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# Normalizing Rejection

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**Abstract:** Getting turned down for grant funding or having a manuscript rejected is an uncomfortable but not unusual occurrence during the course of a nurse researcher's professional life. Rejection can evoke an emotional response akin to the grieving process that can slow or even undermine productivity. Only by "normalizing" rejection, that is, by accepting it as an integral part of the scientific process, can researchers more quickly overcome negative emotions and instead use rejection to refine and advance their scientific programs. This article provides practical advice for coming to emotional terms with rejection and delineates methods for working constructively to address reviewer comments.

Keywords: publications, financing, organized, peer review research

One of the hallmarks of a nurse researcher's career is generating knowledge through research to improve patient health and quality of life. Central components of the research process include applying for grants and submitting papers for publication. Although these activities can be extremely rewarding, they also can be extremely challenging because grants do not always get funded and

manuscripts do not always get accepted. Even the most accomplished researchers will experience rejection at one time or another. Rejection is a fact of scientific life (Wang, 2014).

To ensure continued professional development and future success, it is critical that researchers learn to “normalize” rejection—to accept it as an essential part of the scientific process. To do this, researchers must overcome the negative emotions that they experience when they receive rejections. In this Editorial Board Special Article, our board members share their wisdom and real-life experiences on dealing constructively with rejection and using it to build a stronger, more successful research program. Their advice is summarized in Table 1.

### **Cindy M. Anderson (The Ohio State University)**

“Normalizing rejection” is simultaneously an oxymoron and a monumental achievement in those who actualize it. It is absolutely critical to avoid understating the importance of such an achievement as it often is the “make or break” characteristic that distinguishes those who go on to be successful in research and those who seek success elsewhere. The idea of rejection conjures unpleasant feelings in most people. From the outset, humans seek bonding and attachment. Praise from parents, teachers, and peers contributes to positive self-esteem and value during development and is a highly sought after response. As adults, we continue to seek, and in fact expect, acceptance. For those who enter a scientific career, there is significant development during academic preparation. As students, the idea that assignments or other scholarly products will receive critical analysis from faculty and peers is generally expected and inherent in the process of evaluation and grading. In fact, students successfully completing a PhD will often take a step back and gain increased appreciation for the feedback received during their scholarly development, even if it was not always positive. As an early career researcher, the adoption of select characteristics and approaches of the mentor are often adopted by the mentee.

As early career researchers seek independence, they have a sense of urgency to become productive, the hallmark of a successful researcher and requirement for career development. There are papers

to publish (high impact, of course) and grants to submit (funded, naturally), often as the first products completed without significant mentor input and guidance. While it is widely known not to expect a paper to be accepted or major grant funded on first submission (especially for a novice investigator), the response from reviewers that point out areas for improvement may be difficult to accept, stimulating those uncomfortable feelings of rejection. It is at this point that the "normalization" process begins. For those who perceive rejection, there is an acceptable period for the "pity party," the time where the comments go in the drawer, and there are the typical responses of disbelief and anger. After a short time, the party ends when acceptance sets in and the time to move forward arrives. At that time, there are two choices: resiliency in the face of perceived rejection or defeat. Success in the face of rejection includes a renewed vigor in addressing what can be improved, seeking counsel from trusted individuals who will tell the truth and taking action to get back to being productive.

The road to "normalization" of rejection is a long one and is paved by many opportunities to practice the skills that will eventually help to actualize such a response. As an academician, development in the faculty role is also one that can provide opportunities to practice responses that that will lead to "normalization" of rejection. The preparation required for a new faculty member is significant. In addition to course preparation, learning the material, and assuring confident use of technology, educators strive to present material to students in a cogent and engaging manner. Faculty are sometimes rewarded with student evaluations that are not uniformly positive and, in fact, feel very much like rejection. This situation is really not different from the experience of the researcher in that countless hours were committed to an outcome that was not resoundingly rewarded with positive comments and expected outcomes. As in research, the process and options are the same. Successful educators take heed of the comments, make refinements, and consider the context of the comments to improve going forward. Seeking expert feedback is an important approach in helping to prioritize strategies for success going forward.

