

# Dealing With Failure

Monta Vista Character Lab

March 18, 2025

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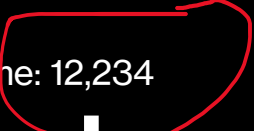
A photograph of Samuel Beckett, a middle-aged man with a joyful expression, celebrating a victory. He is wearing a red baseball cap with sunglasses perched on top, a dark blue athletic singlet with a large white star on the front, and a black wristband on his left wrist. His arms are outstretched in a 'V' shape. The background shows a brick building with several windows, an American flag waving on a pole to the left, and a crowd of spectators in the lower foreground.

**“Ever tried. Ever failed. No Matter.  
Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”**

*Samuel Beckett*

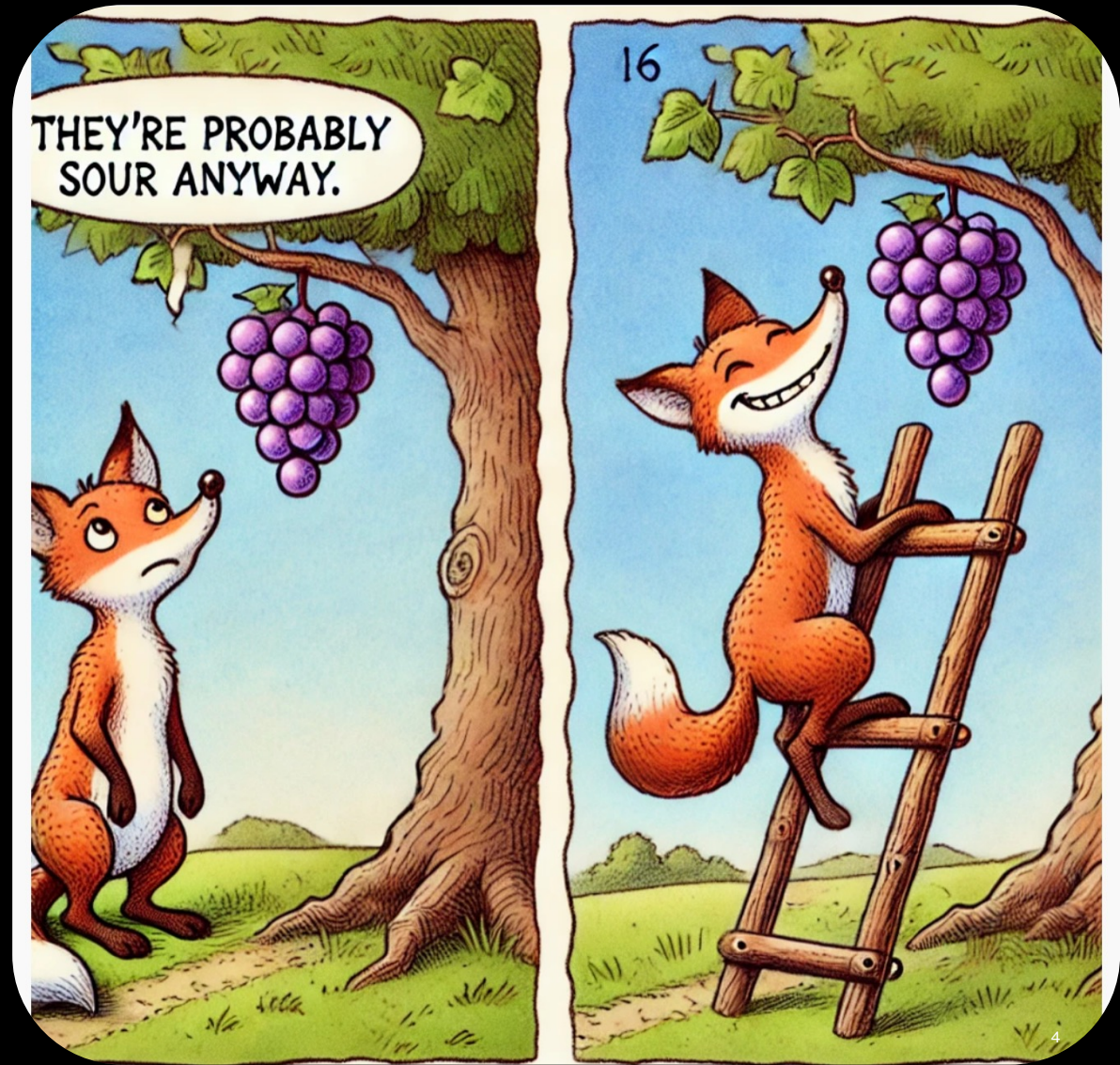
# Boston Marathon Standards and Entries

- 2012
  - + Field size: 27,000
  - + Open qualifying time: 3:10
  - + Cut-off time: 1:14
  - + Rejected applicants who met the qualifying time: 3,228
- 2025
  - + Field size: 30,000
  - + Open qualifying time: 3:00
  - + Cut-off time: 6:51
  - + Rejected applicants who met the qualifying time: 12,234

