain to be processed, narrated, and, over time, transformed.

1.3. Which failure? Notes from a – maybe – catastrophe

Disasterpiece! adopts a structural, relational, and cultural perspective. The project is grounded in a set of references that have informed it from the design phase and accompanied it throughout its implementation: philosophy, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, crisis theories, critical pedagogy, and narrative approaches. This has ensured a systemic approach capable of holding the whole picture together—aligned with Disasterpiece!'s purpose: not to turn youth workers into academics, but to offer strong, usable lenses to understand why failure can hurt so deeply and what can help it become generative.

The concept of generative failure—at the core of Disasterpiece!—is explored further in Chapter II, while the conceptual references introduced here are developed in Chapter III.

a. Failure, performance, and stigma: the genius of Goffman in a nutshell

Erving Goffman described social life as a kind of performance: in everyday interactions we try to present a coherent, competent, socially acceptable self (Goffman, 1956). When our environment is strongly organized around evaluation—school results, productivity, online visibility—young people can feel constantly "on stage."

From this perspective, failure is not only an internal disappointment. It is a threat to recognition. Failure can feel like being exposed: a crack in the role one is trying to perform. This helps explain why many young people hide their struggles and why silence can become a second pain.

Goffman also explored stigma as a social process: certain experiences or attributes are marked as discrediting, producing shame and exclusion (Goffman, 1963). When failure is stigmatized, it becomes harder to ask for help. A key educational task is therefore to de-stigmatize: to create contexts where failure can be spoken without judgement.

b. Failure and anomie in Émile Durkheim: when shared meanings collapse

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Émile Durkheim used the concept of anomie to describe situations in which shared norms and meanings weaken, leaving individuals without stable reference points (Durkheim, 1897). In such contexts, failure becomes particularly dangerous because the person has no collective story to hold on to.

When societies offer little symbolic legitimacy to falling, failure may feel absolute, final, and meaningless. This is why Disasterpiece! insists on rebuilding collective narratives of failure—so that young people do not carry it alone as a private defect, but can understand it as part of a wider human and social experience.

c. *Failure as revelation: limits, desire, and truth in Massimo Recalcati's works*

The psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati proposes one of the key conceptual shifts informing Disasterpiece!: rather than treating failure as a defect, he frames it as a moment of truth—a fall that interrupts fantasies of omnipotence and forces a person to confront limits, desire, and values (Recalcati, 2016).

In this view, failure is not the opposite of growth. It is often its condition. But this does not happen automatically: a fall can also become collapse. For failure to become generative, it must be recognized, narrated, and accompanied—otherwise it risks turning into shame, paralysis, and withdrawal.

d. *The critique of the performance society: Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt School*

Herbert Marcuse's critique of modern societies helps contextualize the intolerance of failure inside systems that reduce human value to productivity and efficiency (Marcuse, 1955). When worth is measured by performance, interruption becomes threatening.

Disasterpiece! positions itself as a counter-narrative: it defends non-linearity, fragility, doubt, and interruption as legitimate dimensions of development. For youth workers, this is a reminder that educational spaces can be places where a different logic is practiced—a logic in which a young person is not valued only when they achieve.

e. *Roots, relationships and care: merging Simone Weil and Nel Noddings*

Simone Weil wrote that human beings need roots: stable relationships, recognition, and a sense of belonging (Weil, 1949/1952). In The Need for Roots (L'Enracinement), Weil presents rootedness (enracinement) as one of the deepest and least acknowledged "needs of the soul," and she defines it in strongly relational and historical terms: a person has roots through their "real, active, and natural participation" in the life of a community that keeps alive "certain treasures of the past" and "certain expectations for the future" (Weil, 1949/1952).

This is a crucial point for Disasterpiece!: in Weil's view, rootedness is not only an emotional comfort, and not only a private feeling. It is a condition of meaning. Roots are made of living ties—place, memory, work, language, shared practices, and recognition within a collective—through which a

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person can locate themselves in time (where they come from, what they inherit, what they can hope for). Weil also stresses that human beings need more than one root: when life is reduced to a single belonging (only school performance, only productivity, only romantic validation), the person becomes fragile and easily collapses under rupture (Weil, 1949/1952).

From this perspective, failure becomes unbearable when it produces uprootedness: not simply "I did not succeed," but "I no longer have a place," "I am no longer recognized," "I am cut off—from my future, from others, from myself." Weil's diagnosis is also structural: uprootedness can be generated by social arrangements that break continuity and belonging (for example, through forms of work and life that detach people from community and meaning) (Weil, 1949/1952).

For youth work, this reframes the task: the goal is not only to help a young person "recover quickly," but to help them reconnect to roots—to rebuild relational safety, recognition, and continuity, so that the failure-event does not become an existential collapse.

This resonates with the ethic of care developed by Nel Noddings, for whom caring relationships are foundational to moral life and education (Noddings, 1984). In Disasterpiece!, youth work is understood as relational accompaniment: the capacity to stay present, to listen, to offer reliability, and to help a young person construct meaning rather than escape discomfort. In this sense, care is not a soft add-on: it is the relational infrastructure that makes rootedness possible—and makes failure survivable, and sometimes transformative.

f. Narrative identity and meaning-making: Jerome Bruner, Paul Ricoeur and Viktor Frankl

A central assumption of Disasterpiece! is that failure is also a narrative experience. Jerome Bruner argued that narrative is not only a way of communicating; it is a way of thinking and building identity (Bruner, 1990). We do not simply remember events—we weave them into stories that say who we are.

Paul Ricoeur developed the idea of narrative identity: we understand ourselves through the stories we tell and retell about our lives (Ricoeur, 1990). This matters in failure, because the story a young person tells about the fall can either imprison them ("I failed because I'm worthless") or open a path ("I failed, I learned something, I'm still here").

Viktor Frankl, writing out of extreme experience, insisted that suffering without meaning becomes unbearable, while suffering with meaning becomes more manageable (Frankl, 1946). The point is not to justify suffering. The point is to recognize that meaning-making is a key part of healing—and stories are one of the ways humans create meaning.

g. Failure, pedagogy, and the risks of "quick redemption" in O'Gorman & Werry (and others)

Disasterpiece! also shares an important caution found in pedagogical debates on failure. Róisín O'Gorman and Margaret Werry note how, in popular discourse, failure can become trendy: we are

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told we must fail in order to succeed, often through cheerful slogans such as Beckett's "Fail again. Fail better" (O'Gorman & Werry, 2012; Beckett, 1983).

The problem is not learning from failure. The risk is turning failure into another demand to perform—another obligation to be productive, resilient, innovative, and positive. When failure is redeemed too quickly, the painful affects it carries (shame, anger, despair, guilt) are pushed away—and the person may remain alone with them.

O'Gorman and Werry propose that, to work seriously with failure, we need to slow down and look at it 'head on'—not to celebrate it or redeem it, but to understand its complexity and its social stakes (O'Gorman & Werry, 2012). Other authors cited in this debate explore failure's relationship with creativity, normativity, and alternative communities (e.g., Le Feuvre, 2010; Halberstam, 2011; Ngai, 2005).

This is fully aligned with Disasterpiece!'s stance: generative failure does not romanticize pain. It takes suffering seriously and asks what kinds of relationships, narratives, and environments make it possible to move through it.

h. *Failure as crisis: turning points, judgment, and resources (from the ancient greek to the Gospel, and Caplan, Erikson, Eastham, Coates & Allodi and Wang)*

Disasterpiece! often uses the language of crisis to describe the experience of failure. In crisis theory, a crisis is not simply a catastrophe: it is a turning point, a period in which old strategies no longer work and a person must reorganize meaning and action. Gerald Caplan described crises as moments of acute disequilibrium that can lead either to disintegration or to growth, depending on the resources available (Caplan, 1964). Erik Erikson's work on identity helps explain why adolescence and early adulthood are particularly vulnerable periods: identity is still being formed, so failure can feel like a threat to the self rather than "just" a setback (Erikson, 1959; 1968). Older crisis research also highlights a key point for youth work: crisis reactions are shaped not only by personality, but by practical circumstances and group support—in other words, by the environment and relationships available (Eastham, Coates & Allodi, 1970). This reinforces Disasterpiece!'s foundational assumption: failure is never only individual.

At the same time, the word crisis carries an older meaning that resonates strongly with Disasterpiece!. Its Greek root, krisis (κρίσις), is tied to krinein ("to discern, decide, judge") and names a moment of discernment and decision, not only collapse. In the Gospels and the New Testament, krisis is also the language of judgment—in the sense of a decisive evaluation that reveals a direction, a "for or against" that involves interpretation and responsibility (e.g., krisis as "judgment/decision" in New Testament lexica). This semantic layer helps clarify why failure can feel so existential: it is not only what happens, but the moment in which a person is tempted to turn an event into a verdict on the self. Philosophical work on the concept of crisis reinforces this interpretive dimension: Tangjia Wang traces how the term historically carried the sense of judgment and turning points—a moment when something must be decided, when the direction of a life or a process is at stake (Wang, 2014).

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This is where Disasterpiece!'s idea of generativity becomes concrete: the fall can become a moment to rethink what to keep, what to let go, and where to go next—provided that relational and practical resources make that reorientation possible.

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CHAPTER II – DISASTERPIECE! AND THE PARADIGM OF GENERATIVE FAILURE

Introduction

This chapter is the **operational heart of the manual**. It explains why Disasterpiece! exists, what it aims to change in the dominant narrative around failure, and how the project's methodology and Toolkit translate that vision into youth work practice.

2.1 Why a project on failure?

Disasterpiece! was born from a simple, uncomfortable fact: many young people are not just "failing" at something—they are collapsing under the meaning of failure. When a bad grade, a rejection, a breakup, or a job setback happens, the event can quickly turn into an identity verdict ("I'm not good enough," "I'm the problem," "this is the end"). This is not only an individual psychological experience: it is also cultural and educational, shaped by contexts where success is treated as proof of value and failure as shame—so young people are often trained to perform, but not educated to fall, pause, interpret what happened, ask for help, and rebuild without humiliation. Disasterpiece! exists to respond to this gap by creating an educational ecosystem where failure is no longer taboo, but speakable, thinkable, and workable—through language, relationships, stories, and practical tools. The project is rooted in real, sometimes extreme realities in which failure becomes so unbearable that people attempt suicide, harm themselves, or—especially when relationships end—harm others; these outcomes are rarely "caused" by a single event, and are often amplified by isolation, shame, and the absence of safe spaces to make meaning out of rupture.

This is why Disasterpiece! refuses two common mistakes at once: the stigmatization of failure ("you are a failure") and the romanticization of failure ("failure is always a gift"). Instead, it takes suffering seriously and asks a pragmatic educational question: what conditions can prevent a fall from becoming terminal—and what conditions can help it become generative over time?

Concretely, Disasterpiece! is an Erasmus+ KA210-YOU small-scale partnership, funded by the Italian National Youth Agency , with the overall objective of improving the work of European youth workers who interact with young people **experiencing failure in studies, work, and relationships**, by co-designing a multimedia Toolkit that can inform, inspire, engage, and offer practical guidance—so that young people, as final beneficiaries, can better understand what they are living and transform destructive failure into a more generative experience of reorientation and regrowth.

The need for a project that co-designs, tests, and validates—together with youth workers, young people, researchers, and experts—a model of education through failure is a very contemporary one. Failure has always existed, as discussed in Chapter I, but the major global events that immediately preceded this project—above all the COVID-19 pandemic—brought many of our era's fragilities to the surface, while also shrinking the space for everyday relationships (at least those not mediated by technology).

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During the pandemic, we realised how unprepared we were to face the unexpected—at least as a human society. We discovered how little antifragile we were: how difficult it was to keep growing and adapting when uncertainty became the norm. We also found ourselves inside a complexity—the complexity of reality—full of variables we cannot fully control: variables that expand and multiply independently of our will and, if not understood and addressed, can end up dominating our lives.

Young people, in particular, were among the main victims of these abrupt changes: distance learning, the impossibility of meeting peers except through technologies that mediated relationships, the spread of a "bedroom culture," and the sudden loss—often without alternatives—of passions, hobbies, and daily routines. Disasterpiece!, as already stated, is above all for them: to mitigate what they have endured—and what many are still living through—namely those factors that increased the risk of physical and relational isolation, which is one of the strongest allies of destructive failure.