Normalization of rejection is a process that takes time and practice, both of which are in abundance for those with successful

careers. Each of them has a strategy that has worked (most of the time) and can provide a menu of ideas from which to choose to help rebound. In the end, rejection happens, and it is up to each of us to find a way to use the experience to learn and try again. In between the rejections are the rewards. Hold on to the positive feelings of rewards and use them as motivation for the future.

## **Cheryl M. Killion (Case Western Reserve University)**

Everyone hates rejection. On the playground, a child worries as he listens for but does not hear his name called to join a team. A high school student's application is not accepted by the university she hoped to attend. Seeking a job, a young professional is told, "Don't call us, we'll call you." A marriage proposal from an attentive suitor is turned down. Rejection occurs with unfortunate regularity in many phases of life, and although a normal occurrence, it can sting, stigmatize, and often assault one's sense of self-worth.

Academia, where professional advancement may hinge on funded research and frequent publication, offers no escape from the possibility of rejection. Receiving a rejection letter from a journal editor or seeing a "not scored" posting on a grant application can discourage even the most diligent scholar. Some academicians normalize this rejection, viewing it as a relatively benign experience. However, for many of us, rejection is a serious matter and deserves careful consideration. The initial effect of rejection can be dismay, and what comes after may resemble the grieving process.

Nurse researchers invest a great deal of time and energy in developing and disseminating critical inquiries reflecting their expertise. The intensity of their efforts demonstrates a strong commitment and familiarity with a particular area of study. They are often optimistic and confident that reviewers will see their work in the same positive way. When reviewers do not affirm that effort, however, the rejection may stifle development of a potentially significant idea, theory, or intervention.

After the initial shock from reviewers' negative comments, anger may ensue: *How could they say that! The reviewers just don't get it!* Sadness and feelings of personal failure may follow. Doubts about decisions previously made regarding research content and methods are often revisited. There may even be an inclination to shelve the reviewers' critiques for a time and cease pursuing the particular line of scientific inquiry in the rejected study.

A pause, if relatively brief, can sometimes serve to buffer the "grieving" reaction. A short-term separation from a project can allow for rethinking, recovering, and regrouping, while triggering a process of meaningful reconstruction as one temporarily transfers energy and commitment to other projects. Although negative emotions, such as grief, can be intrusive and potentially obstructive, they may also facilitate learning by signaling the importance of the project (Shepherd, Covin, & Kuratko, 2009). Attention is paid to an event when it is hurtful.

No formula for recovery from rejection is certain, but some steps that may help manage the grieving process include (a) not taking the rejection personally, but reflecting on it professionally; (b) changing perspective while maintaining a conditional attachment to a particular project; (c) amplifying the strengths of the project while addressing its limitations and weaknesses; and (d) engaging in smaller projects that are assured of success before resubmitting a revision of the rejected project. The goal is to assuage one's pain while getting up and moving forward.

Rejection is painful, yet it is an important catalyst for growth. When rejection is normalized and merely viewed as an ordinary occurrence, necessary emotional reactions may be suppressed and the impetus to change and learn is likely to be reduced. Grief management acknowledges the positive impact that the pain of rejection can have on grieving, learning, and growing.

## **Robert Topp (Marquette University)**

"That which does not kill us will only make us stronger."—Friedrich Nietzsche



Peer review results in manuscripts being rejected for publication by reviewers and editors. This process is a critical component of the scientific community's commitment to advancing knowledge and evidence-based decisions. Most scientists view research that has not undergone peer review as lacking rigor and validity (Rennie, Feher, Dierking, & Falk, 2003). Each year, more than 1.3 million scientific manuscripts are published in peer-reviewed journals (Björk, Roos, & Lauri, 2009). Calcagno et al. (2012) estimated that about 75% of published articles were first submitted to the journal that would eventually publish them, and high-impact journals published proportionally more articles that had been resubmitted from another journal. These authors also indicated the resubmissions from other journals received significantly more citations than first-intent submissions, and resubmissions between different journal communities received significantly fewer citations. In conclusion, previous surveys of scientists regarding the efficacy of the peer review process indicated that 91% of the respondents claimed that their last paper was improved through the peer review process with the discussion section being the section of the paper benefitting the most from the process (Mulligan, Hall, & Raphael, 2013).