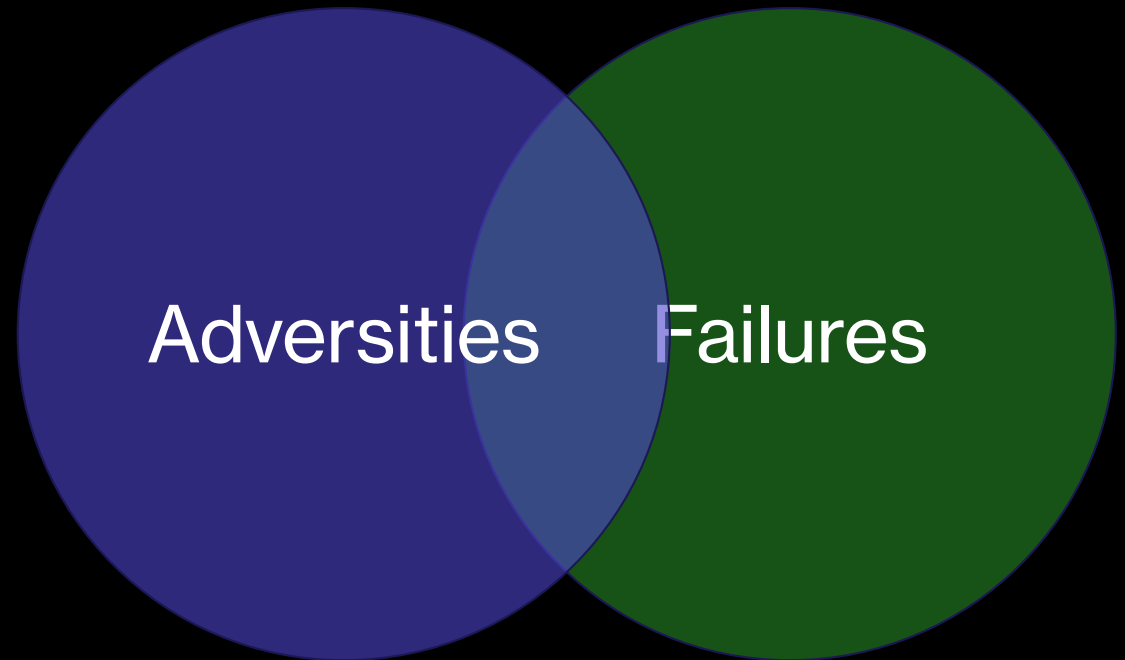


**Standards get tougher...more people fail...yet more people aim for the goal.**

**Why do some of us choose to persist towards a goal...or to give up?**



**What is the  
difference  
between failure  
and adversity?**

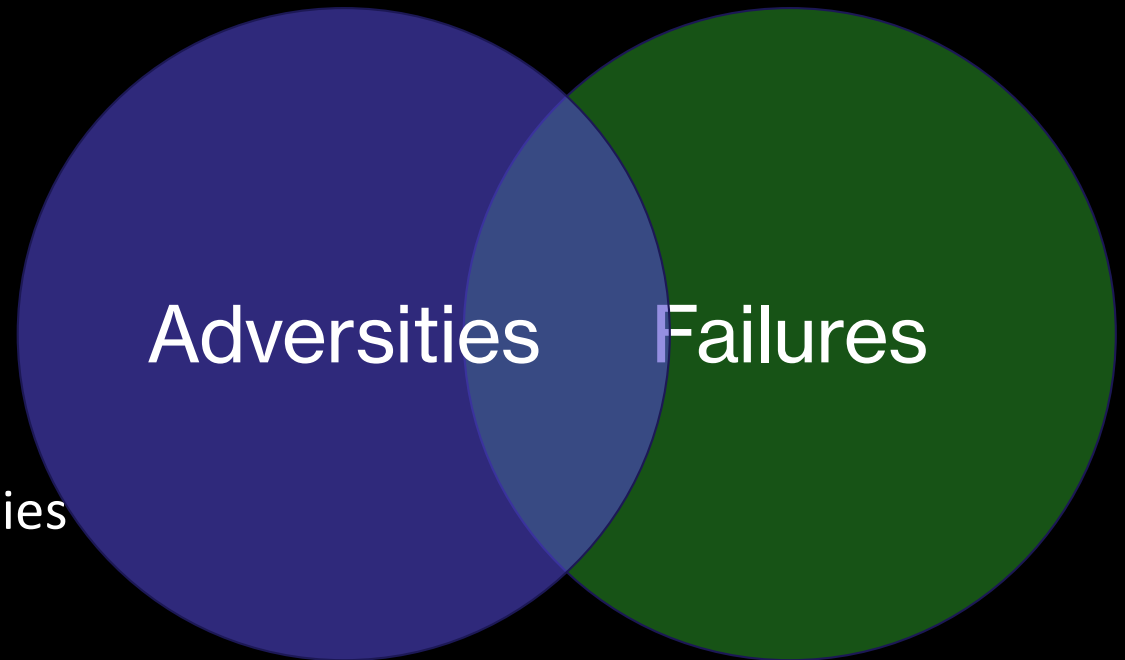


Failure is an outcome—a lack of success in achieving a goal.

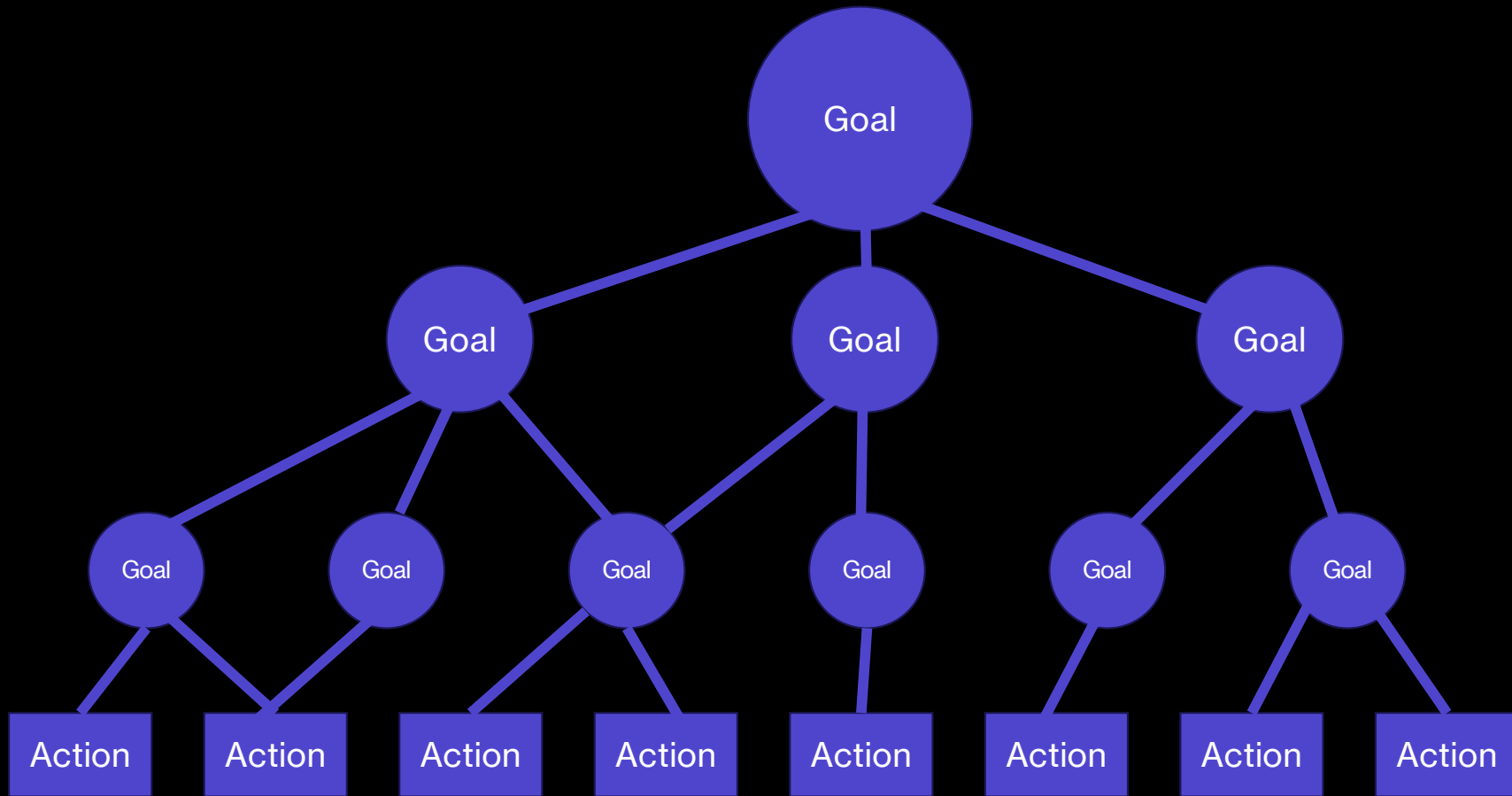
Adversity is a challenge—difficulties or obstacles that test resilience.