The context analysis that motivated Disasterpiece! described the conditions of European young people in the period immediately after COVID. This analysis has since been updated for the countries involved in the project, and this manual includes brief country-level signals (Spain, Cyprus, Italy) on how the COVID period and its aftermath affected young people's well-being—and why youth work needs low-threshold, relational responses. **See Appendix A - Country Snapshots.**

2.2 Why the name?

Let's make one thing clear: it's not because of the Slipknot song! The name Disasterpiece! condenses the project's core message: even what feels like a disaster can become meaningful. In other words, a disaster-piece can become a master-piece when a person is supported to reframe, re-narrate, and reorient what is commonly considered a terminal and destructive experience. The name does not promise that every disaster becomes a masterpiece. It points to a more modest—and more educational—claim: meaning can be rebuilt, and stories of people who fell and found new beginnings can help others imagine a future again.

This is why the project speaks of "disaster-pieces": fragments of lived failure—often chaotic, ordinary, imperfect—that can still be transformed into learning, clarity, and direction when held with care.

Disasterpiece! is guided by a simple motto: embracing our failures one step at a time. This line expresses a methodological choice. It suggests that generativity is not a sudden breakthrough, but a gradual process: small steps of naming, sharing, understanding, and trying again—without rushing people back into performance.

2.3 A small-scale project, with a disruptive ambition

Disasterpiece! aims to shift the dominant narrative that frames failure as a destructive and terminal experience. In mainstream discourse, failure is often treated as:

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- final ("there is no way back"),
- moralized ("you didn't try hard enough"),
- individualized ("it's your fault"),
- silenced ("don't talk about it").

This narrative produces what we call destructive failure: not because an event is inherently larger, but because the person loses access to meaning, support, and future imagination. Disasterpiece! proposes an alternative: generative failure—failure that, over time, can produce something such as clarity, reorientation, renewed agency, resilience, tenderness, or hope.

In this manual (and, of course, in the project), generativity means the capacity to transform a rupture into a process of meaning-making and reorientation. It does not erase pain, and it is never automatic. Rather, it becomes possible when a person is supported to treat failure as a crisis in its original sense: a turning point that calls for discernment and decision. In a generative crisis, one can pause, analyse what happened, understand what to keep and what to let go of, rethink oneself, and take the next step—gradually, one step at a time.

A key distinction runs through the entire project: it is not the fall itself that defines the experience; it is what the fall becomes through interpretation, relationships, and resources.

2.4 For whom "the project bell" tolls?

Disasterpiece! is designed with a clear distinction between direct and final target groups. The direct target group is youth workers and educators, understood as the first educational interface with young people who are experiencing, or are at risk of experiencing, destructive failure. They are often the "meaningful adults" outside the family and outside therapy: present in everyday life and informal contexts where trust can grow, frequently the first to notice silent suffering, and the first who can create spaces where failure becomes speakable.

The final beneficiaries are young people aged 16–35, because adolescence and early adulthood are phases in which identity is still forming. In this life stage, failures in studies, work, and relationships can feel not like temporary setbacks but like threats to the self and to belonging. For this reason, Disasterpiece! adopts a train-the-trainers approach: it strengthens the competences of youth workers and educators—through shared language, methodological guidance, and practical tools—so they can accompany more young people over time, across different contexts, and beyond the project's duration.

2.5 A generative ecosystem, not a simple path

Disasterpiece! is designed as an integrated ecosystem rather than a single method or a linear "step-by-step" path. The project brings together the BETA version of an open-source Toolkit for youth workers, storytelling resources, and case-based learning, all hosted within an online space that makes the materials accessible and usable in different contexts.

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The Toolkit is conceived to be practical, adaptable, and reusable. In its core structure, it includes:

- this manual, conceived as an integrated resource that brings together: (1) research on the concept of failure and its historical and cultural evolution (Chapter III); and (2) a series of case studies of "successful failures" (Chapter IV), analysed through the Hero's Journey framework to identify recurring patterns and outline an ideal pathway toward generative failure.
- a digital museum, a collection of video testimonies in which ordinary people share their experiences of generative failure—offering inspiration, trust, and hope.
- a podcast, gathering additional stories of generative failure and serving as an open space where failure can be discussed freely, through multiple voices, ideas, and perspectives.
- a testing and feedback report, collecting insights from the piloting of the Toolkit with youth workers and young people across Europe, and functioning as a knowledge base to support further development and optimisation.

Together, these elements form a generative ecosystem: a space where failure is not hidden, but explored; not denied, but narrated; not "fixed," but accompanied, so that, over time, destructive experiences can be transformed into more meaningful and livable ones. The TOOLKIT is – and always will be! – available on www.disasterpiece.eu.

2.6 The methodological framework: educating through stories of failure

If failure were only an individual mistake, the educational response would be simple: correct the mistake, motivate the person, and move on. But if failure is also social, cultural, relational, and narrative, then the how of education becomes central. Disasterpiece! proposes a methodology that is process-oriented, relational, and story-based. It is not a clinical approach and it is not therapy. It is youth work: education that supports meaning-making, agency, and connection—especially when a young person feels lost.

A starting assumption of the project is that failure cannot be "solved" through prescriptive formulas. It is not primarily a problem to be fixed, but an experience to be accompanied. This is why Disasterpiece! deliberately avoids deficit-based, clinical, or purely motivational approaches. Instead, it draws on educational traditions that treat learning as a relational and transformative process. Three anchors are particularly useful:

- critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) frames education as dialogue and co-creation of meaning, rather than one-way correction.
- care ethics (Noddings, 1984) treats relationship, attention, and reliability as the ground of learning.
- narrative psychology (Bruner, 1990) shows that identity is shaped by the stories we tell—and can be re-authored when new language becomes available.

In practical terms, this means resisting two common impulses: minimizing ("it's not a big deal") and immediately fixing ("here is what you should do"). Often, what a young person needs first is not a

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solution, but a space where their experience becomes speakable—and where a different story can begin to take shape.

2.7 The youth worker's posture: from "simple expert" to meaningful adult

At the core of this approach lies a shift in the educator's role. In Disasterpiece!, the youth worker is not positioned as an expert who provides answers, nor as a coach who pushes toward performance. Rather, the youth worker is understood as a meaningful adult: someone who can stay present in moments of fragility and help a young person construct meaning rather than escape discomfort.

This posture can be summarized in four verbs:

- stay: remain present without abandoning the young person when they are not "performing well";
- listen: make room for the person's words, pace, and silences;
- name: help find language for what feels confusing (shame, grief, anger, disappointment, fear);
- accompany: support small steps and reorientation without imposing a ready-made path.

2.8 *Failure as a process: a temporal map for educational work*

Because failure is a process, educational work can follow the process rather than fighting it. A useful map is to look at three temporal layers:

- before the fall: expectations, pressure, comparison, fantasies of control, fear of judgement;
- the rupture: shock, confusion, loss of confidence, the feeling that "everything is over";
- after the fall: interpretation, silence or disclosure, identity narratives, first attempts to rebuild or withdraw.

Crisis theory offers a practical reminder: turning points can lead either to growth or to disintegration depending on resources, meanings, and relationships (Caplan, 1964; Erikson, 1959; 1968). This is why time, pauses, and uncertainty are not obstacles but learning material. One of the most important educational gestures is sometimes simply to give time back to a young person.

2.9 *Beyond quick redemption: the project's ethical stance on failure*

Disasterpiece! rejects the idea that failure should be redeemed quickly or turned into a performance requirement ("you must learn from it immediately"). Educational reflections on failure warn that fashionable celebrations of failure can become another demand: be resilient, be productive, be inspirational—right away (O'Gorman & Werry, 2012).

The project's stance is therefore twofold: do not stigmatize failure, but also do not romanticize it. Take pain seriously, and work on the conditions that make transformation possible.

2.10 From principles to practice: how Disasterpiece! works in youth work settings

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Disasterpiece! translates the paradigm of generative failure into youth work practice through a simple idea: failure becomes less destructive when it is made speakable, shareable, and accompanied over time. This does not happen through a single technique. It happens through a coherent set of practices—language, relational presence, group settings, and stories—supported by the Toolkit.

In practical terms, the approach invites youth workers to do three things consistently:

- create conditions of safety (so the experience can be named without shame),
- support meaning-making (so the event does not become an identity verdict),
- rebuild agency step by step (so the future reopens gradually).

2.11 Stories at the core of the TOOLKIT (and the project!)

Disasterpiece! recognises that changing the perception of failure cannot rely on theory alone. Stories are needed—real, honest, imperfect stories—because they can transform both the person who tells them and the people who listen. They reduce isolation, offer language, and widen imagination.

For this reason, storytelling is a core component of the Toolkit (video testimonies, podcast conversations, and case-based learning). A fuller explanation of why stories work, how to use them, and how to do it safely opens Chapter IV, which is entirely dedicated to stories.

2.12 Key educational moves: helping failure become generative

Generativity is not a slogan—it is a pathway. The following moves offer a practical "map" for accompanying a young person from destructive failure to a more generative process:

- Normalize without minimizing: communicate that failure is ordinary, while fully respecting the pain;
- externalize: separate the person from the event ("You experienced a failure" ≠ "You are a failure");
- widen the frame: name contextual factors (pressure, precarity, discrimination, family expectations, social comparisons) so failure is not reduced to personal blame;
- name affects: help identify shame, anger, grief, fear—so emotions do not become identity;
- locate resources: relationships, competencies, values, previous coping, support networks;
- support small experiments: steps that rebuild agency (a conversation, a new attempt, asking for help, a different plan).

These moves reflect the project's stance: no stigma, no romanticization. We do not deny pain, but we also do not treat pain as destiny.

2.13 Working with groups: turning isolation into a response-able community

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Failure is often lived in solitude. Group work can change this—if it is held with care. A group can become a response-able community: a community able to respond rather than judge. This requires facilitation and simple, explicit agreements.

In practice, group work on failure should include:

- confidentiality, respect, and the right not to share;
- a listening culture (no fixing, no motivational speeches, no comparisons);
- active strategies to reduce shame (naming, normalizing, supportive language);
- peer resonance ("me too") without competition or one-upmanship.

When group work succeeds, failure becomes less a private burden and more a shared human experience—something that can unite rather than isolate.

2.14 Do-no-harm: ethics, boundaries, and safeguarding

Working with failure means working close to vulnerability. Disasterpiece! therefore insists on a do-no-harm orientation:

- youth work is not therapy: it supports meaning-making and agency, but does not replace clinical cre;
- consent and choice: sharing must be voluntary; silence is a legitimate form of participation;
- privacy and control: young people decide what to share, with whom, and when; avoid pressure toward exposure;
- referral pathways: if distress is severe or safety is at risk, activate appropriate professional support;
- self-care for youth workers: this work can be emotionally demanding; supervision and peer support matter;

A practical rule of thumb: when a youth worker feels a situation is beyond educational accompaniment—or when safety is at risk—it is responsible to involve additional support rather than carrying it alone.

For practical self-care micro-practices, **see Appendix B.**

2.15 Train-the-trainers, iteration, and improvement: a beta-tested Toolkit and methodology

Disasterpiece! is designed to strengthen the competences of those who accompany young people every day. For this reason, the manual and the Toolkit are conceived as train-the-trainers resources: they are meant to be reused, adapted, and taught across different organisations, groups, and contexts. In training settings, they help teams build a shared language about failure, design workshops, and use stories and case studies as structured learning devices.

At the same time, Disasterpiece! is built on an iterative, beta-tested logic. The Toolkit and methodology are not treated as final products "delivered once," but as resources developed through

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successive steps: research and conceptual framing, collection and production of stories and case studies, and—crucially—testing with youth workers and young people to refine usability and strengthen ethical sensitivity. This matters because it mirrors the project's core message: learning is rarely linear. Tools improve through trials, adjustments, and rethinking—in other words, through a generative relationship with what did not work yet.

2.16 How to use this manual and the Toolkit

This manual has a double purpose: it supports dissemination and storytelling, and it also supports practice. You can use it in three complementary ways:

- as a conceptual compass: to name what failure is, how it becomes destructive, and what supports generativity.
- as training material: to design workshops for youth workers, educators, and trainers using a shared language and shared tools.
- as a bridge to the Toolkit: to connect your practice with stories and with case-based learning.

You do not need to read everything linearly. Some readers will start from methodology; others will start from stories; others will move back and forth depending on their needs. The core invitation remains the same: make space for failure in educational practice, so that young people can face it without shame and without solitude.

To conclude, here are some practical, ready-to-use tips for youth workers.

