

No contest

Don't turn your buds into rivals. Come exam time, mutual aid will get you through.

By SIBYLLE PREUSCHAT

As those wistful summer evenings fade into memory, you suddenly find yourself back on campus, deep in the business of preparing for the rest of your life. The casual warm-weather you is being reborn as a grade-hungry monster. After all, there are only so many spots in law school or that post-grad drama program. Competition is an educational tradition.

Anthropologists have concluded that besting behaviour is learned, and especially valued in North America. Many other societies value cooperation above all, and as a result they're more relaxed. How to survive and thrive in our particular weirdness?

For starters, don't treat other students as the enemy. Instead, focus on building the supportive networks that will help you do your own best work. Develop fallback plans for the times when you don't achieve what you're working for.

And carefully monitor your self-talk when you're panicking. You're likely fuelling your terror with nasty, demeaning stuff or impossible expectations. It can also help to remember that if you think coming first or last says everything about you, as in "I'm great" or "I'm a failure," you're suffering from an illusion. No one's life and abilities are that simply summed up.

Finally, remember, not absolutely everything in your life is in your own hands. Many factors outside your control can often determine who gets what prize.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

"If you focus on the short-term outlook, failures tend to feel

particularly bad. If you stretch out (the time-frame,) then failures often become synonymous with learning. And learning is a success. Success isn't something you can go at directly. It's a by-product of the stuff you do, the way you are. If you're going after the grades, that's one way of being. Another way is becoming knowledgeable, coming from a place where you want to know the material. Have the word "yes" in your heart. That's about inclusion, camaraderie, abundance. There's not a limited amount of success in the world. On any individual item a person can be refuted, but in the broader sense there is no limit."

BARRY ZWEIBEL, business/ personal life coach, Chicago

"Take every cycle of schoolwork, athletic competition, social interaction seriously on its own terms, and consider it an experiment from which you learn. You might come out of an exam or competition and say, 'Against what I set for myself I did well or not so well. And against a class or global standard I did well or not so well.' Of those two standards, you've got to begin with your personal standards, or you'll go nuts. In North American athletics the dominant framework is zero sum: if I win, you lose. Another approach I value is to regard competition as a form of collective improvisation. The best athletic competitions, graduate seminars, tutorials, conversations are like that. One person stimulates another, there's a giving back and forth that is really electrifying and enlightening.'

BRUCE KIDD, dean, faculty of physical education and health, University of Toronto

"The game as we go through life is to continually refine our definition of what we mean by success and not to accept unthinkingly definitions thrust on us from elsewhere. The irony is that so often the winner is really the loser, because often top' jobs end up nothing like what the person expected. (When you win) remember you're still a human being with all the usual flaws and failings. You can build up the impression that you're a genius because everyone is politely agreeing with you on the surface. You have to keep reminding yourself that that isn't the case."

HUGH GUNZ, *professor of organizational behaviour, specialist in career management, Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto*

"There is no end to our competitiveness, potentially, even if we get to the top of everything. We need to find happiness from a different source. For all professions, I think the most important attitude we can have is one of cherishing others, of viewing others as precious and important. From that, compassion will arise, and we will naturally want to increase our knowledge to cherish others. Without your peers there competing (academically) you would never develop such a high-quality understanding or study so carefully. In this way, clear understanding is actually coming through others."

KELSANG ATISHA , *Buddhist monk and teacher, Chandrakirti Buddhist Centre*

"Set goals for yourself that have to do with the process rather than the outcome. Instead of focusing on getting a top grade, ask, 'What would I need to do to maximize my chances of obtaining that grade?' One of the most challenging pieces about winning, particularly for people who are very sensitive to others, is a concern that if you win someone else loses. It's useful to come back to doing the best you can – and if possible, not at the expense of others. If this particular thing is at others' expense, think, 'What are other situations where I can give back?'"

KATE HAYS , *PhD, registered sports and clinical psychologist, author, Move Your Body, Tone Your Mood*



NOW Magazine Online Edition, VOL. 23 NO. 2

Sep 10 - 16, 2003

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