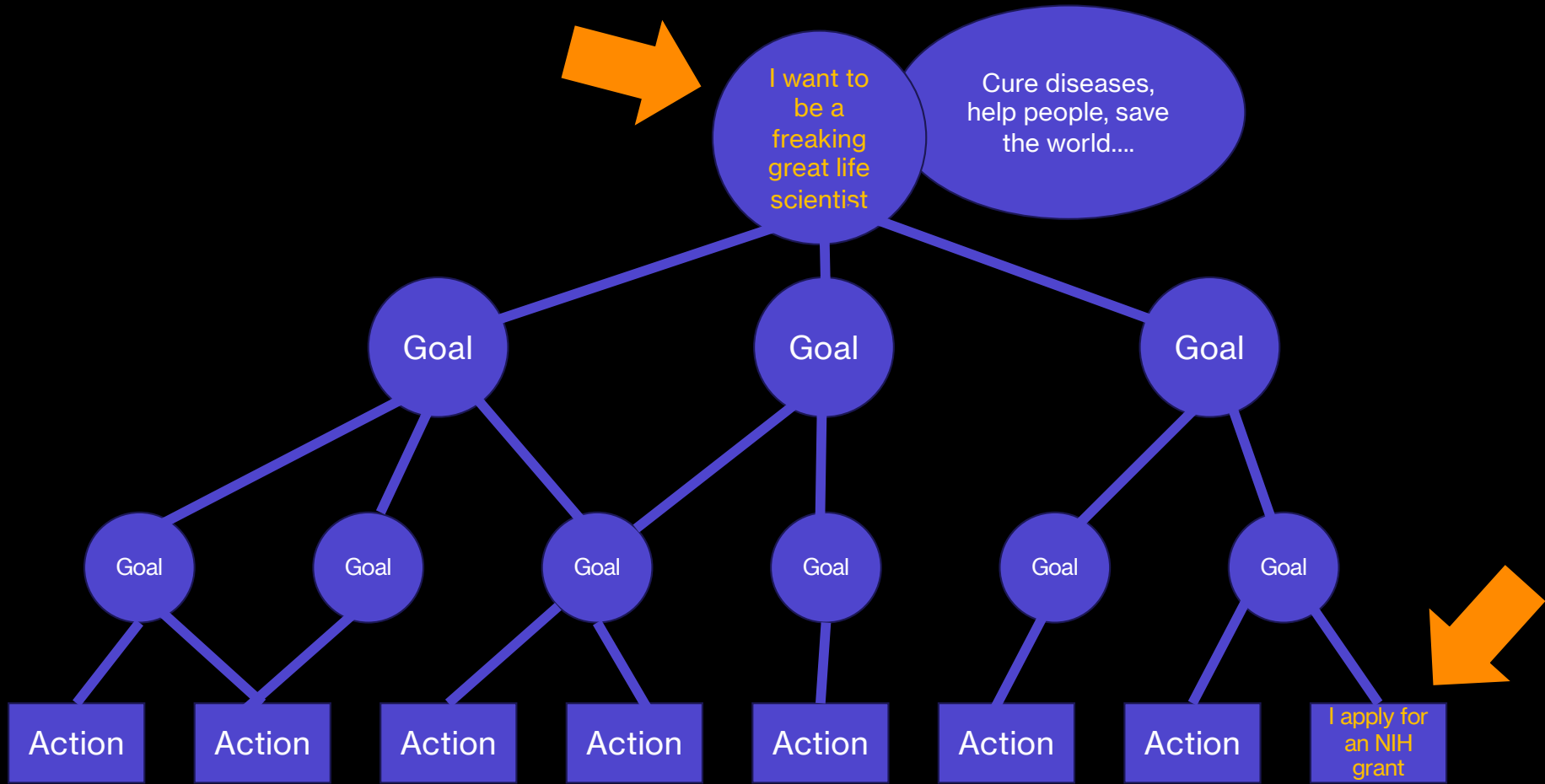
Failure is final only if you stop.

Adversity is what you overcome to succeed.