Box 1 – key principles for youth workers

Use these principles as a quick checklist when you design activities, facilitate groups, or accompany a young person one-to-one:

- Make failure speakable: create spaces where failure can be named without ridicule, moralising, or haste.
- Separate event from identity: help young people distinguish what happened from who they are ("I failed" ≠ "I am a failure").
- Stay before you fix: prioritise presence, listening, and trust before advice, solutions, or action plans.
- Work with time: treat failure as a process; allow pauses, uncertainty, and gradual reorientation—one step at a time.
- Use stories as educational tools: stories reduce isolation, offer language, and widen the imagination of possible futures—when used with care.
- Widen the frame: name structural and relational factors (pressure, precarity, expectations, discrimination) so failure is not reduced to personal blame.
- Rebuild agency through small steps: support manageable experiments instead of pushing "big transformations."
- Protect dignity and safety: consent, privacy, and boundaries come first; young people should control what they share and with whom.

A quick "to do" list (use it when a young person shares a failure!):

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- Start with safety: check privacy, time available, and whether the person wants to talk now.
- Listen first: let them tell it in their words; tolerate silence.
- Name the experience: reflect back what you heard ("It sounds like you felt…") without interpretation or judgment.
- Externalize gently: separate the event from the self ("Something happened" is not "You are…").
- Ask what they need now: listening, company, practical help, or just a pause.
- Agree on one small next step: not a big plan—one doable action.
- If risk is present: activate referral/support pathways and do not carry it alone.

Questions that reopen meaning, without forcing positivity:

- "What part of this is hurting the most right now?"
- "When did it start to feel like the end?"
- "Whose standards are you measuring yourself against?"
- "If this were happening to a friend, what would you say to them?"
- "What would 'one step at a time' look like this week?"
- "Who is one safe person we can involve?"

Box 2 - What to avoid: some common traps when working with failure

These traps are common in good-faith educational work. Avoiding them is one of the fastest ways to reduce shame and increase trust.

- Toxic positivity: avoid "Everything happens for a reason" or "You'll be stronger," especially too early.
- Quick redemption: don't rush to turn pain into a lesson; meaning takes time.
- Minimising: "It's not a big deal" can deepen shame and loneliness.
- Moralising and blaming: "You should have tried harder" reinforces the catastrophe paradigm.
- Fixing as default: advice can be helpful, but only after the experience has been heard and named.
- Forced disclosure: never pressure young people to share; silence is a valid form of participation.
- Public exposure: avoid "confessional" dynamics; stories must be safe and controlled by the narrator.
- Carrying it alone: if distress is severe or safety is at risk, activate referral pathways and professional support.

What not to say (a few examples—the rest is up to your common sense and experience!)

- "At least it wasn't that bad."
- "You just need to be more positive."
- "Everyone fails—get over it."
- "You're overreacting."
- "Here's what you must do" (too early).
- "Tell the group, it will help you" (if the person hasn't chosen it).

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CHAPTER III – THE CONCEPT OF "FAILURE" THROUGH TIME AND SPACE: A SHORT JOURNEY

Introduction

Chapter I introduced failure as a lived experience that can become destructive when it turns into shame, silence, isolation, and identity collapse. Chapter II explained how Disasterpiece! responds through youth work practice, tools, and stories. This chapter – born as the Intellectual Output n.1 of the project - adds a complementary layer: it explores how "failure" has been built and reshaped over time—socially, institutionally, and culturally.

The goal is not to offer an exhaustive history or a purely scientific treatise. The goal is to give youth workers a stronger map of the forces that often sit behind a young person's sentence: "I failed." Once we see how failure is socially produced and why it threatens different things in different cultural contexts, we can accompany young people with more precision, less moral judgment, and more effective educational care.

3.1 Failure is not "natural": how societies build a category

"Failure" is not a fixed object. It is a category used to interpret outcomes and distribute recognition: it defines what counts as acceptable, what counts as deviation, and what consequences follow. This is why what a society calls "failure" changes across eras: the same event can be read as bad luck, moral fault, lack of discipline, lack of talent, lack of effort, or simply mismatch between expectations and reality.

A sociological approach to failure therefore starts with a simple premise: failure is historically and socially variable, and any serious analysis must be grounded in socio-historical contexts rather than universal assumptions. For youth work, this matters immediately: many young people suffer less from the event itself and more from the meaning attached to it—meanings that were not invented by them, but inherited from their environment.

3.2 From outcome to identity: when "the loser" becomes a social figure

One of the most important historical shifts is the transformation of failure from "something that happened" into "something you are." Cultural history shows how, in competitive modern societies, economic setbacks gradually became moralized and personalized: failure moved from being an outcome (loss, insolvency, misfortune) to becoming a character judgment, producing the stigmatized figure of the "loser." Scott Sandage's work is central here: he traces how "failure" became a powerful cultural category in the United States, tied to shame and identity rather than simply to economic facts.

This mechanism is not limited to economics. Once a society adopts strong progress scripts—"the right trajectory," "the correct pace," "the expected milestones"—failure is easily experienced as falling off the human map. Youth workers meet the consequences of this shift every day: the event

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(a bad grade, a rejection, a breakup) becomes a verdict on the self, and the young person's energy is absorbed by shame and self-surveillance rather than by learning and reorientation.

3.3 How modern systems produce failure: institutions, metrics, and permanent comparison

A key complement to Chapter I is this: modern institutions do not only "observe" failure; they can also produce it, stabilize it, and make it durable. Schools, labour markets, and many organizational systems rely on selection, ranking, and evaluation. These systems create thresholds (pass/fail), categories (excellent/average/insufficient), and records (grades, CVs, performance indicators) that can make setbacks feel official, public, and permanent.

This dynamic becomes clearer through a classic analysis of modern power: institutions classify individuals through mechanisms such as examination, normalization, and ranking—processes that make deviation visible and comparable. Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding how evaluation produces "normality" and "deviation," and how those categories can attach to identity. (Foucault, 1977; original 1975).

This does not mean that school or work are inherently oppressive. It means that when evaluation becomes constant and trajectories become rigid, failure becomes easier to internalize as identity. It also helps explain why some young people experience failure as inescapable: not because change is impossible, but because the system keeps re-displaying the failure through metrics, records, and comparisons. In youth work terms, accompaniment sometimes includes a structural task: helping a young person decompress the institutional verdict and recover a more human narrative of possibility.

3.4 Stigma changes over time: a concrete example from bankruptcy

Stigma is not destiny. It is a social process, and it can change when cultural narratives and institutional regimes change. Erving Goffman's classic account explains stigma as a mechanism that discredits individuals who do not match a social norm, often producing concealment, silence, and exclusion (Goffman, 1963). In failure, stigma often works like this: people hide their struggles because they fear losing recognition and belonging.

A vivid historical example is bankruptcy. Catarina Frade shows how financial failure and bankruptcy have historically been framed as immoral, sinful, or criminal behavior—and how stigma has accompanied bankrupt individuals across centuries, even as economic systems changed. Rafael Efrat offers an empirical and historical analysis of how bankruptcy stigma evolved over time, reinforcing the point that stigma is socially shaped rather than fixed.

For Disasterpiece!, this matters beyond finance: it shows that "failure shame" is not a natural property of falling—it is produced by narratives, norms, and institutions. If stigma is made, it can also be unmade, at least partially, by creating safer spaces, shared language, and alternative narratives. That is exactly why the project invests in educational tools and storytelling rather than "quick motivation."

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3.5 Late modernity: when failure becomes self-accusation

A specifically contemporary pressure intensifies failure: many people are expected to manage themselves as projects—perform, adapt, self-optimize. In this cultural climate, failure is often internalized as personal incompetence even when it is structurally produced (precarity, competition, instability, inequality).

Byung-Chul Han describes an "achievement society" where pressure becomes internal and people exploit themselves in the name of performance; burnout and exhaustion appear as social symptoms, not merely individual weaknesses (Han, 2015). Alain Ehrenberg links the rise and meaning of depression to a historical shift in norms of autonomy and responsibility: when individuals are expected to be constantly capable, the inability to "make it" easily becomes guilt and self-blame (Ehrenberg, 2009). Richard Sennett's analysis of flexible capitalism adds a narrative dimension: instability corrodes long-term commitments and makes it harder to build coherent life stories in which setbacks can be integrated rather than experienced as collapse (Sennett, 1998).

This is the deeper background of a common youth-work scene: "I failed" quickly becomes "I failed at being someone." In such contexts, the educational response is rarely to push more performance. It is to restore complexity: failure is lived within systems and cultural expectations, and reorientation requires time, language, and relationships.

3.6 A sociological focus on today: liquid modernity, intersectionality, and the hyperconnected society

In an era defined by constant connectivity, hyper-visibility, and relentless productivity, young people are increasingly struggling to cope with failure. This section explores the sociological dimensions of failure in contemporary youth, contextualized within late capitalist society. Drawing from key thinkers such as Zygmunt Bauman, Pierre Bourdieu, Eva Illouz, Judith Butler, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, the report examines how societal structures, economic precarity, gender norms, cultural narratives, and algorithmic mediation contribute to the individual and collective experiences of failure.

Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" provides a crucial framework for understanding the contemporary experience of failure. In a society where traditional structures and institutions are dissolving, individuals are confronted with a constant flux of information, choices, and demands. This fluidity erodes the stability and predictability that once provided a sense of security, leaving individuals in a state of perpetual uncertainty. Young people, in particular, who are in the process of forming their identities and navigating key life transitions, are acutely affected by this condition. The pressure to adapt, reinvent oneself, and remain constantly "liquid" creates a heightened sense of vulnerability and a fear of falling behind. In this context, failure is not simply an isolated event but a potential threat to one's very sense of self. The relentless pursuit of success and self-optimization, fueled by societal expectations and the logic of consumer capitalism, leaves little room for error, contemplation, or deviation from the prescribed path.

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The rise of social media has further exacerbated this pressure, creating a culture of performativity where individuals are constantly encouraged to present idealized versions of themselves to the world. This curated self-presentation often masks the struggles, setbacks, and failures that are an inevitable part of life, leading to a distorted perception of reality. Young people, who are heavy users of social media, may be particularly susceptible to this phenomenon, comparing their own lives to the carefully constructed narratives of their peers and feeling inadequate when they inevitably fall short.

The Social Construction of Failure

Failure is not a universal or neutral phenomenon. It is socially constructed, meaning that what counts as 'failure' is shaped by cultural values, social expectations, and institutional norms. What is considered a failure in one society or historical period may be viewed differently in another. For instance, in highly individualistic societies, failure may be attributed primarily to personal shortcomings, while in more collectivist cultures, external factors may be given greater weight.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus and capital illuminates how failure is classed. Bourdieu argues that individuals are endowed with different forms of capital, including economic capital (financial resources), cultural capital (knowledge, skills, and tastes), and social capital (networks of social relationships). Young people from less privileged backgrounds often lack the cultural, economic, and social capital necessary to navigate the educational system, the job market, and other key social institutions successfully. They may not have access to the same educational opportunities, resources, or social networks as their more privileged peers, putting them at a significant disadvantage. Consequently, what may be perceived as "failure" – such as dropping out of school, being unemployed, or struggling with financial instability – is often a direct result of these structural inequalities rather than a reflection of individual ability or effort.

The concept of the "meritocratic myth" plays a crucial role in perpetuating these inequalities. This myth suggests that success is solely determined by individual merit, talent, and hard work, and that everyone has an equal opportunity to achieve it. However, this belief obscures the systemic barriers and structural disadvantages that prevent many young people from reaching their full potential. When individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds experience failure, they may internalize it as a personal failing, leading to feelings of shame, inadequacy, and learned helplessness. This internalization can have profound consequences for their self-esteem, mental health, and future prospects.

Intersectional dimension of Failure

Experiences of failure are not uniform across the population but are shaped by the complex interplay of various social identities. Judith Butler's work on gender performativity provides an essential lens through which to understand how experiences of failure intersect with gender. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed or innate characteristic but rather a performance, a set of social practices that are constantly enacted and reiterated. Individuals who do not conform to normative gender roles

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often face amplified experiences of exclusion and failure. They may be subjected to discrimination, harassment, and violence, both in institutional settings and in their personal lives. For example, young men who express emotions that are considered "feminine" may be ridiculed or ostracized, while young women who pursue careers in male-dominated fields may encounter significant obstacles and prejudice.

Trans, non-binary, and queer youth, in particular, may find their identities delegitimized and pathologized, positioning their very existence as a form of social failure in the eyes of dominant norms. They may face rejection from their families, discrimination in schools and workplaces, and limited access to resources and support. The constant struggle to navigate a world that does not recognize or validate their identities can lead to profound feelings of alienation, isolation, and despair.