Based on this evidence, the peer review process appears successful in generating manuscripts with a high degree of scientific rigor. Furthermore, according to Calcagno et al. (2012), a high percentage of manuscripts that are submitted are eventually published in the journal where they are initially submitted, although very few manuscripts are accepted without revisions following the initial submission. Thus, the peer review of manuscripts is a collaborative process between author/scientist and the reviewer/scientist that results in the production of high-quality, rigorous, scientific information. A reviewer's recommendation about an initial manuscript submitted for peer review may be as follows: (a) Accept the manuscript with no changes, (b) accept the manuscript with minor changes, (c) accept the manuscript with major changes, or (d) reject the manuscript. These reviewer's recommendations may be communicated to the author directly or the journal's editor may provide a summary of multiple reviewers' comments about the manuscript. A challenge to the novice researcher is interpreting the decision about their manuscript. In cases where the reviewers have suggested well-defined changes to the manuscript, the editor may

request the author to revise their manuscript according to the reviewer's requested changes and return the revised manuscript for a second review. In cases where the reviewer's comments are more extensive, the editor may reject the manuscript or express an interest in seeing a future revised version of the manuscript. The message from the journal is usually clear regarding whether a revised manuscript will be considered or whether the author will need to submit to a different journal. Based on the editor's response and the degree of revisions suggested by the reviewers, the author may continue to pursue publishing the manuscript in the journal or decide to submit their manuscript to a different journal. Regardless of this decision, the author should attempt to incorporate the reviewer's comments that would result in a more scientifically rigorous manuscript.

Novice researchers commonly respond to anything other than "accept the manuscript with no changes" by experiencing a protracted grieving process that includes denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 2005). More seasoned researchers are able to progress through these stages rapidly because they have learned to accept the idea that suggested revisions will improve the scientific rigor and scholarly quality of the manuscript. Being able to accept and incorporate suggested revisions into a manuscript is a hallmark of a prolific scientist. Thus, novice researchers should strive to view the peer review process in a positive manner as contributing to, instead of inhibiting their science, and even interpret rejection as advancing their work.

## **Linda M. Herrick (South Dakota State University)**

Rejection of a grant or manuscript can be difficult if unprepared. Knowing what to expect and actions to take better prepare one for the experience. Although people recommend not to take rejection personally, it is difficult as significant time and great effort have often gone in the grant or manuscript. Learning what goes into the selection and review process and learning to value diverse opinions often help deal with a rejection.

A key to success is to know the funding source or journal well. It is important to understand the goals and priorities of funding sources.

It is helpful to talk to program directors or staff prior to submission if possible. When submitting a manuscript, having read multiple issues to understand the focus of the journal and the types of articles published and reviewing information for authors are very helpful. After a rejection, it may be possible to talk to the funder or request reviewer comments depending on the source. Some will welcome a conversation too. It can be difficult to ascertain the weaknesses based on minimal feedback. If those options do not exist, a review of the winning grant, if available, can be helpful.

Use connections before submission and after rejections to determine weaknesses or alternative strategies. Sometimes additional information or insight can be gained than what is publicly published or stated. Use those colleagues and mentors to review or participate if appropriate.

Some funding sources and journals are very popular and receive many more submissions than can be funded or published. Be aware of funding and publication rates. Do some homework to know whether the grant or publication fits the priorities. Sometimes we choose to submit knowing that the fit may not be as good but that the project or paper has merit, but we acknowledge that before submission and recognize that it may influence funding or acceptance.