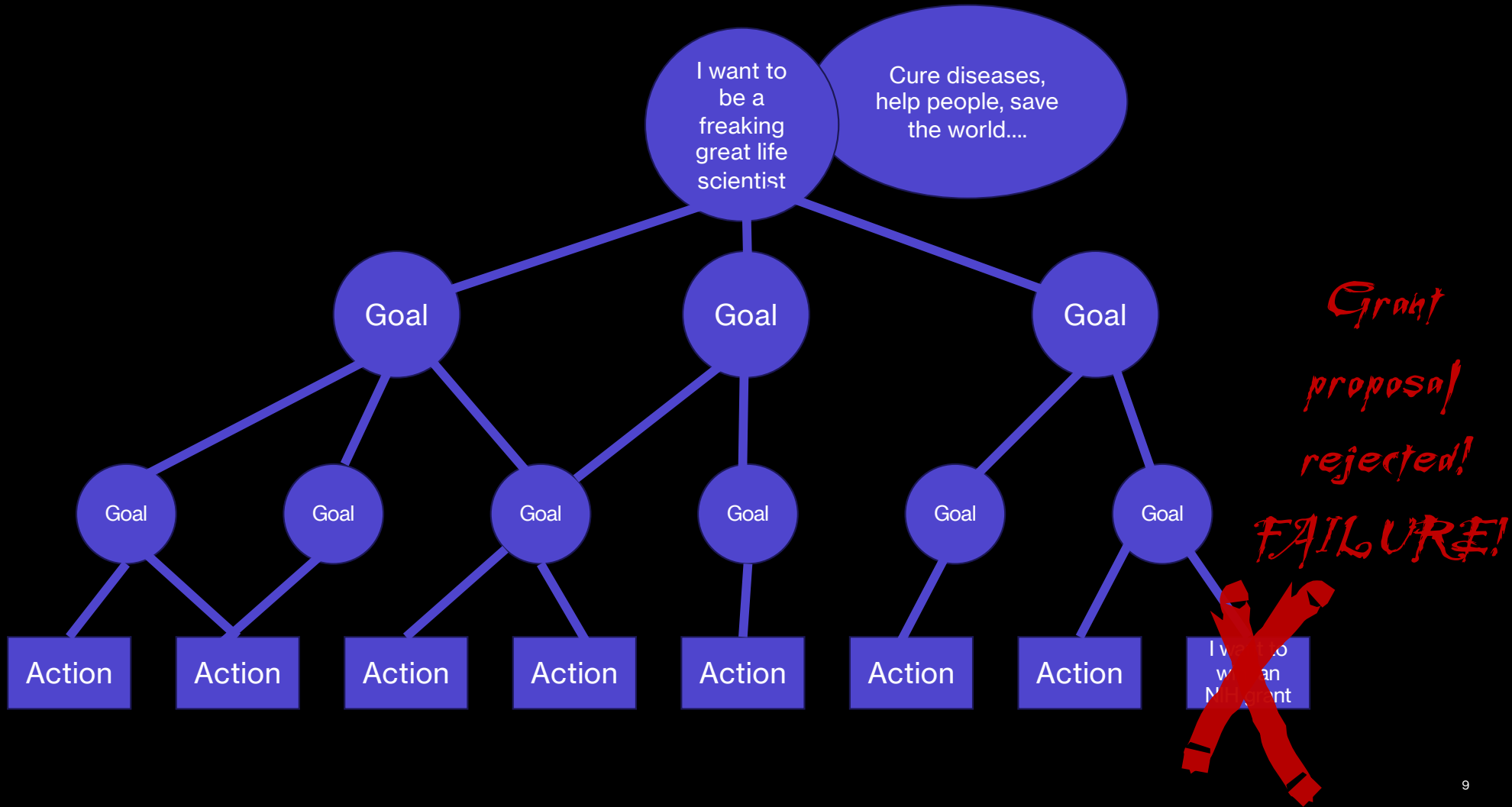


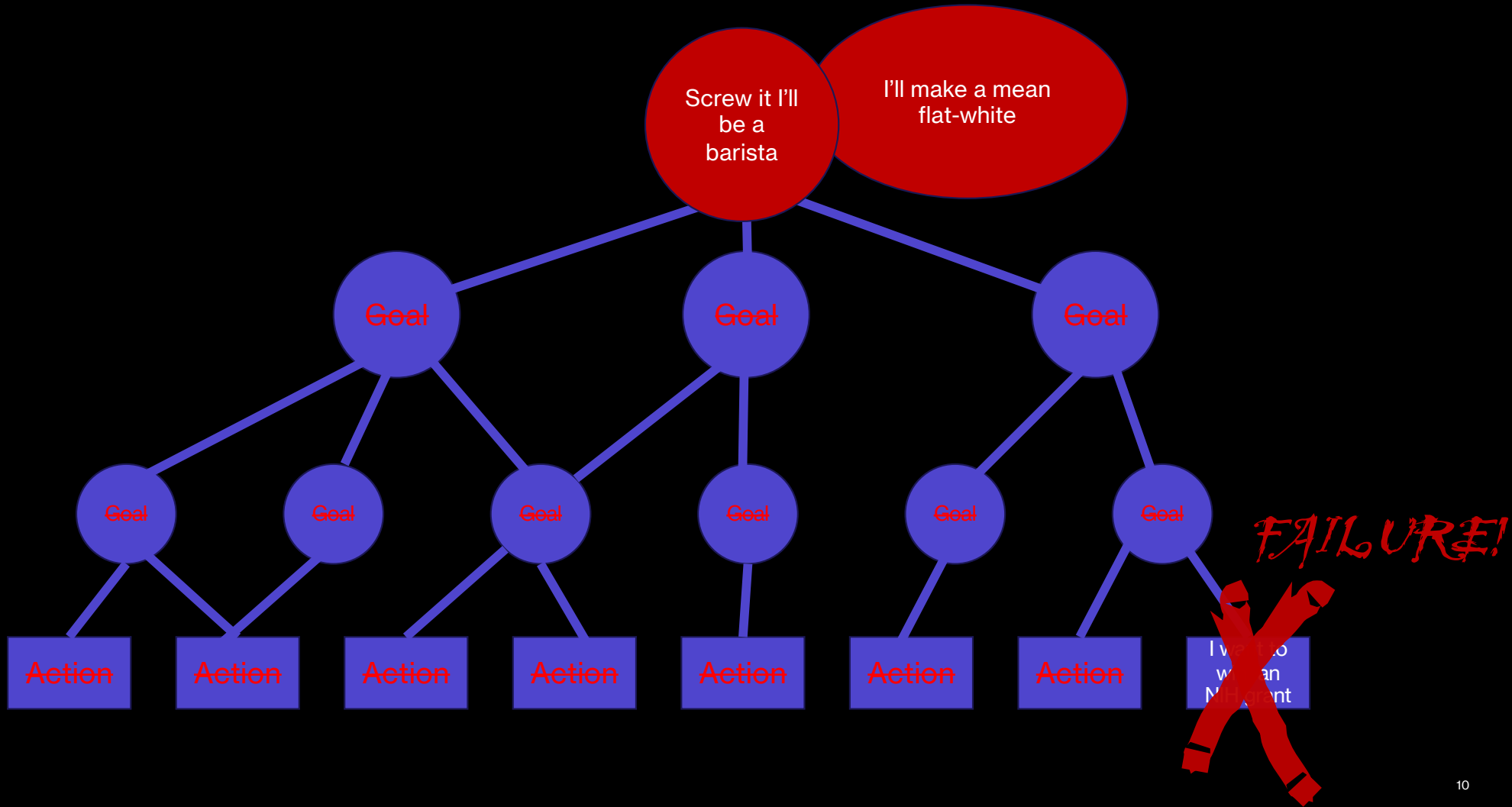
**What do you think about this description?**





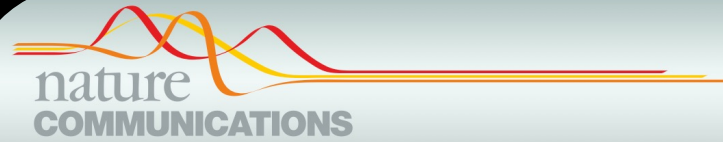








# How does a failure effect our future?



## ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-019-12189-3>

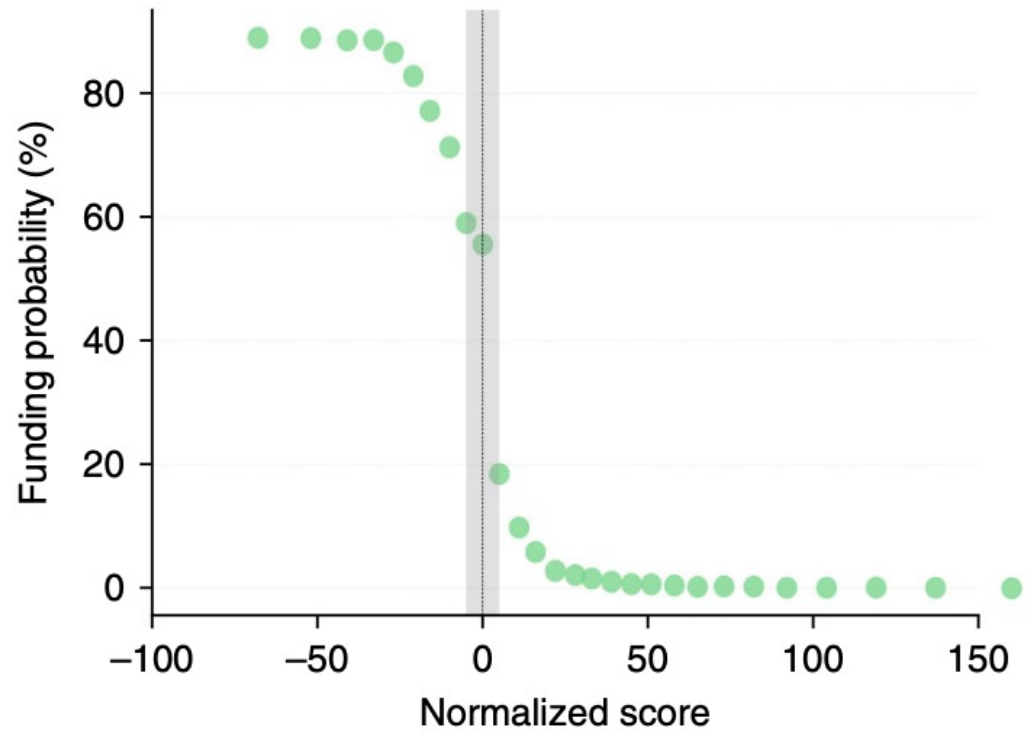
OPEN

## Early-career setback and future career impact

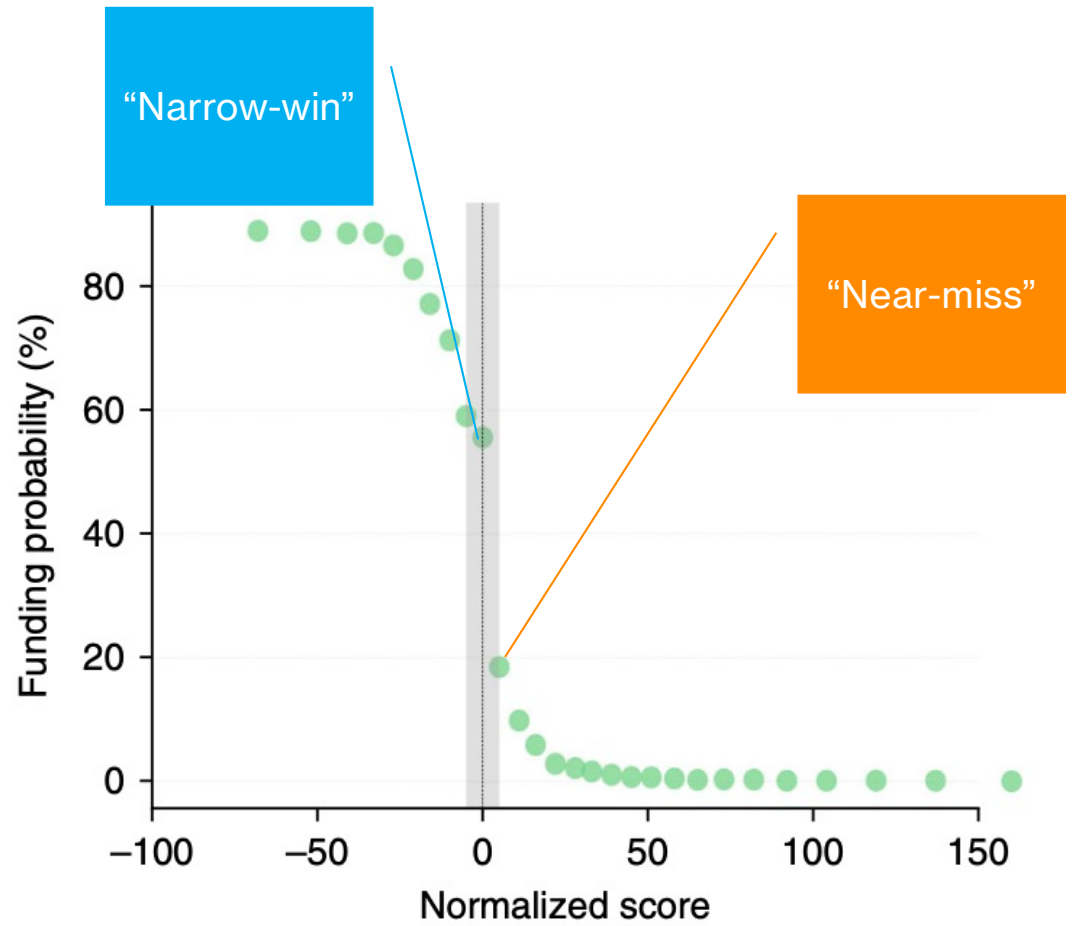
Yang Wang <sup>1,2,3,4</sup>, Benjamin F. Jones<sup>1,2,3,5</sup> & Dashun Wang <sup>1,2,3,6</sup>