Furthermore, drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, it is crucial to recognize that experiences of failure are shaped not only by gender but also by the complex interplay of race, class, sexuality, disability, and other social categories. Individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups often face compounded forms of discrimination and disadvantage, leading to unique and often more severe experiences of failure. For instance, a young, working-class, queer person of color may experience failure differently from a young, affluent, cisgender person. They may face discrimination in the job market due to their race and sexual orientation, lack access to the same educational and economic opportunities, and experience social isolation due to the intersection of their marginalized identities.

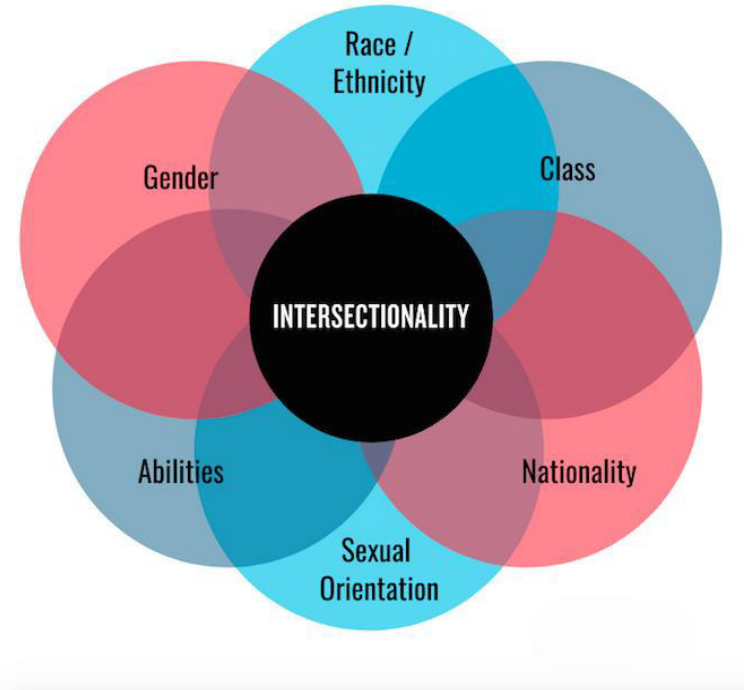

Figure 1: Intersectionality diagram

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The Emotional Landscape of Late Capitalism

Eva Illouz's work on the sociology of emotions provides valuable insights into how late capitalism shapes our emotional lives and our experiences of failure. Illouz argues that in contemporary society, emotions are not simply private or personal experiences but are increasingly commodified and integrated into the logic of the market. We are taught to manage our emotions in ways that enhance our productivity, efficiency, and marketability. Happiness becomes a duty, a sign of success and self-discipline, while negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, and disappointment are seen as signs of weakness or dysfunction.

This commodification of emotions has significant implications for how young people experience and respond to failure. They are taught to optimize not only their bodies and their productivity but also their emotional landscapes, striving for a state of constant positivity and resilience. When they inevitably encounter setbacks or disappointments, they may feel pressure to suppress or deny their negative emotions, viewing them as a personal failing rather than a normal human response to difficult circumstances.

Furthermore, there is a growing tendency to pathologize emotional distress, framing it as a mental health problem that requires medical intervention. While genuine mental health struggles are a serious issue that requires attention and care, there is a risk of over-medicalizing what might be seen as normal responses to societal pressures and disappointments. Young people may be increasingly likely to be diagnosed with anxiety disorders or depression, not because they are inherently unwell, but because they are struggling to cope with the unrealistic demands and expectations of a highly competitive and individualistic society. This pathologization can have the effect of individualizing what are fundamentally social problems, shifting the focus away from the systemic factors that contribute to young people's distress and placing the burden of responsibility on the individual to "fix" themselves.

Social Media, Algorithms, and the Illusion of Instant Success

The rise of social media has profoundly transformed the way young people perceive and experience failure. Social media platforms fuel the illusion that success is instantaneous and universally visible. Young people are constantly bombarded with curated portrayals of achievements, happy relationships, and perfect lifestyles, which rarely reflect the failures, struggles, pauses, and detours that are an integral part of any meaningful path. This curated self-presentation creates a distorted perception of reality, where success appears to be the norm and failure an anomaly.

Social media algorithms play a significant role in amplifying this illusion. These algorithms are designed to maximize user engagement, often prioritizing content that is positive, exciting, and attention-grabbing. As a result, young people are more likely to see posts that showcase success and achievement than posts that depict the challenges, setbacks, and failures that are a natural part of life. This constant exposure to idealized images and narratives can lead to social comparison, feelings of inadequacy, and a fear of missing out (FOMO).

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Moreover, the metrics of social media, such as likes, followers, and shares, create a system of social validation that is based on external approval rather than intrinsic worth. Young people may come to define their self-worth based on their online popularity, leading to a precarious sense of self that is constantly vulnerable to the fluctuations of social media attention. When they fail to receive the validation they seek, they may experience it as a personal rejection, further reinforcing feelings of failure.

The culture of "I want everything and I want it now" is not merely a generational trait but a by-product of consumer capitalism, which demands immediate gratification and treats time as a commodity. Social media reinforces this culture by providing instant feedback and gratification, creating an expectation that success should be quick, easy, and readily apparent. In this context, failure is not seen as a valuable part of a process but as an interruption of a linear, upward trajectory, a deviation from the expected path of constant progress and achievement.

Failure in the Techno-Economy

The changing nature of work in the era of late capitalism has significantly impacted young people's experiences of failure. The decline of traditional career paths, the rise of the gig economy, and the increasing prevalence of precarious employment have created a landscape of economic uncertainty and instability.

In this context, "failure" in the realm of work takes on new dimensions. It may not simply mean being fired from a job but also struggling to find one, being forced to accept low-paying or unstable jobs, or being unable to pursue a career path that aligns with one's passions and skills. The traditional markers of career success, such as climbing the corporate ladder or achieving financial stability, may be increasingly out of reach for many young people, leading to a sense of disillusionment and frustration.

The experience of economic precarity can also have a significant impact on young people's sense of self-worth and their ability to achieve other life goals. Financial instability makes it difficult to afford housing, education, and healthcare, and can delay or prevent them from starting a family or pursuing personal interests. This can lead to feelings of shame, inadequacy, and a sense of being "stuck" or unable to progress in life.

Despite these pressures, failure can also be a site of resistance and transformation. Drawing on feminist and queer theories, we can reframe failure as a break from oppressive expectations and a call to reimagine value and success on one's own terms.

Jack Halberstam's concept of "the queer art of failure" offers a powerful framework for challenging dominant narratives of success and embracing alternative ways of being. Halberstam argues that failure, rather than being a source of shame or despair, can be a catalyst for creativity, innovation, and social change. Queer individuals, who have historically been marginalized and excluded from mainstream society, have often found ways to thrive outside of conventional norms, creating their

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own communities, cultures, and forms of expression. Their experiences of "failure" – of not conforming to heteronormative expectations – have become a source of strength and resilience, leading to the development of unique perspectives and ways of life.

This reframing of failure invites us to celebrate alternative lives, timelines, and ways of being that do not conform to dominant scripts of success. It encourages us to question the narrow definitions of achievement that are imposed upon us by society and to embrace the messiness, uncertainty, and unpredictability of life. Examples of this can be seen in various social movements, artistic expressions, and community-building initiatives.

For instance, the feminist movement has challenged traditional gender roles and expectations, creating space for women to pursue careers and live lives that were once considered "unsuccessful" or "unfeminine." The civil rights movement challenged racial segregation and discrimination, demanding equal rights and opportunities for Black people who had been systematically denied access to success. The LGBTQ+ rights movement has fought for the recognition and acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, celebrating forms of love and family that deviate from the norm. Artists, writers, and musicians have often used their work to explore themes of failure, alienation, and marginalization, creating powerful and moving expressions of the human experience. Community-building initiatives, such as support groups, cooperatives, and grassroots organizations, provide spaces for individuals to connect with others who share similar experiences of struggle and to build collective narratives of resilience and resistance.

3.7 Failure across cultures: different stakes, different time-logics, different "repairs"

Culture is not a label stuck to a person. It is a web of meanings and practices that shape what matters most, what counts as honorable, what counts as shameful, and what kind of "repair" is required after rupture. Individuals never belong to one culture only; they live at the intersection of family culture, peer culture, social class, religion, migration, and digital culture. Still, cross-cultural research supports a robust point: dominant cultural orientations shape what failure threatens most—self-worth, social face, family honour, belonging, moral standing, or future legitimacy.

A foundational account in cultural psychology distinguishes independent and interdependent ways of construing the self and shows how these orientations shape emotion, motivation, and evaluation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Intercultural communication research, particularly face-negotiation theory, highlights how "face" (public self-image and social respect) can be central in vulnerability and conflict, shaping disclosure, shame, and support dynamics (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998).

For youth work, the practical takeaway is simple: the same failure event may be experienced as a threat to very different core goods—and therefore requires different kinds of accompaniment. Disasterpiece! does not treat cultures as stereotypes; it treats cultural frames as hypotheses that generate better questions.

Western mainstream frames (linear progress and individual responsibility).

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In many mainstream Western narratives, life is imagined as linear progress: the "right track" and the "right pace" matter. Failure often becomes "falling behind," and in individual responsibility cultures it can easily become a verdict on worth. Sandage's cultural history shows how modern societies can turn economic or social setbacks into personal identities ("the loser"). In youth work, this often appears as urgency ("I'm late"), self-accusation ("I'm not enough"), and catastrophic forecasting ("I ruined everything"). Educational repair here often means reopening the future as plural: more than one path, more than one pace, more than one definition of success.

East Asian mainstream frames (relational selfhood, face and family expectations).

In many East Asian contexts influenced by Confucian traditions, social life often emphasizes relational roles, harmony, duty, and learning as moral formation (Britannica overview). Failure may be experienced primarily as threat to face, family honour, or social standing—often making disclosure more difficult. Facework research helps explain why public exposure can be experienced as devastating and why indirect communication or concealment may be protective strategies (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). For youth workers, a key implication is practical: safety often means privacy, dignity-preserving language, and avoiding public "confessional" formats unless chosen by the person.

South Asian and other worlds shaped by cyclicality (long horizons, duty and consequence).

In cultural worlds influenced by Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, existence is often narrated through cycles of rebirth and return (samsara) rather than one linear arc (Britannica). This does not automatically make failure easier or less stigmatized. But it can shift how rupture is framed: the horizon may be longer, and meaning may be interpreted through duty, consequence, learning, or spiritual coherence. For youth work, the implication is to avoid imposing "quick redemption" and instead ask what the failure threatens: duty? family honour? spiritual meaning? future belonging? Repair may take forms such as reconciliation, restitution, recommitment, or re-choosing a path.

African relational philosophies (personhood-in-community, with great diversity).

"Africa" is not one culture; any generalization must be cautious. Still, Ubuntu/Hunhu is widely discussed as an orientation in Southern African thought that emphasizes personhood as relational—becoming a person through others (IEP overview). Mbiti's classic synthesis similarly highlights communal dimensions of personhood and time in African religious philosophy (Mbiti, 1990). In such lenses, failure may be experienced less as "I am incompetent" and more as "I have lost my place / I have disappointed the community / I have broken reciprocity." Educational repair often requires relational work: reintegration, recognition, restoring ties—not only individual coping.

Indigenous/Mesoamerican examples (rhythmic time, continuity, "spiraling" temporality).

Indigenous cultures are highly diverse, but many accounts describe time as rhythmic or cyclical and rooted in continuity with place and community. Brown & Cousins discuss Native American concepts of time and process, contrasting linear "progress time" with more rhythmic, cyclical orientations

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(OUP chapter). Contemporary philosophy cautions against simplistic binaries ("West = line, Indigenous = circle") and explores more nuanced models such as spiraling time that preserve continuity while recognizing change (Fritsch, 2024). A concrete example often cited in public education is the Maya calendrical system, structured through interlocking cycles used to record historical and astronomical information (Britannica). In youth work terms: "repair" may require continuity, reconnection to place or community, and a pace that respects long horizons rather than immediate "success recovery."

Why time-logic matters (and why "one step at a time" is culturally sensitive).

Across these grammars, time-logic matters: in rigid linear scripts, failure becomes irreparable delay; in cyclical or relational scripts, failure may be integrated into return, repair, and continuity (without denying pain). This is one reason Disasterpiece! insists on "one step at a time" as a method, not a slogan: it respects different paces of meaning-making and protects dignity.