Reading comments related to the review or requested revisions carefully helps provide insight into the priorities. Sometimes those involved in a proposal or paper miss critical details or items that become evident in a critical review. More than once, a reviewer has caught something that was missing or had been deleted in an effort to stay within a word or page limit. It helps to be organized so that there is time for people within the institution to review before submission.

One of the most important messages I received from a mentor was to remember that reviewers may have different perspectives and experiences and to welcome and appreciate that diversity. What may be clear to the team may have different meaning or be unclear to others. Once that diversity of thought is realized, many of the comments and revisions can be viewed from the perspective from which they were given.

Last, persevere by reassessing and working to improve the next submission. Look for opportunities to network or partner, seek consultation, and continue to submit. A wise nurse researcher once said that ten grants may need to go in for one to be funded. The rewards are worth the efforts.

## **Carol Smith (University of Kansas)**

Rejections of grant applications, manuscripts, or conference abstracts do occur across a successful research career. The cognitive complexity of responding to rejection includes critique issue clarification, managing emotions, worry over reputations, and facing resubmission deadlines. Knowing what critiques to immediately begin to work on and those to address by acknowledging as a limitation becomes comfortable over time. Accepting rejection is a career-long challenge even for researchers who have been successful over many years. Such acceptance leads to a person's new sense of what is "normal" for them, as they adapt to managing rejections over time.

Individual researchers engage in many cognitive and behavioral strategies to maintain emotions, energy, and wherewithal to carry on and cope with rejection. Poor initial strategies often include minimizing the value of the critique and avoiding or downplaying consequences of not addressing each issue within the rejection. Also not working with trusted colleagues and professionals to interpret and understand each rejection item is a commonplace fault.

However, after accepting the rejection and putting aside typical emotional reactions, researchers can maintain positive outlook by integrating the improvements into the resubmission drafts. This process of normalization is an active adaptation by which individuals cope with emotions, and minimize any anxiety or specific self-doubts and learn from the critiques to create a positive response to rejection. By understanding the concept of normalization, researchers can embrace strategies and tools for changing rejections into successful resubmissions.

The initial emotional disappointment, anger, worry, and even vehement rejection of the critiques are common. The way to overcome this is to read the review details—several times in a row while not

fussing about “reviewers did not read what I wrote, that’s not what I meant, or reviewers don’t understand these patients.” Re-reading allows the author to cope with the individual comments and get a sense of what to address. The next coping strategy should be to then sit and write down all the positive points made and list the easy fixes that will turn rejections into resubmissions.

Following recognition of the positive and identifying repeating critique among reviewers, the literature review for addressing critiques is undertaken. Do not do all this work on updating the literature to verify your responses at the end, but during each step of the process. Then try understanding a rejection from the reviewer’s perspective. This provides a meaningful understanding to continue forward by shifting your view of the negative critique to suggestions to strengthen your work. Paterson’s Shifting Perspectives Model of Chronic Illness is aligned with researchers’ career-long process of accepting and addressing rejection (Paterson, 2001). Another important factor is that researchers have a strong desire for normalcy in their work with rejections being a common action step to fix. However, this requires the researcher to redefine a new normal for the science. Good science is built on testing an idea that others critique.

Normalization has been likened to a camera lens by seeing one part of a rejection as acceptable but the other as blurry, and by first making a list of the exact critiques and placing these problems into the whole rejection background. Thus, researchers can determine what to address. This coping or management strategy gives an order to how to tackle each listed item while providing a sense of continuity for your research or writing.

Throughout your revising, remind yourself why you are doing this project: It is not for personal success but to make patients’ lives and health care better, which can put a smile on your face. In this way, you will come to recognize that rejections are learning opportunities in disguise!

## **Julie Zerwic (University of Illinois at Chicago)**

Success as a scholar cannot be realized without rejection. The most productive scholars are those who accept this and have

developed effective strategies to manage rejection. A number of investigators have found that the experience of rejection produces a response in the brain that mimics that of physical pain (DeWall et al., 2010; Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). Understanding that rejection is a normal and expected phenomenon helps put it into perspective.