Setbacks are an integral part of a scientific career, yet little is known about their long-term effects. Here we examine junior scientists applying for National Institutes of Health R01 grants. By focusing on proposals fell just below and just above the funding threshold, we compare near-miss with narrow-win applicants, and find that an early-career setback has powerful, opposing effects. On the one hand, it significantly increases attrition, predicting more than a 10% chance of disappearing permanently from the NIH system. Yet, despite an early setback, individuals with near misses systematically outperform those with narrow wins in the longer run. Moreover, this performance advantage seems to go beyond a screening mechanism, suggesting early-career setback appears to cause a performance improvement among those who persevere. Overall, these findings are consistent with the concept that “what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger,” which may have broad implications for identifying, training and nurturing junior scientists.

# National Institute of Health R01 Grants



# National Institute of Health R01 Grants



# What do you think happened next for the “narrow-wins” and the “near-misses”?

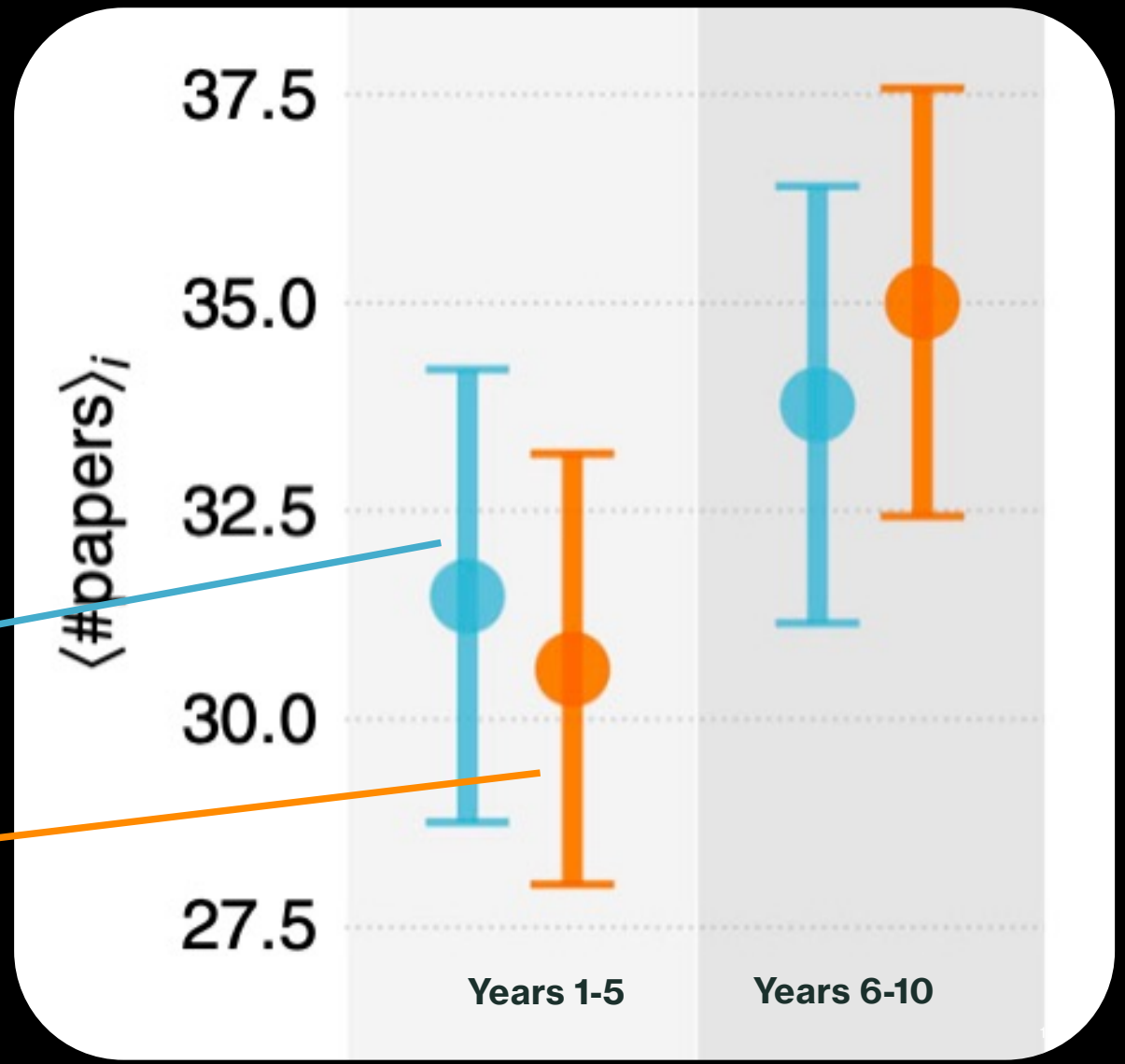
**Think about implications, reactions and possibilities for what might happen next:**

- Narrow winners had funding for as much as five years of research
- “Matthew Effect”: Advantages accumulate for winners while disadvantages compound for losers (“the rich get richer”)
- Emotional response to winning – I am the MAN, I am awesome!
- Emotional response to losing – man, I worked so hard on this proposal. I suck.

The narrow-win and near-miss groups produced a similar number of papers over the next ten years...

Narrow Wins

Near Misses





...but the papers written by the near miss group was more than 20% likely to be a "hit" ...