The most important practical shift is to treat culture not as identity-labeling but as question-guidance. Instead of asking "what culture are you?", a youth worker can ask: what is at stake here? Is this failure threatening self-worth, face, family honour, belonging, moral standing, or future legitimacy? Does repair mean re-attempt, reconciliation, reintegration, or a new path? What kind of space is safe: private conversation, small group resonance, mediation, a trusted adult?

3.8 Why this journey matters to youth workers?

Why should youth workers be interested in these historical, sociological and philosophical topics? How can they improve their daily approach to young people at risk or victims of destructive failures? Furthermore, how can they be useful in strengthening educational intervention strategies, tools and models?

Because these lenses change what you see—and what you see changes what you do. A youth worker does not meet "failure" in the abstract: they meet a young person whose experience is already shaped by social narratives ("winners/losers"), institutional mechanisms (grades, selection, records), and cultural expectations (face, duty, belonging, individual success). Understanding this background helps you avoid the most common trap: treating failure as a private defect or as a simple mistake to correct. Instead, you begin to recognize what the young person is truly carrying: shame, loss of recognition, fear of exclusion, or the sense of having fallen off the expected path.

In daily practice, this knowledge improves accompaniment in concrete ways. It helps you ask better questions—what is at stake here?—and to distinguish the event from the verdict that has formed around it. It supports you in naming structural pressures (evaluation systems, precariousness, comparison cultures) when needed, so the young person is not left alone with self-blame. It also makes you more sensitive to cultural differences in how failure is lived: sometimes the core threat is self-worth, sometimes "face," sometimes family honour, sometimes belonging. When you read

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these differences accurately, you can choose safer settings (private vs group), more respectful language, and a more realistic pace—protecting dignity rather than intensifying exposure.

Finally, these perspectives strengthen intervention strategies, tools, and models because they clarify why certain educational moves work. They justify the need for non-stigmatizing spaces, narrative resources, and gradual reorientation ("one step at a time"). They support a do-no-harm approach to storytelling and group work, and they help refine toolkits so they are not one-size-fits-all, but adaptable across contexts. In short, the research in this chapter is not "extra theory": it is a practical map that improves judgment, reduces harm, and increases the chances that a destructive failure can be accompanied toward a more generative process.

To conclude this conceptual overview, we have decided to explore an aspect that we believe is essential for youth workers in their daily work with young people: the fear of failure, stemming from social expectations and differences from supposed social "standards". You can find everything at the end of the manual, here: **Annex 1 – A focus on the fear of failure.**

CHAPTER III – references

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CHAPTER IV: STORIES, AT THE CORE OF DISASTERPIECE!

Introduction

The previous chapter explored how "failure" is historically and culturally shaped. This chapter moves from concepts to lived experience. Here we introduce the three storytelling outputs that carry the project into practice: the case studies, the digital museum, and the podcast.

4.1 Why stories?

Disasterpiece! is built on a simple educational conviction: stories transform. They transform the person who tells them—because narrating is not only "sharing," but also giving shape to an experience, reorganising meaning, and reclaiming agency. And they transform the person who listens—because a story can reduce isolation, offer language for what feels confusing, and widen the imagination of possible futures. This is why Disasterpiece! does not treat storytelling as an "extra" communication tool, but as a core educational device: stories can inspire, restore hope, help people understand what is happening to them, and make transformation feel imitable rather than exceptional.

At the same time, the project is clear about what stories are not. They are not magic solutions. They are not moral lessons. And they must never become "performance" or forced exposure. The aim is not to celebrate failure or to redeem it quickly. The aim is to create spaces where failure can be narrated with dignity and held with care—so that destructive experiences can gradually become more livable and, sometimes, generative.

In this chapter, stories are presented through three complementary formats—each designed for a distinct educational function and a distinct kind of accessibility. Together, they form one coherent message: whoever tells their story becomes a reachable example, not an unreachable unicorn.

4.2 Three storytelling outputs for three educational functions

Disasterpiece! developed three interconnected storytelling outputs. They share the same educational ambition—changing the narrative around failure—but each one does it through a different "learning door."

IO2 — Case studies: learning from patterns, not from heroes.

The case studies analyse stories of people—famous and not famous—who have been able to govern a failure and come out changed. The point is not to create "success myths." The point is to understand whether, across different lives and contexts, we can identify recurring turning points—personal resources, relational support, moments of decision, mentors, second chances, and concrete steps—that helped protagonists move from destructive to generative failure.

What emerges across the collected cases is not "they made it alone." On the contrary, many trajectories include a combination of:

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- inner resources (resilience, discipline, creativity, meaning-making),
- relational resources (friends, mentors, teams, family, communities),
- contextual opportunities (timing, openings, institutional chances),
- and sometimes faith or a deeper value framework that provided direction and endurance.

The educational goal is therefore not imitation of a person, but transfer of a process: extracting learnable dynamics that youth workers can recognise in real life and translate into practice.

IO3 — Digital Museum: ordinary people, reachable examples.

The Digital Museum is a collection of short video testimonies in which ordinary people tell their "disaster-piece": a lived failure that became more generative over time. The museum exists for a crucial reason: it shows that generative failure is not reserved for extraordinary individuals with exceptional resources. It is not an "unicorn story." It can happen in ordinary lives—often thanks to ordinary supports: one relationship, one second chance, one decision, one reorientation.

In educational terms, the museum is designed to be inspiring and trust-building without being unrealistic. It offers proximity, not perfection. It is also conceived as a scalable archive: a living collection that can grow, be expanded, and improved over time—so that more voices, contexts, and perspectives can be included.

IO4 — Fail-Cast!: a free space for conversation and meaning

The podcast is both storytelling and dialogue: a space where failure can be discussed openly, through different voices and perspectives, and where the project's key concepts can be explored without turning them into lectures. It is intentionally a low-threshold medium: young people can access it while commuting, walking, working out—at their own pace, without the pressure of a classroom setting. This choice is also strategic. Audio and podcast formats are widely used today, with audience reach often higher among under-35s. Ofcom reports that about one fifth of adults listen to podcasts weekly, with higher reach among under-35s. Edison Research also describes podcast listening as a significant part of younger people's audio consumption (including Gen Z), with strong engagement patterns.

In short: the podcast is not only a container of stories; it is a format of companionship—a way to be with someone while they are processing a difficult season.

4.3 How the case studies are built: Vogler's Hero's Journey as a readable map

To analyse stories without flattening them into moral lessons, Disasterpiece! uses a narrative framework adapted from Christopher Vogler's Hero's Journey—a model widely used in storytelling and screenwriting to describe how transformation often happens through a sequence of stages rather than through a single "turning point." The Hero's Journey, in Vogler's version, is not primarily about heroes in the spectacular sense. It is about a very human structure: leaving what is familiar,

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facing disruption and trials, meeting resources and allies, and returning changed. It is a map of transition.

Disasterpiece! does not use this framework to "force" real lives into a heroic myth, nor to romanticize suffering. It uses it as a practical analytical tool: a shared language that makes different stories readable, comparable, and learnable. Real lives are messy; the Hero's Journey helps youth workers and readers trace the underlying arc of change without losing complexity. It highlights key moments that are educationally relevant: the rupture that breaks the old narrative, the phase of resistance or disorientation, the appearance of allies and mentors, the tests and setbacks, the decisive moment in which something shifts, and the construction of a new equilibrium that is not "back to before," but reoriented.

Concretely, the case study analysis sheet organises each story into a three-act structure—Act I (the beginning), Act II (the challenge), Act III (the rebirth)—supported by prompts that help identify: the initial context and expectations, the "call" or rupture, the emotional and practical response, the obstacles and risks, the resources (internal and external), the role of supportive figures, the critical choices made, and what changed afterwards (identity, values, direction, relationships).

This is why Vogler's framework is useful for Disasterpiece!: it turns a story into learning material. Not only what happened, but how it was navigated, what enabled the turn, and which elements can be translated into educational practice. In short, the Hero's Journey is used here as a readable map of generativity—a way to study transformation without turning it into a fairy tale.

4.4 What we look for in the stories: the "generative pattern"

Across the different outputs (case studies, museum videos, podcast stories), Disasterpiece! looks for recurring elements—not as a rigid recipe, but as signals that a failure is moving from destructive to generative. The case study sheet makes this intention explicit: by collecting and analysing stories, we can explore whether common aspects exist (personal traits, external support, decisive moments) that can become suggestions and guidelines for helping failure become generative.

In practice, many arcs include:

- a rupture that breaks the previous narrative,
- an initial phase of confusion, shame, or withdrawal,
- a turning point (often relational: a mentor, a friend, a team),
- a period of struggle and experimentation ("one step at a time"),
- and a new equilibrium that is not "back to before," but reoriented.

This is exactly why the stories that follow are not meant to glorify resilience. They are meant to show how transformation becomes possible through resources + relationships + meaning-making, and how youth workers can create conditions where that process is more likely.

4.5 Inspiration without unicorns: why these stories are credible and useful

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Storytelling around failure carries a risk: presenting transformation as something only "special people" can do. Disasterpiece! actively resists this risk:

- the case studies offer structured learning: they highlight patterns, supports, and decisions rather than simply celebrating outcomes.
- the Digital Museum offers reachability: ordinary people, ordinary lives, ordinary supports.
- the podcast offers companionship and plurality: failure is not one story, but many; it is not one interpretation, but multiple voices.

The message is not: "be like them." The message is: you are not alone, and there are learnable ways to stay human in failure.

Below, we will focus on the intelligent and respectful use of stories and their educational power.

Box 3 –some key principles for youth workers

What do we mean by "storytelling"? In this manual, storytelling is the practice of giving lived experience a narrative form—selecting events, naming emotions, and building a meaning that can be shared with others. It is not "performing" a perfect story. It is a way to make experience speakable, and therefore easier to hold, understand, and integrate.

Stories can reduce shame, but they can also create exposure if used carelessly. A responsible use of stories in youth work includes a few non-negotiables:

- Consent and control: the narrator controls what is shared, how, and with whom.
- No forced disclosure: silence is legitimate participation.
- Right context and timing: not every story should be told in every setting; never rush "confession."
- No public exposure by default: avoid formats that reward oversharing or sensational pain.
- Containment and referral: if a story activates severe distress, youth workers should not carry it alone—activate appropriate support pathways.
- Used well, stories do not "solve" failure. They make it speakable and shared, which is often the first condition for generativity.

Box 4 – the narrative ecosystem: notes, links

- Case studies (IO2): a structured analysis of a failure-to-reorientation trajectory, designed to extract patterns and educational insights;
- Digital Museum of Disaster-pieces (IO3): short videos testimony by ordinary people, designed to reduce isolation and make generativity feel reachable;
- Fail-cast! (IO4): a conversational format that combines stories and concepts, offering companionship and multiple perspectives.

The whole narrative ecosystem is open-source and available here: www.disasterpiece.eu.

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CHAPTER V: DISASTERPIECE!, AN OPEN ECOSYSTEM FOR EUROPEAN YOUTH WORKERS

Introduction

Disasterpiece! was designed from the start not as a "one-off" project, but as an open educational ecosystem: a set of tools, stories, and guiding principles that can keep working after the funded period ends. The goal is continuity: allowing youth workers, educators, and young people to access, reuse, adapt, and improve the Toolkit over time—so that the conversation on failure does not close with the final report, but stays alive in real practice. This is why the project's outputs are made available in digital form and meant to remain usable after the end of the project.

5.1 Why an "open ecosystem"

Disasterpiece! responds to a problem that does not disappear when a project ends. Young people will continue to face destructive failures in education, work, and relationships, and youth workers will continue to need language, tools, and safe formats to accompany them. For this reason, Disasterpiece! was designed not as a closed set of "finished products," but as an open ecosystem: something meant to remain usable over time, to travel across contexts, and to grow through real-world use.

In practical terms, an "open ecosystem" means three things.

1. continuity and access: the project outputs are made available in a way that allows youth workers and organisations to use them beyond the project's duration—freely, digitally, and through a stable public hub—so they can become a shared educational resource rather than a temporary project archive.
2. scalability: the ecosystem is built to be expanded—more stories, more case studies, more users, more local adaptations—so that what started as a small-scale initiative can reach new groups, territories, and communities over time.
3. openness as a community practice: "open" does not only mean accessible; it also means replicable and improvable. The Toolkit is conceived as a set of resources that others can adapt, translate, and strengthen, while keeping its ethical backbone intact (do-no-harm, consent, dignity, and no stigma/no romanticisation).

This is the core idea of the ecosystem: the project offers a first structure, but its real strength emerges when youth workers and organisations make it theirs—using it, adapting it responsibly, and contributing back so the work can continue and grow.