The experience of rejection is mitigated if it is shared with colleagues. Ideally, developing scholars during their doctoral programs are working with their advisors on manuscripts and grants. Through these experiences, they will observe their mentors as they accept feedback and re-write manuscripts and revise grant applications. Working as a member of a team also provides you with colleagues who will help you interpret the reasons for rejection.

At the University of Illinois at Chicago, we have a number of mechanisms to provide doctoral students and faculty with feedback on presentations, manuscripts, and grant applications. These include review sessions prior to scientific meetings such as the Midwest Nursing Research Society spring conference, mock reviews for grant applications, and seminars on how to respond to reviewers' comments. In these sessions, students are able to observe faculty (as well as experience themselves) getting constructive feedback from colleagues. The more times an individual shares their work and accepts feedback from others, the easier it becomes to quickly work through the feeling of rejection and move on.

Reading through the criticism as soon as it is received and then putting it aside for several days is an effective mechanism for getting some distance from the immediate emotional response. Balancing this with a reasonable time frame for picking up the critique again and carefully reviewing and responding is needed. It can be overwhelming to look at the response in its entirety. Therefore, creating a table and listing all of the specific items are extremely useful. This allows the individual to break up the feedback into manageable components. This is also particularly helpful for manuscripts because editors and reviewers can see how you responded to each specific criticism.

Individuals may want to immediately discount the feedback. For example, it is not uncommon for an author to receive a rejection from

one journal and immediately send it to another journal. However, it is very likely that those first reviewers gave valuable feedback that would strengthen the article. On several occasions, I have reviewed a manuscript for one journal and then received the exact same manuscript from another journal. You can be sure my original review was copied and pasted a second time. It is important to realize that the feedback reviewers provide can significantly strengthen the manuscript or the grant application. It does not mean that as an author you must accept every statement that a reviewer makes. It is quite acceptable to disagree with a reviewer if support for your position is provided. Accepting external reviewers as colleagues at a distance, rather than the enemy, will help put their comments into perspective.

## **Marlene Z. Cohen (University of Nebraska)**

When reviewers recommend that a manuscript not be published or a grant not be funded, I view their comments simply as feedback. It sometimes helps to vent to a colleague how foolish, unwise, and often rude their feedback is, but I do not allow myself to get stuck in this phase longer than a weekend. Sometimes it helps to vent your feelings to a trusted ally—my husband and colleagues know many stories—and other coping strategies are useful, so go jog, eat some chocolate, or do whatever helps you feel better. I also recognize that reviewers' feedback is based only on what I wrote—not on what I know. In addition, reviewers bring their own knowledge, or lack of knowledge, about the topic to their reading, so their feedback can give direction about how to be more clear about what I know, and therefore write a more persuasive revision. Being unable to use feedback is a serious handicap for researchers!

Dealing with criticism is important for academics and researchers, but not unique to us. We can learn from what others say about withstanding criticism. In her book *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg (2014) noted Arianna Huffington's advice that the cost of speaking her mind was that she would offend someone. She did not believe it was either realistic or desirable to tell others not to care when they are attacked. Instead, she advises reacting emotionally and then quickly

moving on. She noted that children can serve as role models in the way that they cry one minute and then run off to play the next.

Writing manuscripts can be viewed as a series of practice performances. It is wise to have co-authors and other colleagues review your ideas—first verbally, then in written draft form. Then it is useful to present the ideas at a conference. Presenting the content to an audience that is unfamiliar with the ideas gives you valuable feedback that you can use to refine the presentation. This gives you many opportunities to refine both your ideas and your presentation. It helps to view “rejections” as only feedback, and to view drafts as rehearsals. The work is not “finished” until it is published or funded in the case of a grant (when, of course, the work of the study begins!). The passion you have for finding answers to questions to solve important problems will help you to keep focused and to try again when the response is not positive.