Near Misses

Narrow Wins

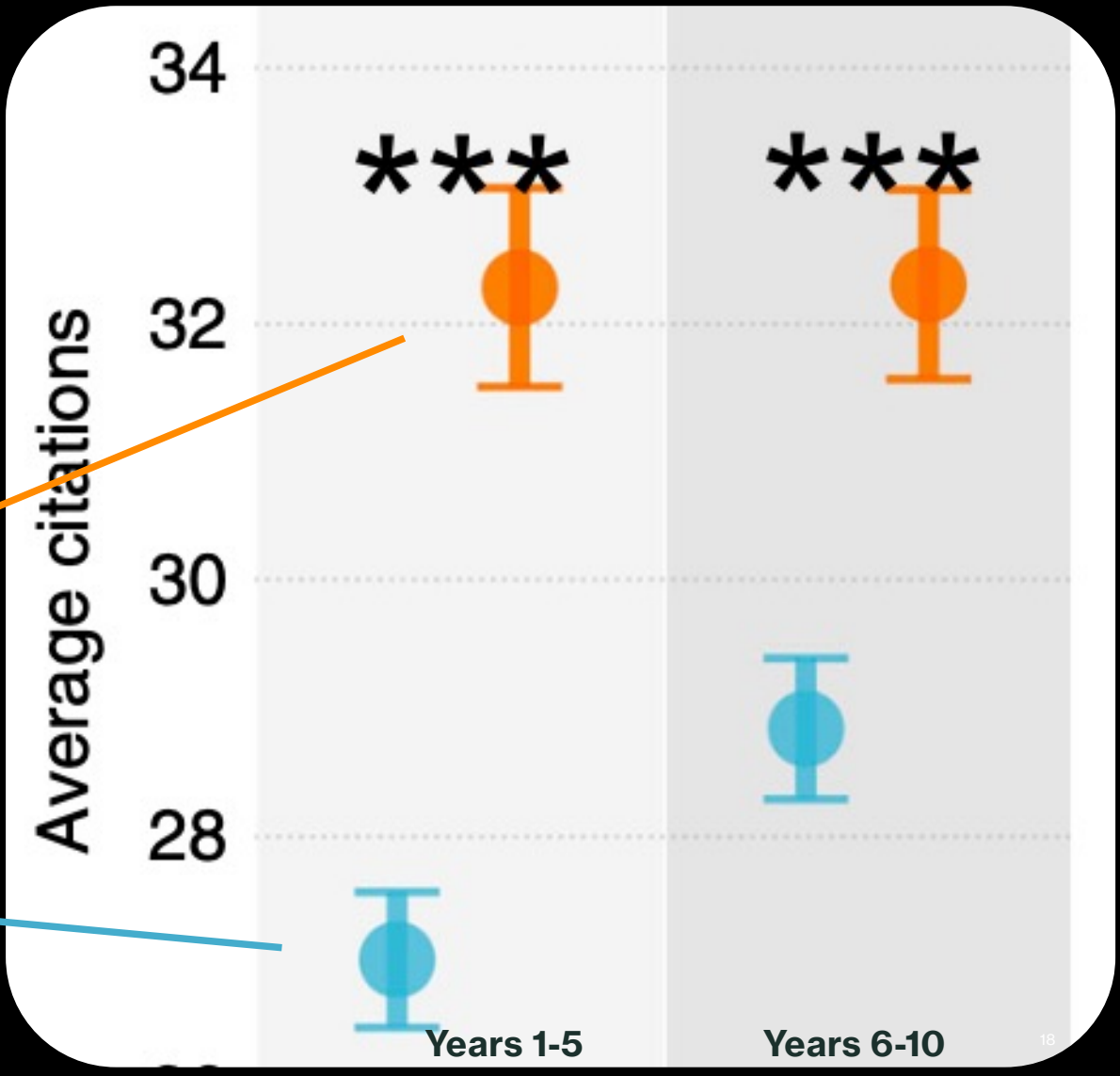
A "HIT" PAPER IS IN THE TOP-5 OF PAPERS CITED IN A YEAR

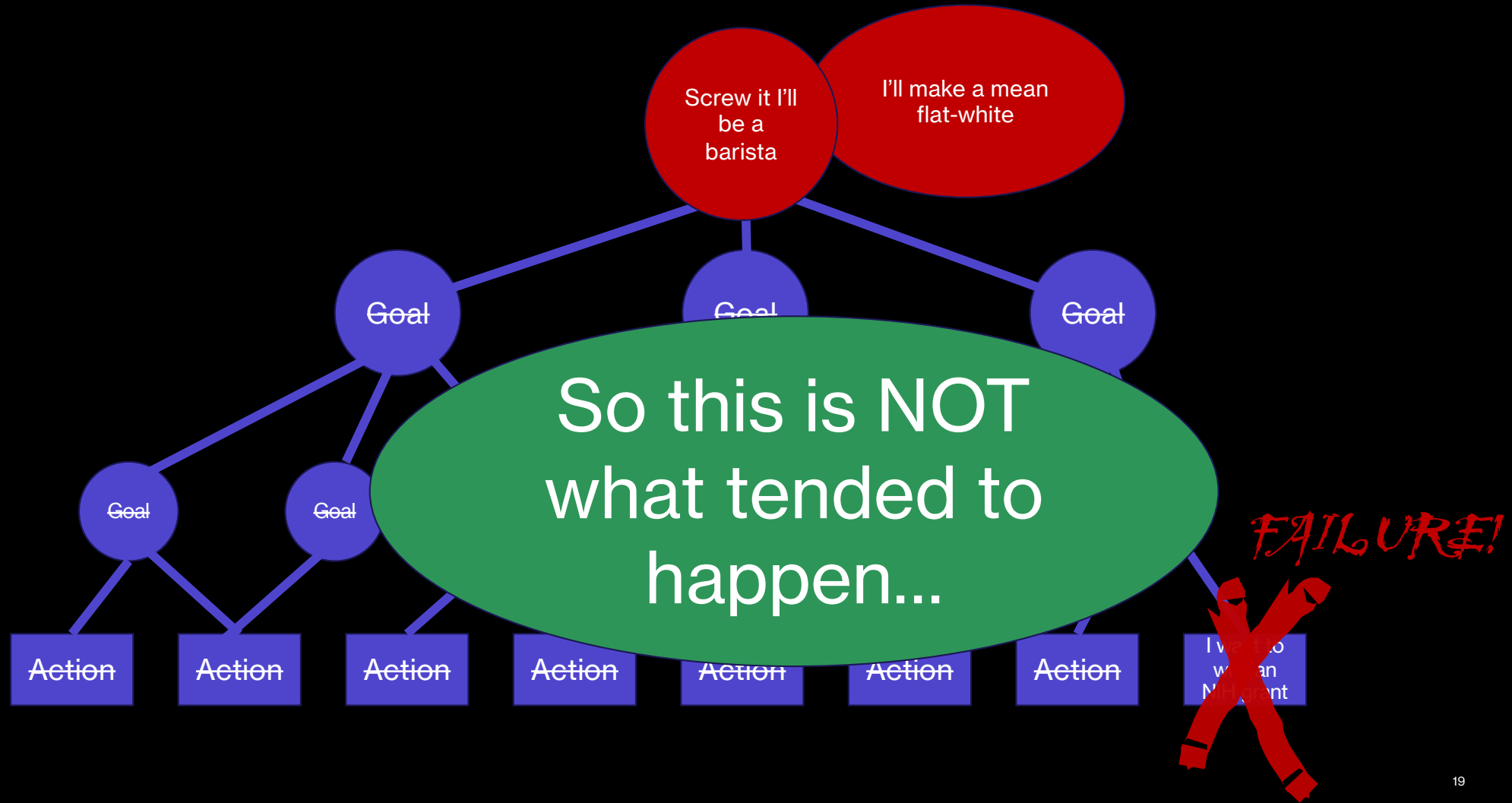


...and over time,  
the papers  
written by the  
near-miss group  
were cited much  
more.