5.3 How to contribute to the ecosystem?

An ecosystem grows when people share back—content, feedback, adaptations, and improvements—carefully and responsibly. This is also part of its European value: building common goods that are shared, transferable, and strengthened through cooperation, not owned by a single organisation or locked into one context.

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Disasterpiece! follows an open-source philosophy: materials are meant to circulate, be reused, and evolve over time. Contributing, therefore, means helping the Toolkit stay alive, relevant, and usable for different communities across Europe.

Here are the main ways to contribute:

- share feedback to improve the Toolkit over time: the Toolkit is designed to be refined through real-world use. If you test it in a workshop, a youth centre, a training course, or a one-to-one setting, your feedback becomes part of the ecosystem: what worked, what did not, what felt unclear, what felt risky, what should be added or simplified. This is not a secondary activity—it is how the Toolkit improves, becomes more culturally sensitive, and remains grounded in practice;
- propose new stories (video and/or podcast): the Digital Museum and Fail-Cast are designed as open spaces: they grow when new voices enter. The project deliberately values reachable examples—ordinary people, not superheroes—because this helps young people feel that generativity is possible in real life. Contributing a story means adding diversity of contexts, ages, cultures, and kinds of failure, always with consent, boundaries, and do-no-harm principles. The project website is the reference point for contacts and participation channels.
- propose new case studies or learning materials: case studies help identify recurring patterns and translate stories into educational learning. You can contribute by proposing a new case study, a new analysis sheet, or a training activity that uses the existing resources in a structured way. This strengthens the educational side of the ecosystem and helps other youth workers turn stories into practice—workshops, reflection tools, group formats, or guided questions;
- share local adaptations, translations, and formats: one of the most valuable contributions is contextualisation. You might adapt the Toolkit to your local language, youth culture, or organisational setting, or develop a local format (a workshop sequence, a "story circle," a training module). Sharing these adaptations helps the ecosystem travel: it allows others to learn from your context and improves European transferability while respecting cultural differences.

Contributing means viewing the Toolkit as a shared European resource, a common good that grows through cooperation. Giving feedback, sharing a story, proposing a case study or adapting a format means that you are not simply "using" Disasterpiece!, but contributing to building a living ecosystem of generativity that can continue beyond the project and beyond borders. Every contribution is valuable and can be sent to the project staff at www.disasterpiece.eu.

5.4 Safeguarding, quality, and open-source responsibility

An open ecosystem is powerful—but it also requires boundaries. Disasterpiece! works with a sensitive theme: vulnerability, shame, mental distress, and relational rupture. So openness must be paired with do-no-harm and a minimum quality standard.

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Below is a simple contribution checklist that reflects the project's ethical posture (no stigma, no romanticisation, no forced exposure) and protects both storytellers and audiences:

- consent, control, and dignity: the narrator must know where the story will appear (website, social media, podcast platforms). The narrator must have the right to withdraw or revise their contribution when possible. No story should be collected through pressure, persuasion, or group dynamics that reward exposure;
- privacy and vulnerability management: avoid identifying details when they could harm the narrator or others. Avoid stories that put someone else at risk (e.g., accusations, disclosures involving third parties) unless properly handled and anonymised. Treat pain as real: do not turn it into entertainment;
- no sensationalism, no "quick redemption": the project rejects both stigma ("you are a failure") and romanticisation ("failure is always a gift"). This applies to contributions too: avoid narratives that simplify suffering or promise miraculous outcomes. Keep the tone human, honest, and realistic: "one step at a time";
- referral awareness: if a contribution includes self-harm, suicide ideation, severe distress, or violence, it must be handled with extra care. Youth work is not therapy: part of responsibility is knowing when professional support is needed;
- quality as care: in an open-source ecosystem, quality is not perfection—it is respect. Clear audio, readable subtitles, and basic contextual information are forms of care for the listener and for the narrator. Making materials understandable is part of making them usable.

Finally, the project's follow-up plan links openness and improvement: the Toolkit is meant to remain available after the end of the project, and its development is supported by ongoing feedback mechanisms.

5.5 This is the end (?): a call to action

Across its chapters, the manual has built one coherent message. Chapter I named the challenge: failure is human, but in many contemporary contexts it becomes stigma, isolation, and identity collapse. Chapter II introduced the Disasterpiece! paradigm and methodology: educating through failure by creating safe spaces, supporting meaning-making, and rebuilding agency step by step—through youth workers as the first educational interface with young people at risk of destructive failure. Chapter III offered a research-informed journey across time and cultures, showing that failure is not "natural" in one fixed way, but shaped by narratives, institutions, and cultural stakes. Chapter IV placed stories at the core: case studies, the digital museum, and the podcast as educational devices that make failure speakable and generativity reachable. Chapter V closes by opening: the project is designed as an open ecosystem—scalable, replicable, and shareable—so that the work can continue beyond the project and across borders.

This manual is a draft (alpha) version: a first structured attempt to give language, tools, and stories to one of the most silenced educational issues of our time—failure. It is not meant to be the final

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word. It is meant to be a usable starting point: something that can already support youth workers in daily practice, while remaining open to improvement through testing, feedback, and collective learning. If you are planning to use the Toolkit, your experience matters. Please, share what worked, what didn't, what should be clarified, what should be added, and what felt ethically sensitive in your context. And remember that you can also contribute with new stories (even yours!), new case studies, and suggestions. In other words: don't just use Disasterpiece!—help it evolve.

To contribute to the open-source ecosystem, reach us through www.disasterpiece.eu or write directly to disasterpieceproject@gmail.com.

Thank you for reading,

the project staff.

A FINAL MESSAGE, FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.

We want to conclude this manual with the most special concept we wish to convey, the one that is closest to our hearts: if you feel crushed by the weight of failure, if you think you are about to hit a wall, if you believe there is no hope for you, write to us. Talk to us, to a friend, to an adult, to a youth worker. Ask for help. Let someone take care of you if you are unable to do so yourself at the moment. This effort, which may seem enormous, will change your life for the better. Do not give up, you are stronger than you think. You can get through this difficult time. We are here for you and we believe in you.

You can be truly happy, even if you have failed. In fact, you may find happiness through failure, which could help you truly understand who you are, who you are for, what you want and who you want to be with. Accept your failure and let it make your life better!

And if you have managed to overcome this failure, to overcome a real crisis, share your experience with us. You could save someone's life. **Really**.

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APPENDIX A – COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS of how COVID and post-COVID period echoes in young people's well-being

Introduction

These snapshots provide contextual signals, not exhaustive national reports. Their purpose is practical: **to capture how the COVID period**—and its long echoes—**intensified vulnerability in young people's mental, relational, and sometimes physical well-being**, often shrinking everyday social life and amplifying isolation. In this landscape, a setback can more easily become a verdict, and failure can turn destructive when it is lived in silence, shame, and disconnection.

For youth workers, these notes are meant to support two things: understanding (what young people have been navigating) and action (why low-threshold, relational educational responses matter). They are not included to "prove" the project, but to help situate it in reality—and to make the need for failure education clearer and more concrete.

Each snapshot highlights:

- main signals: what changed, what worsened, or what became more visible;
- youth-work implications: why these signals matter in daily educational practice;
- educational responses: what these trends suggest in terms of low-threshold, relational support (spaces to talk, shared language, boundaries, and referral awareness).

SNAPSHOT N.1 - SPAIN

The mental health landscape of Spanish youth post-COVID

In recent years, the mental health of young people in Spain has entered a critical phase that requires an urgent and structured response from multiple areas. According to the report "Mental health and youth equality in Spain" from the Reina Sofía Centre of Fad Juventud (2024), almost 60% of young people have experienced some type of psychological distress in the last year, and 17.4% declare suffering from it frequently. This data, which triples the figures recorded in 2017, reflects a sustained deterioration of youth emotional well-being that cannot be understood as an isolated phenomenon. Added to this is an even more alarming fact: 48.9% of the young people surveyed admitted to having had suicidal thoughts at some point in 2023, a proportion that reaches 60.4% among those in situations of severe material deprivation. Social and economic vulnerability not only conditions the vital opportunities of young people but is also having a direct impact on their mental health.

Unwanted loneliness, especially during adolescence, has emerged as one of the most decisive factors in this crisis. Psychologist Antonio Rial warns that more than 1.5 million young people between 12 and 18 years old are at risk of suffering emotional problems linked, in large part, to social isolation and the intensive use of social networks, which far from connecting, often exacerbate the feeling of emotional disconnection and distort self-perception. This isolation has been especially destructive during the pandemic, when social restrictions coincided with a critical stage for the development of identity and a sense of belonging. The closure of educational centres and the virtualisation of social relationships and learning not only limited access to education but also generated an environment of high emotional

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pressure. 46% of young people admitted not having been able to effectively assimilate knowledge during the course, which translated into frustration, insecurity, and loss of motivation.

Labor precariousness, for its part, has ended up shaping a desolate panorama. With a youth unemployment rate exceeding 25%, thousands of young people face a horizon without certainties or stability. As economist Santiago Niño Becerra points out, this absence of reasonable expectations is causing an increase in sick leaves due to disorders related to anxiety and depression. During the last year, 24% of young people were affected by a temporary employment regulation file (ERTE), which further aggravated their economic and emotional insecurity. Emancipation, as a symbol of independence and personal development, has become an increasingly distant goal: in Spain, the average age for leaving the family home is 29.5 years, one of the highest figures in Europe, and 64.5% of young people continue living with their parents, not by choice, but due to structural impossibility.

This generalized malaise is not only manifested in aggregated data but also in worrying clinical symptoms. Almost 20% of adolescents between 14 and 18 years old have taken anxiolytics or sleeping pills at some point, according to the Ministry of Health, which evidences a strong tendency to medicalise psychological suffering instead of addressing it from a preventive and integral perspective. The increase in hospital admissions for suicidal behaviours has been exponential: in 2021 alone, an increase of 250% was registered, and the average age of admission dropped from 17 to 15 years, which indicates that these behaviours are starting at increasingly younger ages.

Differences by gender are also revealing. Girls present higher anxiety levels and a greater propensity to verbalise their emotional distress, situating themselves at moderate levels of mental health, while boys tend to accumulate responses that reflect a greater risk of self-destructive behaviours. 52.3% of young people declare experiencing moderate or severe levels of anxiety, and one in five presents symptomatology considered severe. In addition, 54% affirm having difficulties related to a low mood, and nearly 50% admit feeling excessively worried, unable to relax or control their thoughts most of the time. This climate of generalised anguish is complemented by another revealing fact: 56.5% of young people affirm not feeling satisfied with their life.

Finally, the quality of the social environment acts as a protective or risk factor, as the case may be. Only 35% of young people perceive a high level of social support, while 22.5% consider it low. Territorial, educational, and class inequalities are also evident in this area: those who live in urban areas, have higher education, or belong to middle and high classes are those who declare greater access to emotional support networks. This gap reinforces the need for interventions that not only focus on the individual but also promote healthier, more cohesive, and emotionally sustainable study, work, and family coexistence environments.

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SNAPSHOT N.2 – CYPRUS

Mental health and resilience among young Cypriots

The COVID-19 was a profound effect, leaving the whole world paralysed due to the unexpected and unknown elements of experiencing a pandemic from the first time. Various studies that have been carried out show how much young people have been affected. This section will provide information on the experiences of young people in Cyprus in the pandemic while also further information on resilience in Cyprus. In a 2023, European Commission report it was shared that in Cyprus mental health and well-being was above the global average while still being in the top countries of young people expressing feelings of tension.

COVID19 and young people.

A youth barometer study that took place in 2021 gathered the perceptions of 1000 young people (14-35 years old) in Cyprus, sharing their feelings on the COVID-19 pandemic. Various of the participants expressed negative feelings about the pandemic while also confirming how the restrictive measures which included social isolation impacted the psychological state of the youth.

More specifically:

- Stress or anxiety was experiences by 46% of the participants,
- Insecurity and precarity was experiences by 28% of the participants,
- Concerned was expressed by 10% of the participants.

Additionally, to the above information, it was found that the lives of young people between the ages of 14 – 17 have been significantly affected while 38% expressed the need for psychological support.

Effects of COVID-19 in Students.

A different study conducted regarding the quality of life and psychological symptoms of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the emergence of feelings such as negativity, feelings of stress and tension, withdrawal and isolation as well as psychosomatic symptoms. Based on the above information, it is evident how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the participant's quality of life while also impacting their productivity and performance.