It is also helpful to remember that revisions are just part of the process. I had the great good fortune of working for several years with an internationally acclaimed and distinguished researcher at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center. The conference room in his department has a large whiteboard on which was written in small size letters the name of each publication, the list of authors, and the journal to which it was submitted. This was regularly updated with the outcome of the submission, and the current status—need to revise, resubmitted to another journal, and so on. The need to revise and resubmit, sometimes to a second or third journal, was a frequent notation on the board. I found it comforting to know that even skilled researchers have to submit and resubmit manuscripts, sometimes many times before finding the right “home” for the paper.

This distinguished scientist served as a mentor for many researchers. A mentor serves as a role model and illustrates by example how to be the best you aspire to be. Mentors also show how to cope with setback as well as successes that inevitably come in your career. A mentor provides support to you through the rough times when your work needs to be revised and celebrates with you when the work is “finished,” that is, accepted or funded.



I often remind students and colleagues that manuscripts that are not submitted are never published, and grants that are not submitted are never funded. So you have nothing to lose by submitting, and you do have the possibility of learning from the reviewers' feedback. Learning and using the feedback are critical to success.

## **Nancy Fahrenwald (South Dakota State University)**

Rejection of scientific work is not a personal criticism. Sometimes it is as simple as a mismatch between the priorities of a funding agency and the proposal focus, or the different perspectives and strengths of blind peer reviewers of grants or manuscripts. Graduate nursing programs can assure preparation for rejection by sharing faculty and student stories of rejection and persistence in publication and securing extramural funding. In a beginning seminar or role socialization course, mentors can advise on their approach to rejection, revision, and resubmission. Standard practice in a role course or seminar can be ready access to a repository of manuscript reviews for papers that were rejected, and even those that were accepted after revision and resubmission. By sharing rejection and review letters in a repository that is equally accessible as our lists of published papers and funded grants, we acknowledge the persistence and tenacity necessary for building and sustaining a scientific career. Access to the repository also offers a warehouse of critiques for a variety of professional journals and funding agencies. This warehouse can help investigators to prepare for how their work will undergo peer review.

On rejection, the first instinct is to discard the manuscript or grant application. This is a normal response to disappointment; yet, after the initial jolt of frustration, careful review and reflection on the submitted work and the critique are essential. Approach rejection with the same methodical effort that was put forth when the original paper or grant was developed. Dissect the critique and respond without emotion. The approach to rejection should be systematic, including a list of alternative actions in response to an unfavorable critique. With each rejection, there is discovery of a different perspective or an

alternative approach that often yields a scholarly piece of work with higher quality and greater competitiveness. Create a list of potential approaches to the rejection. When we learn from and respond to rejection, our roles as nurse scientists are strengthened. A scientific career is filled with disappointments and rewards. We celebrate the rewards but need to share and learn from our disappointments along the scholarly journey.

## **Lazelle E. Benefield (University of Oklahoma)**

In preparing this essay, I came across an article by marketing strategy consultant and author Dorie Clark (2014) titled *Stop Believing That You Have to be Perfect*. That title says it all—we often believe in perfection on the first try, and any sidestep, stumble, or alternate path from straightforward progression is considered total failure. Intellectually and intuitively, we know the path to sustained success requires adjustment and realignment. And we know this includes rejection, whether it is a manuscript returned for lack of clear creative insight or a grant application denied due to insufficient focus on novel, emerging areas of inquiry. Even so, we sometimes make the mistake of equating rejection with failure, as if the former implies the latter. In our mind's eye, the returned manuscript or unscored grant proposal is quantifiable documentation of our failure.

In her article, Clark (2014) recommends a three-step process to combat *rejection equals failure* thinking: (a) recognize that innovation requires failure, (b) "own" our failures by acknowledging them to ourselves and others rather than being embarrassed by them, and (c) understand that failure will happen on a recurring basis. We fail all the time, and how we frame that failure influences whether and how we proceed to success. To be innovative requires adapting over time, realigning when faced with new information or circumstances, and being focused on change and risk. To be successful, we will continue to make other, different mistakes along the way that will likewise teach and inform, moving us still further forward. Contrary to viewing a rejection as total failure, we should view it as a temporary setback on a generally forward, albeit non-linear, path to success.