Near  
Misses

Narrow  
Wins

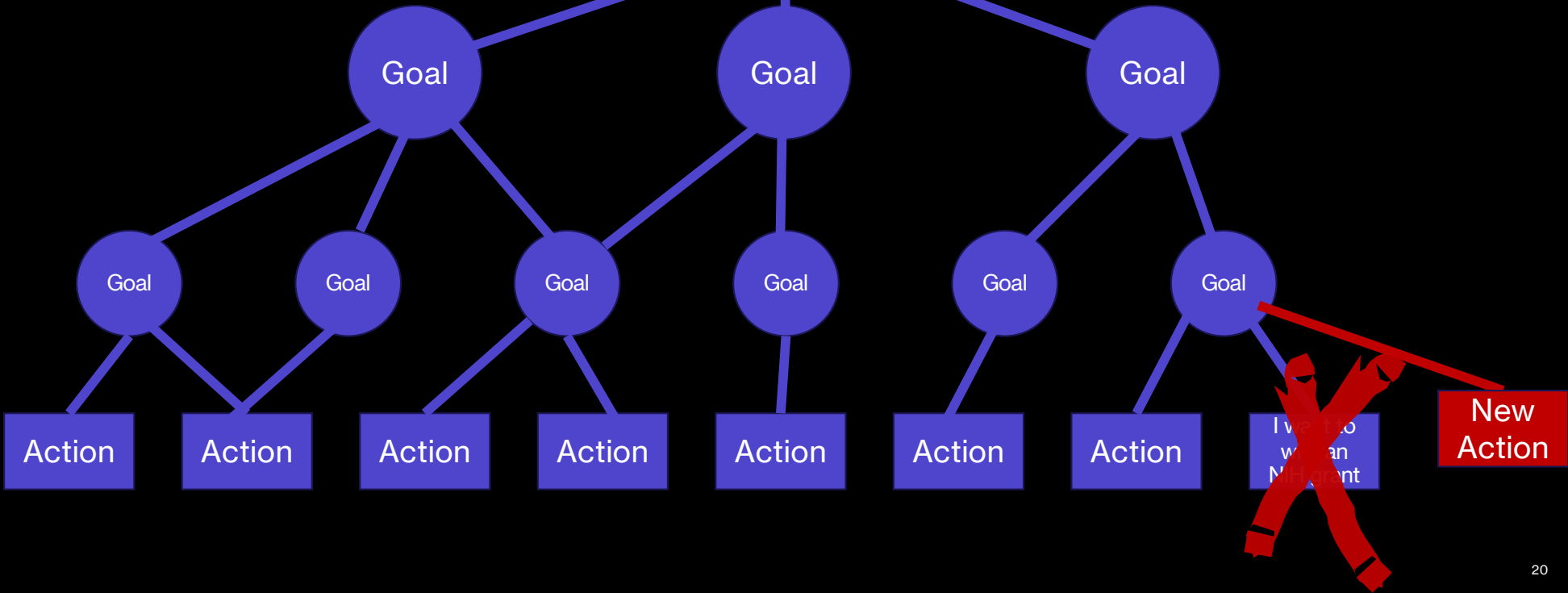




**THIS** is what tended to happen...

I want to be a freaking great life scientist

Cure diseases, help people, save the world...



# Researcher Discussion

*“These results document that an early-career setback has powerful, opposing effects, hurting some careers, but also, quite surprisingly, strengthening outcomes for others .”*

Unobservable dimensions:

- Effort
- Grit

**Who tends to be the most vulnerable, and who the most resilient?**

# What might be going on: Growth Mindset

## Fixed Mindset

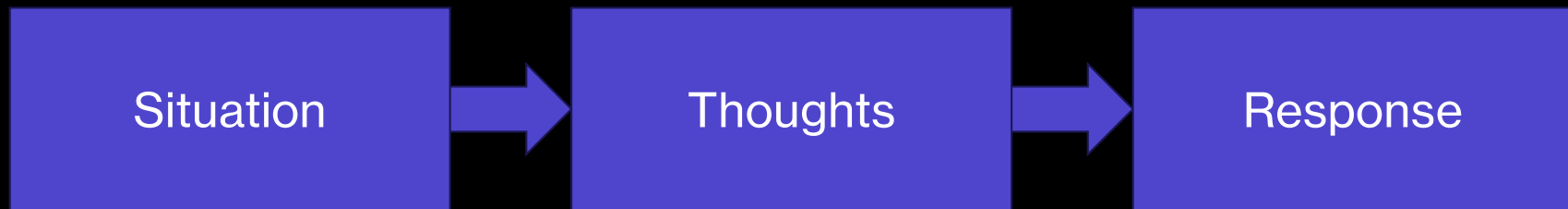
- Intelligence is static
- Desire to look smart
- Tendency to avoid challenges
- “Failure tells me my limits.”
- “I am good at something, or I am not.”

## Growth Mindset

- Intelligence can be developed
- Desire to learn
- Tendency to embrace challenges
- “Challenges help me grow.”
- “I can’t do this...**yet\***.”

**Growth Mindset → Optimism**

# How do you respond to failure?



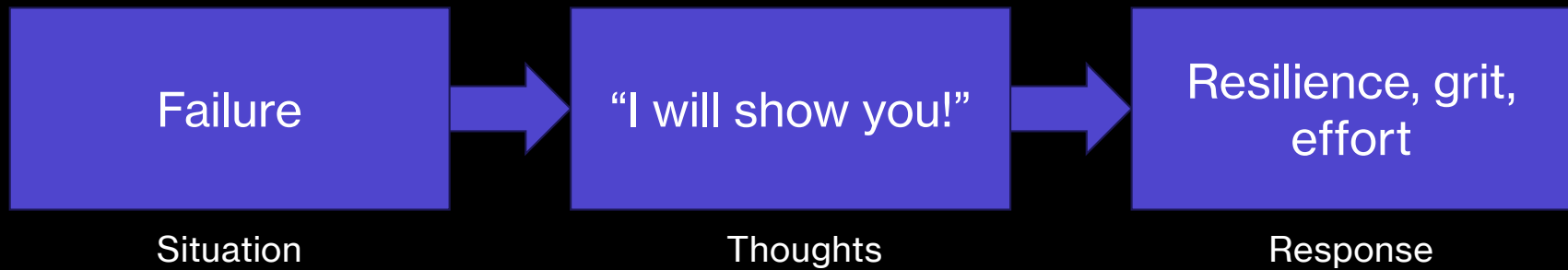
# How do you respond to failure?



**“I give up!”**



# How do you respond to failure?



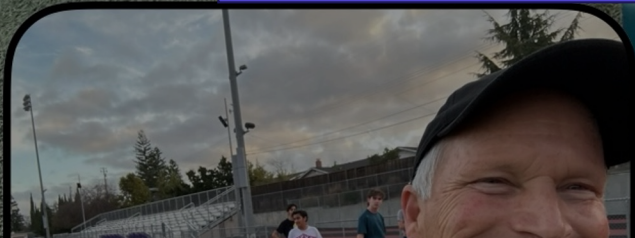
**“I’ll show you!”**

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# How We Process Our Failures Matters

“I give up!”

“I will show you!”



Bereal.

# A Virtuous Cycle



Park, D., Tsukayama, E., Yu, A., & Duckworth, A. L. (2020). The development of grit and growth mindset during adolescence. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 198*, 104889.

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# A couple of caveats!

If Angela were here, she might have a couple pieces of advice for you...