The disruption of the face-to-face teaching greatly impacted various students while their anxiety manifested in breathing difficulties and a general feeling of nervousness. All students were kept at home where all education related activities took place such as learning, teaching and evaluations, and highlighted by Demetriou et al (2021) that there were significant of differences in stress between students who adapted and who did not adapt within the distance learning context.

In a different study dedicated to the impact of the COVID19 measures on mental health, wellbeing & the role of resilience found that university students were one of the groups mostly affected and especially employed students. More specifically, anxiety was more prevalent in employed students as 41.5% expressed high anxiety levels compared to the 24.2% of their unemployed counterparts.

A general emergence of negative emotions was expressed by young people especially around death and an 'unknown rival' something that was immensely highlighted in the media allowing a rising in detrimental

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feelings due as they did not know where the danger was emerging from. According to the most significant elements contributing to their anxiety included: negative impact on personal or family financial situation, not staying with family during the lockdown, job loss of students, gender, age as well as no contact with friends.

Presence of support networks was highlighted by young people as a helpful element during the pandemic while individuals who had good relations with their family and were staying with them scored higher in terms of general health including both physical and psychological contexts. According to Demetriou et al. (2020) older aged participants were more psychologically resilient and more prone to adaptation than younger participants. Psychological resilience is extremely important in adapting to various unexpected situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic showing the importance of developing initiatives and tool to inspire and help young people to acclimatise within any challenge or obstacle, which is what the Disaster piece project aims to address and accomplish.

Challenges in Support services.
As mentioned above, support networks such as family and friends for some participants helped to easy the anxiety and general feeling of unsettledness during the pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the 'Line 1410', which is an online counselling helpline saw an increase of 40% in calls during the pandemic. However, young people expressed that they could not find information on support services or were not even aware which support services existed. The lack of information, various young people expressed the stigma as well as cultural norms as elements preventing them from accessing the support they might need, especially in regard to vulnerable populations revealing that unfortunately support was not accessible to everyone either due to physical or digital barriers.

Within the current system young people expressed obstacles in finding accessible support services that are also available and most importantly being aware of them. The stigmatisation and prejudice further create indecisiveness in deciding to reach out while services were described as not friendly towards the youth and/or engaging and neither accessible to vulnerable groups. Inconsistent access as well as lack of mental health education additionally exasperates the situation, highlighting the need for a systemic and multi-disciplinary approach. Equally worthy to mention are the experiences of young migrants and asylum seekers experiencing various challenges in regard to accessing of mental health services further exacerbating their situation

Resilience and mental health.
Even though a study was conducted with 500 young people (18-35 years old) in November and December 2021 on mental resilience in young people, there is limited information on the topic. Respondents expressed the following:

- Uncertainty for the future:86%
- Pressure/stress: 75%
- Stress/professional insecurity: 72%
- State of mental health wellbeing: 6.43

Through the study, various components were assessed such as perception of life, life control, relationship development, acceptance and positive thinking, orientations to objectives and solutions as well as self-sufficiency. An average of 7.19 expressed that they are optimistic towards the future and that they can handle difficulties, 7.41 expressed that they reflect and use their successes and failures from learning while 6.68 stated that they can adapt and easily accept elements that cannot be changed. It is evident that the above information shows definitely a space for improvement while also showing the need of mental resilience in young people.

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Conclusion.
This report provides significant findings in regard to the mental health state of young people in Cyprus as well as the need to provide support networks for every young people residing in the republic. Young people and especially university students phased the reality of the pandemic while being affected by it, due to the unknown circumstances and changes that took place. Resilience and adaptation are extremely important when facing such challenges while also having the appropriate support services and networks. Concluding, the need for the Disasterpiece project is evident more than ever, allowing young people to build resilience and navigate through difficult times.

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SNAPSHOT N.3 – ITALY

In Italy, institutional data suggest that the COVID period did not simply "cause" a temporary crisis; it left echoes that continue to shape how young people experience stress, belonging, and everyday functioning. These echoes are visible across three intertwined layers: mental well-being, relational life (and isolation risk), and physical routines. In a context like this, a setback (a poor grade, a rejection, a breakup, a job setback) can more easily become a personal verdict when young people lack buffers—shared spaces, stable routines, and trusted adults who can help them make meaning.

Mental well-being: a fragile equilibrium, with a gendered signal
ISTAT's World Mental Health Day materials highlight the national mental health index (SF-36), which captures dimensions such as anxiety, depression, psychological well-being, and emotional/behavioural control. The same source notes that the consequences of the pandemic had a stronger impact especially among the youngest girls.
This matters for Disasterpiece! because it confirms a key educational intuition: vulnerability is not evenly distributed, and certain groups can carry the weight of failure more intensely—particularly when shame and self-judgment become the dominant language.

"How healthy do I feel?": overall well-being in young adults, and the link to mental health

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In ISTAT's Rapporto annuale 2025 (chapter "Una società per tutte le età"), the long-term and generational reading of self-perceived good health shows two crucial points:

- the indicator is sensitive to the pandemic shock;
- among more recent generations there is a worsening of perceived good health among young people aged 20–34, with a drop particularly visible in the 30–34 age group (for example: 87.3% vs 82.2% when comparing cohorts at the same age), and the worsening is more marked among young women. ISTAT also states explicitly that this worsening of perceived health among young people is associated with a worsening in terms of mental health.

For youth work, this is not a "medical" detail: perceived health is a proxy for whether life feels manageable. When young people feel less well overall, they often have less capacity to metabolise rupture—so failure can more quickly become paralysis, withdrawal, or hopelessness.

Relational well-being: why isolation becomes a multiplier

COVID restrictions dramatically reduced in-person sociality—especially at ages where identity and belonging are built through peers and everyday contact. After the acute phase, many young people did not automatically "return" to the same relational fabric. At European level, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) has explicitly examined loneliness prevalence in the EU, including how risk factors associated with loneliness changed after the outbreak of the pandemic and how forced social isolation can have consequences for the population. Eurofound's analysis of COVID's impact on young people also points to effects on well-being alongside employment and education disruptions. For Disasterpiece!, the point is educational: isolation—physical and relational—is one of the strongest allies of destructive failure. When there is no safe listener, no peer resonance, no meaningful adult, the event (the failure) is more likely to fuse with identity ("I am the failure"). Youth work becomes crucial precisely here: to rebuild low-threshold relational spaces where failure becomes speakable before it becomes terminal.

Physical well-being and daily routines: activity, sedentariness, and "drop-out"

Physical routines are not only about fitness; they are also about stress regulation, self-efficacy, and belonging (teams, groups, habits, shared time). ISTAT's report on sport practice in Italy (data 2024; published 2025) offers several signals that are relevant for youth work:

- in 2024, 62.5% of the population aged 3+ did not practice sport; 32.8% were completely sedentary (no sport and no physical activity).
- 25.4% reported having stopped practicing sport they had done in the past.
- among 10–24-year-olds, girls abandon sport more than boys (21.6% vs 15.1%) and about one year earlier (14 vs 15).

These data do not "prove" a psychological mechanism, but they do help describe a post-COVID context where routines, group belonging, and embodied regulation can weaken—especially in adolescence. When protective routines collapse, vulnerability to shame, anxiety, and withdrawal tends to rise.

Services and responsibility: youth work is not therapy, but it is often the first reachable interface

Finally, the national mental health system context matters. The Italian Ministry of Health publishes the annual Rapporto Salute Mentale (SISM), providing an official view of service activity and resources (for adults, with national monitoring).

This is relevant for Disasterpiece!'s ethics: youth work is not therapy, but it must be referral-aware. When distress is severe or safety is at risk, educational accompaniment should activate professional support rather than carrying the burden alone.

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APPENDIX B – SELF CARE PRACTICES FOR YOUTH WORKERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

This list provides some self-care tips that can be applied to everyday life. Self-care can be perceived differently based on each individual, so this is just a list of practices that might inspire you! Please note that this is by no means professional help and please seek out to a professional when you feel that your mental health is being compromised!

1. Declutter your space

The questions below will allow you to create a space that is tailored to you and your needs:

- What is your favourite thing about your physical space?
- What would you like to change in your physical space?
- What type of you have a lot of?
- Do you have any habits of accumulation? Are they reflecting any of your habits?
- What would you like to simplify in your life?
- What do you really need?
- What feelings does your physical space create to you?

2. Tune in with Nature

It's extremely important to be tuned in with your senses and in nature as it helps you to be mindful. These questions will help you to be mindful and unravel to you the beauty of changing seasons.

- How is the weather? Pay attention to elements such as water, sun or any other conditions?
- How is the light?
- What are the emerging plants and flowers?
- Which animals did you notice within these few days?
- What are the seasonal ingredients/colours/sounds/smells?
- What are your feelings and your mood?
- How are your energy levels?

3. Acceptance

Acceptance is a decision consisting of various elements such as the decision to detach from your thoughts, recognising what is happening and realise that is an opportunity for a new beginning

- The Decision: I will not allow myself to get drawn away by a flurry of thoughts. At the moment, I am_____
- You can state what you can experience with your senses
- Recognition: This is what is occurring at the moment or what just occurred. The current facts are_____
- You can state the facts for a clearer perspective
- New beginning: I acknowledge that this is a new start for me and I will start by _____

Acceptance doesn't always indicate an easy path so it's important to take care of yourself, some ways that you can do that include:

- Mind: Talk with a person close to you, get involved in activities that bring you joy.
- Body: Go for a walk in nature, nourish yourself in any way that feels right
- Spirit: Mediate or engage in a relaxing activity, have a gratitude list, etc.

4. Create new challenges and hobbies

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a. Clarify what is your challenge
b. Why is important for you to do this challenge?
c. What is a tiny step that you can do towards this challenge
d. What is your related long – term goal?

5. **Create a journal which can include**
   a. Monthly calendar
   b. Monthly goal
   c. Habit tracker
   d. Gratitude list
   e. Daily or weekly to-do list

6. **Create a bedtime ritual**
   a. Get off your phone 1 hour before sleep
   b. Wash your face at the end of the day
   c. Have a communication black out

7. **Add to your calendar a 5 -minute lunch meditation**

8. **Do a digital detox**
   a. Download a detox app
   b. Monitor your usage
   c. Leave your phone alone for an hour
   d. Adjust your homescreen
   e. Mute your notifications
   f. Do not use your phone during mealtimes

9. **Take care of yourself**
   a. Limit your caffeine
   b. Have a sleeping routine
   c. Engage in breathing techniques and awareness.

10. **Activities for self-love**
    a. Be kind to yourself
    b. Don't be strict with yourself
    c. Note down times when you felt good about yourself
    d. Create a list with your compliments
    e. Establish your boundaries

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ANNEX 1 – A FOCUS ON THE FEAR OF FAILURE.

a. *Some key points, to start from:*
   - The Normality of Failure: failure is not a temporary interruption of the system but a continuous and normal condition of system operation. It is more common than success and is embedded in the way systems operate.
   - The Need for Conceptualization: a better conceptualization of failure is required to clearly understand what it means, how it is generated, reproduced, and terminated as a normal part of system functioning.
   - Interdisciplinarity: the field of failure studies is emerging and interdisciplinary, reflecting social trends such as the instability of winner-takes-all systems, the omnipresence of the new spirit of capitalism, metrics-based forms of governmentality, platformization, and changing cultural attitudes towards failure.
   - Moral Recognition: failure is a mundane fact endowed with moral recognition, and organizations, art fields, technological complexes, governance regimes, and alternative economies must grapple with the normality of failure in an endogenous, ubiquitous, and morally legitimate sense.

b. *The psychological roots of fear failure*

Baker presents a theory of the development of fear of failure as the result of pathological family relations in which the child's failure comes to play an important function. The parent's role is to provide the child with empathic encouragement so as to minimise the child's frustrations and maximise self-esteem. Parents who cannot accept their child's shortcomings or who are highly critical will rear a child with little self-esteem and unrealistic personal standards. This child will have an unrealistic or grandiose sense of self. The combination of low self-esteem and high demands for performance results in failure or narcissistic injury. Poor self-esteem causes the child to search for external resources of evaluation. Any failure experienced by such a narcissistically vulnerable child will result in either rage or avoidance. Rather than engage in the repeated effort or trial and error necessary for academic achievement, the child begins to avoid studying and instead engages in activities with more pleasurable outcomes. By not studying, the grandiose self is kept intact. "If an exam is flunked, it is only due to lack of study, not due to the lack of ability: Furthermore, the child avoids studying to prevent competition and thus direct comparison with the parent.

c. *Gender difference*

Theorists recognise the prevalence of fear of failure among women and focus on origins of this fear specifically from the perspective of female development. According to Kanefield, conflicts about achievement and fear of failure are prevalent in girls whose mothers are ambivalent about their daughter's independence. The mother in this case needs the presence of a daughter to maintain her sense of adequacy, and she may feel intensely threatened as her daughter matures and this obviates the need for a protective caretaker. Rather than respond to her own maturity with pleasure, the girl associates mastery with anxiety, fear of abandonment, loss of love, or retaliation. Women's undermining of success as a solution to fears of retaliation by the mother has been termed masochism by psychodynamic theorists (Freud, Horney, Kanefield) "Fear of failure may be a form of masochism, in that the constant sense of inadequacy which underlines fear of failure is, in one sense, a perpetuation of pain and suffering" The masochist pursues defeat rather than pleasure and is"...consumed by self-centered suffering" (Yuen & Depper) Rather than accomplish success and thus symbolically risk surpassing their mothers, women devalue success or perceive themselves as worthless. The alternative involves triumphing over parents with terror about retaliation and loss of affiliation.