Once we reframe our thinking, the strategies we have learned to sustain motivation and momentum for a successful research career continue to apply:

- Do your best work and give sufficient time for project preparation. Believe in, set up, and follow a specific timeline and hold yourself accountable. Hurrying or shortcutting will be reflected in a lesser end product and apparent to manuscript or grant reviewers. Do the necessary homework that sets you up for success: Prepare the manuscripts that report your preliminary work, cultivate the research team, meet and discuss team function and priorities. Early on, secure the mentor(s) who know the science, support you in team work, and budget development and the nuts and bolts of developing the proposal. These strategies have been discussed in previous *WJNR* articles (Chase et al., 2013; Cohen et al., 2010; Conn et al., 2015; Conn et al., 2014; Groves et al., 2012).
- Wisely select internal and external reviewers. Use them consistently with sufficient time built in to reflect on their responses, and adjust the planned project.
- In response to reviewer comments, use the tried and true method I call *reflection over time*. Read the reviewer comments, react verbally, and put the comments away for a few days. Return to reread the comments, make notes on how you will approach updating the manuscript or proposal, and then discuss the reviewer comments with the larger team. We err in reacting to comments we deem harsh or irrelevant; instead, for example, update the proposal narrative to address criticisms so future reviewers see you have considered alternative strategies and settled on the best and most practical approach.
- Remember that past successes have propelled you to this point! Celebrate. Use a support system to vent your occasional angst; then move on. Be there for others when they need this support.
- Find and embrace the joy in your work. If you question over and over *why am I doing this?* Step back and reflect. *Why are you doing this?* If you can affirm that the work is professionally valuable to you and the populations you hope to influence, then seek counsel to use methods to reduce frustration and self-doubt. Everyone experiences this on occasion.
- Aim high and innovate!

## **Vicki Conn (University of Missouri)**

Most researchers, even those with years of experience, will have an emotional reaction to rejection. Rejection never feels good, but successful researchers are those who have developed some affective coping strategies to minimize its impact. While acknowledging the negative feelings, they avoid excessive reaction and prolonged wound-licking. Many individuals develop specific rituals to help them get past the sting of a rejection.

Developing a self-concept that is separate from one's identity as a scientist is essential to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the negative emotions arising from a rejection. Basing one's entire self-worth on getting a manuscript accepted or a grant funded is both unhealthy and unrealistic. The tendency for many people is to isolate themselves when they receive a rejection, which can lead to worsening of negative feelings. The better alternative is to seek out others when rejection comes. The best research is conducted in a team setting; likewise, rejection is best dealt with as a group.

Open discussion with others about rejections is useful for other reasons. It is important that senior faculty serve as role models for doctoral students and junior faculty on how to effectively cope with rejection. Talking about rejections will help prepare these individuals to better handle the rejections they will receive periodically through the course of their professional lives. Open discussion also helps remove the stigma associated with receiving rejections.

Instrumental coping strategies are a second, parallel defense against the negative influences of rejection. Using reviewers' comments to improve a rejected manuscript or resubmit a grant proposal permits a more practical, problem-solving approach to rejection and will in the long run serve to strengthen one's research program. In responding to reviewer comments, it is helpful to develop a self-identify as a life-long learner. Reviewer feedback can then be viewed as an educational opportunity rather than as attack on one's scientific abilities. New knowledge through scientific inquiry is ultimately about improving the lives of patients, not increasing the status of investigators. Feedback from rejections will be much more

palatable when it is regarded as an opportunity to better serve patients.

