There are good reasons to believe that the whole notion of ‘seeking happiness’ is flawed to begin with. For one thing, who says happiness is a valid goal in the first place? Religions have never placed much explicit emphasis on it, at least as far as this world is concerned; philosophers have certainly not been unanimous in endorsing it, either. And any evolutionary psychologist will tell you that evolution has little interest in your being happy, beyond trying to make sure that you’re not so listless or miserable that you lose the will to reproduce.

Even assuming happiness to be a worthy target, though, a worse pitfall awaits, which is that aiming for it seems to reduce your chances of ever attaining it. ‘Ask yourself whether you are happy,’ observed the philosopher John Stuart Mill, ‘and you cease to be so.’ At best, it would appear, happiness can only be glimpsed out of the corner of an eye, not stared at directly. (We tend to remember having been happy in the past much more frequently than we are conscious of being happy in the present.) Making matters worse still, what happiness actually is feels impossible to define in words; even supposing you could do so, you’d presumably end up with as many different definitions as there are people on the planet. All of which means it’s tempting to conclude that ‘how can we be happy?’ is simply the wrong question – that we might as well resign ourselves to never finding the answer, and get on with something more productive instead.

But could there be a third possibility, besides the futile effort to pursue solutions that never seem to work, on the one hand, and just giving up, on the other? After several years reporting on the field of psychology as a journalist, it finally dawned on me that there might be. I began to realise that something united all those psychologists and philosophers – and even the occasional self-help guru – whose ideas seemed actually to hold water. The startling conclusion at which they had all arrived, in different ways, was this: that the effort to try to
feel happy is often precisely the thing that makes us miserable. And that it is our constant efforts to eliminate the negative – insecurity, uncertainty, failure, or sadness – that is what causes us to feel so insecure, anxious, uncertain, or unhappy. They didn’t see this conclusion as depressing, though. Instead, they argued that it pointed to an alternative approach, a ‘negative path’ to happiness, that entailed taking a radically different stance towards those things that most of us spend our lives trying hard to avoid.

Failure, and our fraught relationship with it...is the thing that the culture of positive thinking strives at all costs to avoid, so it should come as little surprise that it should be so central to an alternative approach to happiness. The Stoic technique of negative visualisation is, precisely, about turning towards the possibility of failure. The critics of goalsetting are effectively proposing a new attitude towards failure, too, since an improvisational, trial-and-error approach necessarily entails being frequently willing to fail. The spiritual ruminations of Eckhart Tolle and Alan Watts, meanwhile, point to an even deeper kind of failure: the ultimate – and ultimately liberating – failure of the ego’s efforts to maintain its separation and security.

But it is also worth considering the subject of failure directly, in order to see how the desperate efforts of the ‘cult of optimism’ to avoid it are so often counterproductive, and how we might be better off learning to embrace it. The first reason to turn towards failure is that our efforts not to think about failure leave us with a severely distorted understanding of what it takes to be successful. The second is that an openness to the emotional experience of failure can be a stepping-stone to a much richer kind of happiness than can be achieved by focusing only on success. It has become fashionable, in some circles, to insist upon the importance of ‘embracing failure’: no autobiography of a high-profile entrepreneur or politician or inventor is complete without several passages in which the author attributes his or her success to a willingness to fail. (Sir Richard Branson is a repeat offender in this regard.) But truly embracing failure entails a shift in perspective far greater than what most such figures mean when they pay lip-service to the notion. And in any case, heeding only the advice of the successful is a big part of the problem.

Our resistance to thinking about failure is especially curious in light of the fact that failure is so ubiquitous. ‘Failure is the distinguishing feature of corporate life,’ writes the economist Paul Ormerod, at the start of his book Why
Most Things Fail, but in this sense corporate life is merely a microcosm of the whole of life. Evolution itself is driven by failure; we think of it as a matter of survival and adaptation, but it makes equal sense to think of it as a matter of not surviving and not adapting. Or perhaps more sense: of all the species that have ever existed, after all, fewer than 1 per cent of them survive today. The others failed. On an individual level, too, no matter how much success you may experience in life, your eventual story – no offence intended – will be one of failure. Your bodily organs will fail, and you’ll die.

Yet though failure is ubiquitous, psychologists have long recognised that we find this notion appalling, and that we will go to enormous lengths to avoid thinking about it. At its pathological extreme, this fear of failure is known as ‘kakorrhaphiophobia’, the symptoms of which can include heart palpitations, hyperventilation and dizziness. Few of us suffer so acutely. But as we’ll see, this may only be because we are so naturally skilled at ‘editing out’ our failures, in order to retain a memory of our actions that is vastly more flattering than the reality. Like product managers with failures stuffed into a bedroom closet, we will do anything to tell a success-based story of our lives. This leads, among other consequences, to the entertaining psychological phenomenon known as ‘illusory superiority’. This mental glitch explains why, for example, the vast majority of people tell researchers that they consider themselves to be in the top 50 per cent of safe drivers – even though they couldn’t possibly all be.