In response to these social and psychological dilemmas, a woman takes the only resource: she sabotages her accomplishments, devalues or disowns her achievements, or views herself as inadequate in spite of her activities to the contrary. Thus, she assuages her guilt for abandoning her mother, extricates herself from

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responsibility for her mother's rage, envy, or emptiness, excuses her mother's inappropriate dependency, and perpetuates the masquerade that she lacks what is essential for independent achievements. She remains loyal to her mother, but sacrifices self-esteem.

In contrast, boys are encouraged to enter into rivalry with their fathers in order to disidentify with their mothers. Consequently, Kanefield argues that males do not have the fears of competition that females do. Women's conflicts about achievement have also been interpreted as penis envy (Chessick, Kanefield; 1985). This is not actual wish for a penis but instead the desire for power, status and independence awarded to men in our society. Given the devaluation of women in our culture and the restrictions and limitations placed on them, this results in women's denigration of their accomplishments, withdrawal from competition, work inhibitions and feelings of fraudulence in their achievements (Kanefield). It will also result in women's lowered self-esteem and in oversensitivity to the opinions of others rather than personal values. (Chehrazi, 1984).

Notman, Zilbacj, Baker-Miller and Nadelson, describe how women's self-esteem is tied to relations with others. Self-esteem is thus enhanced when women feel connected to others and receive feedback about such connections. In contrast, men's self-esteem is characteristically tied to feelings of personal accomplishment. Since our society regards achievement as an individual rather than a collective attribute, men are less likely to experience achievement-related conflicts than are woman.

Kanefield, has similarly described boys as wishing to achieve, motivated by their desire to separate from the mother. Girls on the other hand, are fearful of achieving because of threats of isolation, and consequently they engage in self-defeating behaviours in order to maintain interpersonal relationships.

d. Intervention

Baker emphasises the need to select an appropriate treatment for fear of failure, rather than focusing on improved academic performance or successful career, the therapist should investigate development factors, particularly those related to the client's poor self-esteem. Because of the origins of poor self esteem and lack of separation from parents in the periodic years, the prognosis for recovery is not considered good. Furthermore, the clients' difficult ambivalent relationships with the parents can result in poor transference during the therapeutic process, including rage, lack of interest in therapy, and increased failure in school or career. This in turn may result in the therapist feeling helpless, frustrated, and antagonistic toward the client.

Stein and Bailey reviewed the literature on achievement motivation in order to identify factors specific to women's pattern of achievement. First, they argue that leadership and intelligence are qualities that women are not socialised to value as much as men.

In fact, females place greater value on and have higher personal standards of performance tasks, that are labeled feminine or neutral rather than masculine. Specifically, social skill and avoidance of social rejection are sources of achievement motivation for females. For example:

Females are more likely to seek contact during a failure situation than are boys. Women competing against others report less confidence, lower goals and less expectancies for success than women working alone. In contrast, there are no significant differences on these variables between men and working alone and men competing against others. In sociological studies of coalition forming males tend to use "exploitative" strategies such as playing competitively, whereas females use "accommodative" strategies (such as displaying concern for the welfare of others.

e. Mehrabian Achievement Scales

The Mehrabian Achievement Scales (Mehrabian, 1968) are separate male and female scales of achievement. The scales are designed to distinguish high achievers, who have a stronger motive to achieve than to avoid failure, from low achievers, who have a stronger motive to avoid failure than to achieve. The items are written

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such that response to an item indicates a behavioral disposition which has been found to be characteristic of high or low achievers (e.g., if high achievers have been found to prefer X to Y, then an item is worded as, "I'd rather do X than Y"). Correlation data provide validation for the scales and reliability results are conservative. (APA PsycTests Database Record (c) 2019 APA, all rights reserved).

Nearly 30 years ago, Malpas and Wickham (1995) observed that sociologists get it wrong when viewing failure as "a temporary breakdown within the system" (p. 38). Failure is neither temporary, nor is it a breakdown. It is a continuous state of normal working of the system*: deficio ergo sum* is the paradigmatic expression of failure. Failure is not just normal, it is also far more common than success and only some kind of bias — conceptual, epistemic, cognitive, or ideological — may obscure this basic fact. Success is easy to observe, while failure require an extra-effort. We easily see successful start-uppers but we do not see so clearly the entire population of contenders and the myriad of losses covering the process that produces a handful of winners. Only about one in 1,000 turtles survive to adulthood. Hatchlings die of dehydration if they do not make it to the ocean fast enough, not to speak of animals of prey killing them. For turtles, failure is normal in a Durkheimian sense: it is the way the system they live in works as such.

These basic considerations have been neglected for too long in the analysis of failure, which focused on various sub-topics unified by the belief that failure is the exception, not the rule, of the way things work in a continuous and smooth way. From this presumption, the analysis of failure alternatively underlined the "unexpected consequences" of failure, the "intelligence" of failure (Sitkin, 1992), or its role as a change-maker (Ellis & Davidi, 2005) that governs action. The closest look at the normality of failure is to be found in organizational studies (Perrow, 1999; Vaughan, 1996), where failure is conceived as the consequence of the normal way of working of the system. Still, even in these precursor studies, failure was conceived as a breakdown, a disaster, or a rupture. It was not the ubiquitous condition of the system. To include the ubiquity of failure, the concept of permanently failing organizations first developed by Meyer and Zucker (1986) is key. The study asserted that the continued survival of underperforming firms is contingent on serving the interests of certain internal and external actors who have come to replace the purely economic interests of shareholders and owners (Rao, 1990). Still, the source of the "permanent failure" was found in the surrounding organizational field and not in the way the organizational system works per se. A close conception was later developed by Schrank and Whitford (2011) within the framework of the network failures, framed as continuous, rather than discrete, outcomes.

More recently, social sciences have been paying a closer attention to failure, to its manifestations in the contemporary world and to the modalities of dealing with it both in theory and in practice (Mica et al., 2023a; 2023b). An emergent and interdisciplinary field of analysis has been consolidating under the label of failure studies and the pervasive anti-failure bias denounced by Malpas and Wickham is vanishing. This growing and quickly consolidating interest for failure is due to a number of factors, such as:

- the "failure of excellence", namely the shaky foundations of a winners-take-all society where few super-champions get the largest part of the resources/rewards (Cook & Frank, 2010);
- the ubiquity of the "new spirit of capitalism", where personal identity of agents and their economic performance are intertwined in an "entrepreneurial" project-based logic (Boltanski & Chiappello, 2005);
- the growing interest in the analysis of governmentality effects and the critical assessment of metric-based power (Beer, 2016);
- the diffusion of creative industries and performance-based jobs (Elberse, 2013);
- the narrowing of good jobs and the provision and platformization of labor markets (Kalleberg, 2016);
- and the decline of the social stigma against failure, namely the "mundanization" of failure and the growth of failure tolerance (Brendan & Hughes, 2006).

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Thanks to these and perhaps other factors, the failure of imagination in the social sciences concerning the conception of failure is evaporating. Failure is no more a temporary breakdown https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/18960 2 Introduction Sociologica. V.17 N.3 (2023) of the system. It is neither a rare phenomena, nor is it the permanent but unintended outcome of a complex set of practices and conventions of a variety of actors from within and outside the organization. Failure is embedded in the way the system ordinarily works per se. It is not a dichotomous variable confined in a precise sector of field and it manifests ordinarily in a nuance of discrete states at multiple levels.

Moreover — from the discursive and symbolic viewpoint — it is a mundane fact endowed with moral recognition. Accordingly, organizations, artistic fields, big-tech complex, governance regimes and even the "alternative" economies in the production and distribution of goods and services need to deal with the normality of failure in a threefold sense; failure is endogenously normal, ubiquitous, and morally legitimate.

The normality of failure calls for a better conceptualization of it, for there is a resounding recognition that a clear understanding of failure remains elusive. What is needed is a clearer thinking about what failure really means, a better understanding of the mechanisms that generate, reproduce and terminate it as a normal way of working of the system. The essays collected for this symposium offer fresh insights on the analysis of failure from this perspective.

The symposium opens with the essay by Diane Vaughan (2023), a key scholar of organizational failure studies. Vaughan's essay assumes that failures and harmful outcomes are not restricted to a particular type of organizational field, form, or function. She looks at the failures of large complex socio-technical systems through a cross-case comparison of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) Space Shuttle Program and the Federal Aviation Administration's National Airspace System (NAS).

The second essay, by Janet A. Vertesi and danah boyd (2023), starts from a cognitive twist: failure may not be just an unintended consequence, on the contrary it can be a purposeful agency of players who restrict sociomaterial resources to push their respective systems toward failure. The aim is reconfiguring the resulting agencies along politically expedient lines to the brink of failure through the strategic withholding of resources.

The third essay, by Martin Jones (2023), deals with the failures of governance and metagovernance. It starts from the concept of spaces of collibration, taken initially from the work of Andrew Dunsire and developed by Bob Jessop, to critically get behind how uneven development and state intervention in sub-national economic development is managed by creating an unstable equilibrium of compromise, which in turn helps to the explain the governance of failure.

The fourth essay, by Adriana Mica, Mikołaj Pawlak, and Paweł Kubicki (2023b), explores how new meanings of policy failures enact new expectations in relation to policymaking. The redefinition of failure in terms of ignoranceand social injusticeentails oppression risks and social justice costs. This happens, as they show, especially on the terrain of politicized and polarized policymaking, where the introduction of new changes in the name of emancipation may occur to the detriment of social groups that do not have a dominant position.

The fifth contribution is from Rachel Skaggs (2023) and it is built on the concept of kaleidoscopic failure made of thousands of points of potential for failure along a number of relevant dimensions. Skaggs shows how failure is a normal reality in the arts, yet it is felt individually and can lead artists to self-doubt, low motivation, blocks in creativity, or to them exiting the field altogether.

Bernd Bonfert (2023), in the sixth essay, considers the causes, dynamics, and intensity of network failure as the partial dysfunctions and underperformance in alternative food networks, as well as the inability to realize their collaborative potential. In a sense, it matches an alternative conceptualization of failure to the failure of an alternative way of organizing food production and distribution.

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Finally, Filippo Barbera and Ian Rees Jones (2023) review different understandings of moral economy and their applications across different political, economic, and cultural contexts. Following this, they examine the literature on failure in different spaces including failure of markets, valuation regimes, innovations, markets, governance, policy and democratic https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/18960 3 Introduction Sociologica. V.17 N.3 (2023) experimentalism. The essay argues that a moral economy of failure needs to be built on sociohistorical understandings of failure in different contexts, cultures, and environments.

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Generative Failure Manifesto

Young people, youth workers, researchers, and experts collaborated in drafting this Manifesto, which is open source: anyone can contribute to its evolution, because it belongs to everyone, without exception. It contains some fundamental principles for learning how to deal with failure, transforming it into an opportunity for rebirth

- You are not your failure: what happened is not who you are
- Give yourself time, you need it: if everything seems too much right now, it doesn't mean you can't handle it
- Talk openly about your failure: silence makes it heavier, talking about it makes it manageable
- One step at a time: do the next feasible thing, then the next, and you'll find yourself walking again
- Trust in relationships: don't isolate yourself, turn to someone you trust
- Accept failure: don't run away, don't avoid it, and don't look for quick, false solutions that you may regret
- Everyone fails, you are not a bad exception: you are imperfect, you are human
- Take care of yourself: be kind to yourself, do not condemn yourself without appeal if you have made a mistake
- If you feel overwhelmed by negative thoughts, seek professional help immediately: you do not have to face this alone, do not be a hero

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DISASTERPIECE

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