It is important to remember that important papers may be rejected by journals, and excellent potential research grants may be unfunded. An interesting blog by Nikolai Slavov (2014) documents some papers with major scientific impact were rejected by at least one journal prior to eventual publication (<https://majesticforest.wordpress.com/2014/08/15/papers-that-triumphed-over-their-rejections/>). For example, the original paper about the Krebs's cycle was rejected by one journal. Another paper that was rejected by a famous journal in the mid-1990s now has more than 15,000 citations (<http://www.the-scientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/42261/title/Riding-Out-Rejection/>; Yandell, 2015). Authors should not assume rejection means the project is not worthy of publication. Papers may be revised for submission to a subsequent journal and make a stellar contribution to knowledge.

## Conclusion

Although rejection is a normal aspect of scientific life, having a manuscript or grant application turned down can still engender negative emotions. Investigators must find the best personal strategies to help them overcome the sting of rejection so that it does not undermine their productivity. A critical part of overcoming rejection is to learn to view rejection as an opportunity for improvement rather than as a judgment of personal worth. Regarding rejection in this manner can facilitate getting on to the work of addressing reviewers' comments in a dispassionate and organized manner. Experienced researchers understand that rejection is not failure so much as it is success temporarily deferred.

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**Table 1.** Normalizing Rejection.

Strategy	Implementing rejection management
Accept rejection	<p>View rejection as a normal part of applying for funding or publishing a manuscript.</p> <p>Embrace constructive criticism as essential to improve grants and manuscripts.</p> <p>Acknowledge reviewers are not perfect and can make mistakes.</p> <p>Pick a strategy for addressing viewer comments that is personally most effective for countering feelings of rejection</p> <p>Do not spend long periods of time reviewing comments when they are first received. Read the comments, then put them aside for a few days. Later, use comments to improve work.</p> <p>Delve into the critique of work immediately as a first step in the process of accepting rejection.</p>
Share rejection	<p>Seek the advice of trusted colleagues on the reviewers' comments. Colleagues provide another perspective to the comments.</p> <p>Understand that the people who provide emotional support may be different from those who provide instrumental assistance.</p>
Cope with emotions associated with rejection	<p>Accept emotional responses, but do not dwell on them. Do not take comments personally.</p> <p>Recognize reviewer comments are based on what was present in the manuscript or grant, not what the author knows.</p> <p>Remember you are more than your scholarly productivity.</p> <p>Develop a mind-set of life-long learning in which feedback represents an opportunity for increasing knowledge.</p> <p>Share feelings about rejection with someone who will be supportive.</p> <p>Ask successful colleagues about their experience with rejections.</p> <p>Remember to have strong personal relationships and obtain adequate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.</p> <p>Develop positive emotional coping strategies.</p> <p>Consider developing a personal ritual for dealing with rejections.</p> <p>Talk with others about how the rejection fits in the overall pattern of successful productivity.</p>
Manage and overcome rejection	<p>Create a table listing all specific items from reviewers' feedback to have manageable chunks of information.</p> <p>Re-read the reviewers' comments and details. Try to understand the comments from each reviewer's perspective.</p> <p>Approach responses to reviewers in a systematic manner.</p> <p>Respond to reviewers' comments without emotion. Avoid hostile or defensive language in revisions and responses.</p> <p>Avoid minimizing the importance of reviewer comments.</p> <p>Incorporate reviewers' suggestions in resubmissions or in submissions to alternative journals.</p> <p>Remember that even when you consider submitting a manuscript to another journal, there is a chance that the same reviewer might review the manuscript again or that different reviewers may have similar comments.</p>
Reframe rejection	<p>Understand many good manuscripts are rejected because of journals receive far more good manuscripts than they have the capacity to publish.</p> <p>Acknowledge that even excellent projects may get rejected due to agency funding limits.</p> <p>View journal rejection as deferred publication. The original journal missed an opportunity to publish your work, and the paper will eventually be published in another journal.</p> <p>Remember that the most successful authors and principal investigators experience many deferred publications and unfunded grant submissions.</p> <p>Understand that productive scientists profit from feedback by improving their work.</p> <p>Socialize doctoral students and junior faculty to experience rejection as feedback.</p> <p>Recognize the purpose of science is to improve the lives of patients, not to build the status of researchers.</p>