Like many commentators concerned about our reluctance to confront failure, Robert McMath likes to argue that we should behave ‘more like scientists’. The implication is that scientists, unlike the rest of us, must by necessity learn to become more comfortable with failure. Professional scientists, not surprisingly, tend to share this flattering view. The goal of every good scientist is discovering the truth, so he can’t be picky about whether the results of his experiments confirm or undermine his hypotheses. Scientific research involves devising a hypothesis, testing it, and then dealing with whatever results you obtain – even if they ruin your hopes of a prize-winning breakthrough. Right? Actually, maybe not. A fascinating series of studies of working scientists, conducted by the Irish-born researcher Kevin Dunbar, presents a very different picture – and confirms just how deeply and universally human the tendency to avoid confronting failure really is. Scientists, it transpires, may be just as bad as everyone else.

Dunbar negotiated access to four leading molecular biology laboratories, and began observing the work that was conducted there. For months, he
videotaped interviews and recorded the weekly lab meetings at which researchers discussed their findings. (This kind of examination of what scientists do on a day-to-day basis is rare, not least because scientists themselves frequently dismiss it as irrelevant.) Dunbar’s first discovery was that the researchers encountered failure all the time. ‘If you’re a scientist and you’re doing an experiment,’ he said later, ‘about half the experiments that you do actually turn out wrong.’ For whatever reason – faulty procedures, or a flawed hypothesis – the results obtained did not mesh with the conclusions towards which the scientists believed they were advancing. As one of Dunbar’s subjects put it in a meeting, describing yet another failure: ‘I saw the results, and I wanted to throw myself off a bridge.’

Things got more interesting when Dunbar examined how the researchers responded to this deluge of failure. As he explained in an interview with Wired magazine, their reactions followed a predictable sequence. First, a scientist would blame his equipment or techniques – suspecting that a measuring device must be malfunctioning, or that he himself had made a stupid mistake. If the problem couldn’t be explained away so easily, the researcher would then repeat the experiment, sometimes several times, in hopes that the anomaly would vanish. And if that didn’t work, he would often simply put the experiment aside. Laboratories are busy places; scientists are overworked; there are vastly more potential avenues for research than could ever be pursued, and so researchers have to make choices about what they will focus on next. Consistently, Kevin Dunbar found, they chose to neglect their inexplicable results, focusing on their successes and avoiding dwelling upon their failures.

Using brain imaging, Dunbar has examined the part of the human brain that seems most implicated in screening out failure: the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, or DLPFC. This region plays a crucial role in filtering out irrelevant or unwanted incoming information, which is essential if you want to concentrate, say, on a single conversation at a noisy cocktail party. (People with damaged DLPFCs experience difficulty with such tasks.) But a similar filtering process appears to be triggered when we are presented with information that violates our expectations, even when it is far from irrelevant. In one experiment, Dunbar showed videos to an audience of physics students in which two objects of different sizes, dropped from the top of a tower, appeared to behave in defiance of the laws of gravity: they fell at different speeds. Physics students know that’s not what really happens, and their DLPFCs lit up – much more so than
was the case in viewers of the videos who weren’t so familiar with this law of physics. Dunbar’s hunch is that the physics students’ brains were reacting to the unwanted, clearly inexplicable information by attempting to delete it from their awareness.

Back in Ann Arbor, at the museum of failed products, it wasn’t hard to imagine how a similar aversion to confronting failure might have been responsible for the very existence of many of the products lining its shelves. Each one must have made it through a series of meetings at which nobody realised that the product was doomed. Perhaps nobody wanted to contemplate the prospect of failure; perhaps someone did, but didn’t want to bring it up for discussion. Even if the product’s likely failure was recognised, Robert McMath explained, those responsible for marketing it might well have responded by ploughing more money into it. This is a common reaction when a product looks like it’s going to be a lemon, since with a big enough marketing spend, a marketing manager can at least guarantee a few sales, sparing the company total humiliation. By the time reality sets in, McMath notes in What Were They Thinking?, it is quite possible that ‘the executives will have been promoted to another brand, or recruited by another company’. Thanks to a collective unwillingness to face up to failure, more money will have been invested in the doomed product, and little energy will have been dedicated to examining what went wrong. Everyone involved will have conspired – perhaps without realising what they’re doing – never to think or speak of it again.