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**Beating your head against a wall is not a noble thing! We don't need to seek out or provide roadblocks for the sake of a 'challenge.'**

“Results do not imply that one should strategically put roadblocks in the way of junior scientists....the precondition of becoming stronger is to not be killed in the first place. The findings do suggest, however, that for those who persevere, early failure should not be taken as a negative signal – but rather the opposite, in line with Shinya Yamanaka's advice to young scientists, after winning the Nobel prize for the discovery of iPS cells, “I can see any failure as a chance.” “

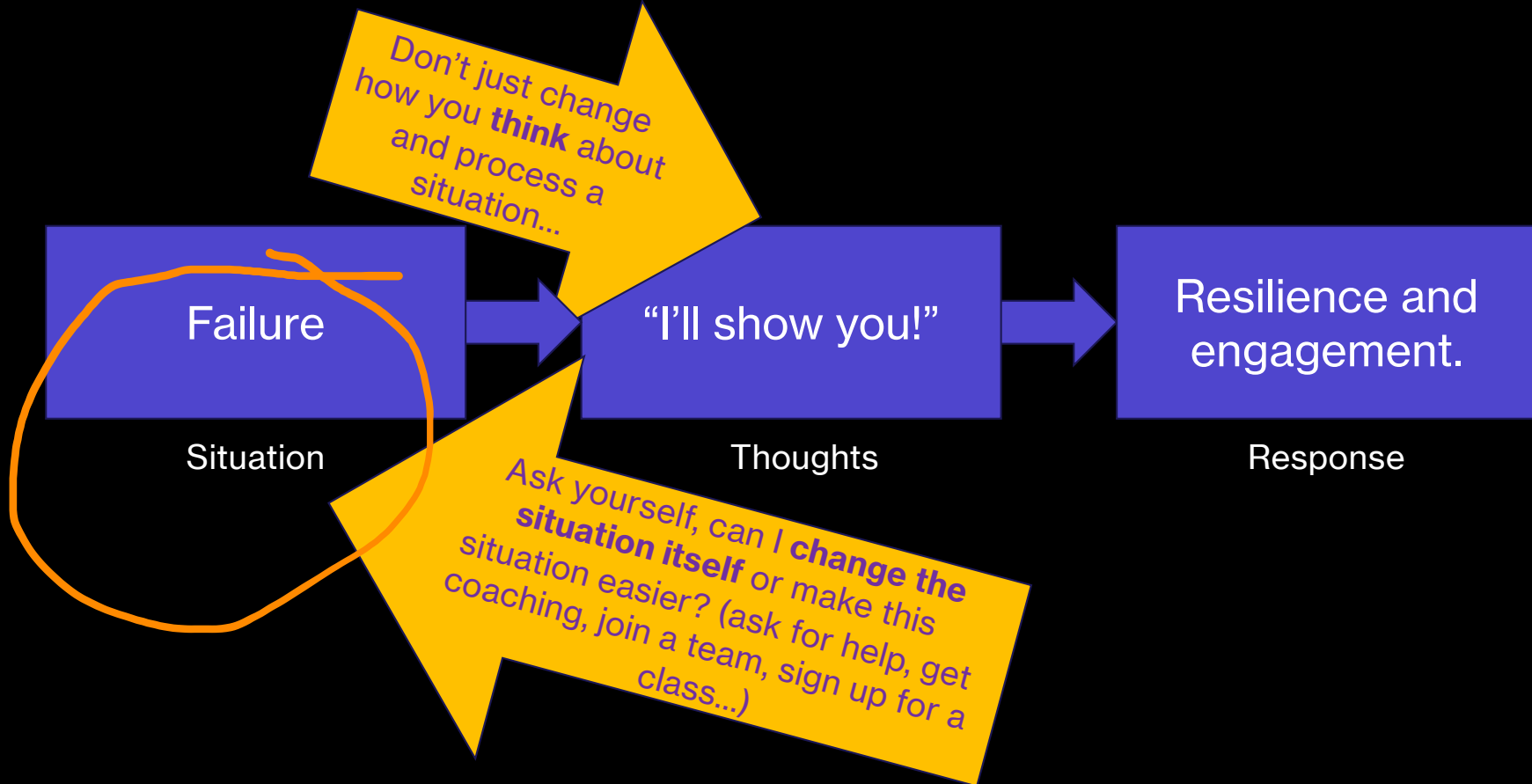
*~Dashun Wang et al*

**“No pain, no gain” is a misguided notion.**

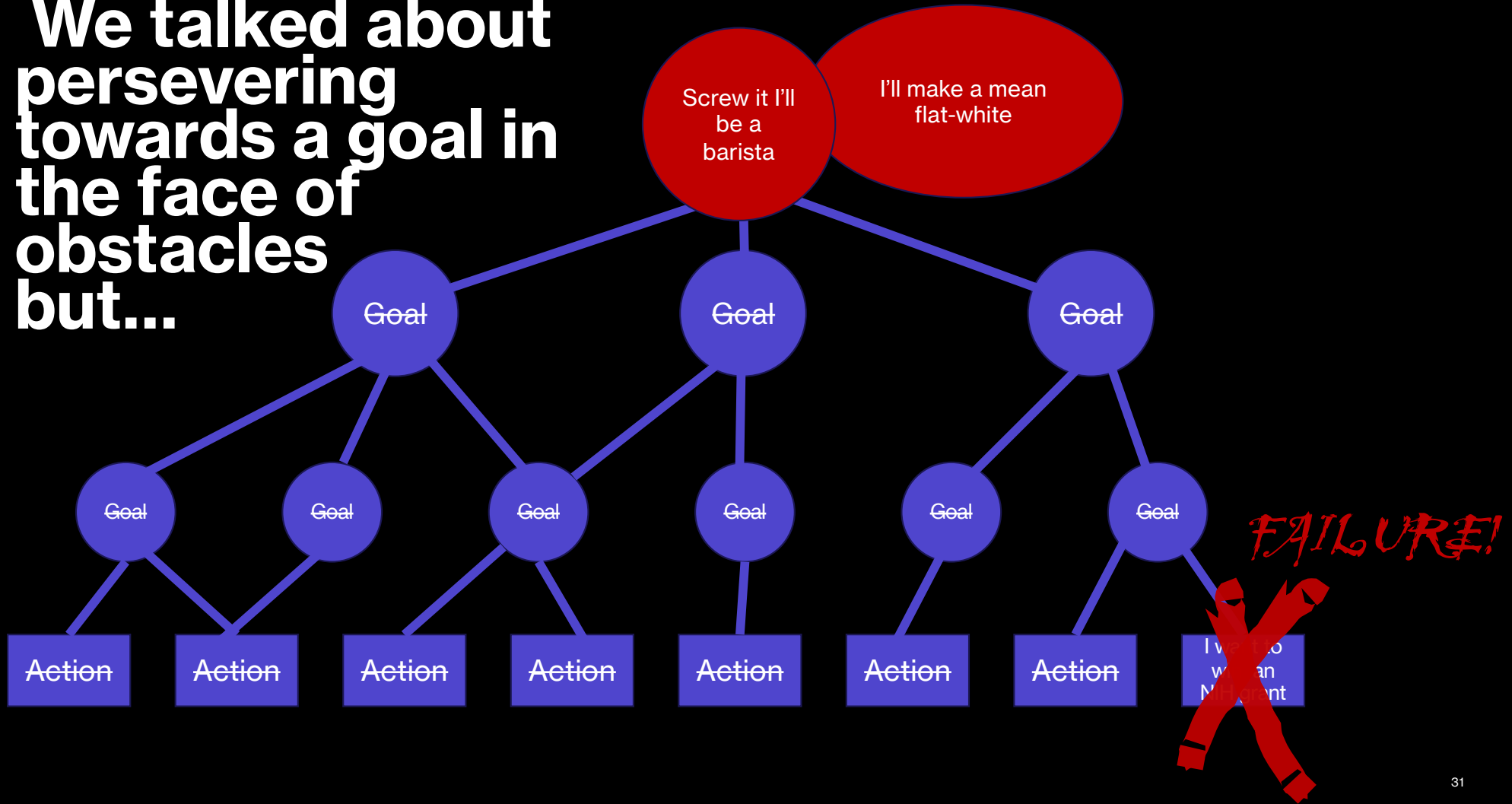


# Can you change your situation?

Go back and look at the prior box...that box is not always set in stone.



We talked about persevering towards a goal in the face of obstacles but...



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**Grit is not  
slavish  
devotion to  
a goal.**

**Angela Duckworth, the  
Queen of Grit, would tell  
you it can be OK to  
change your goal –  
especially at your age.**

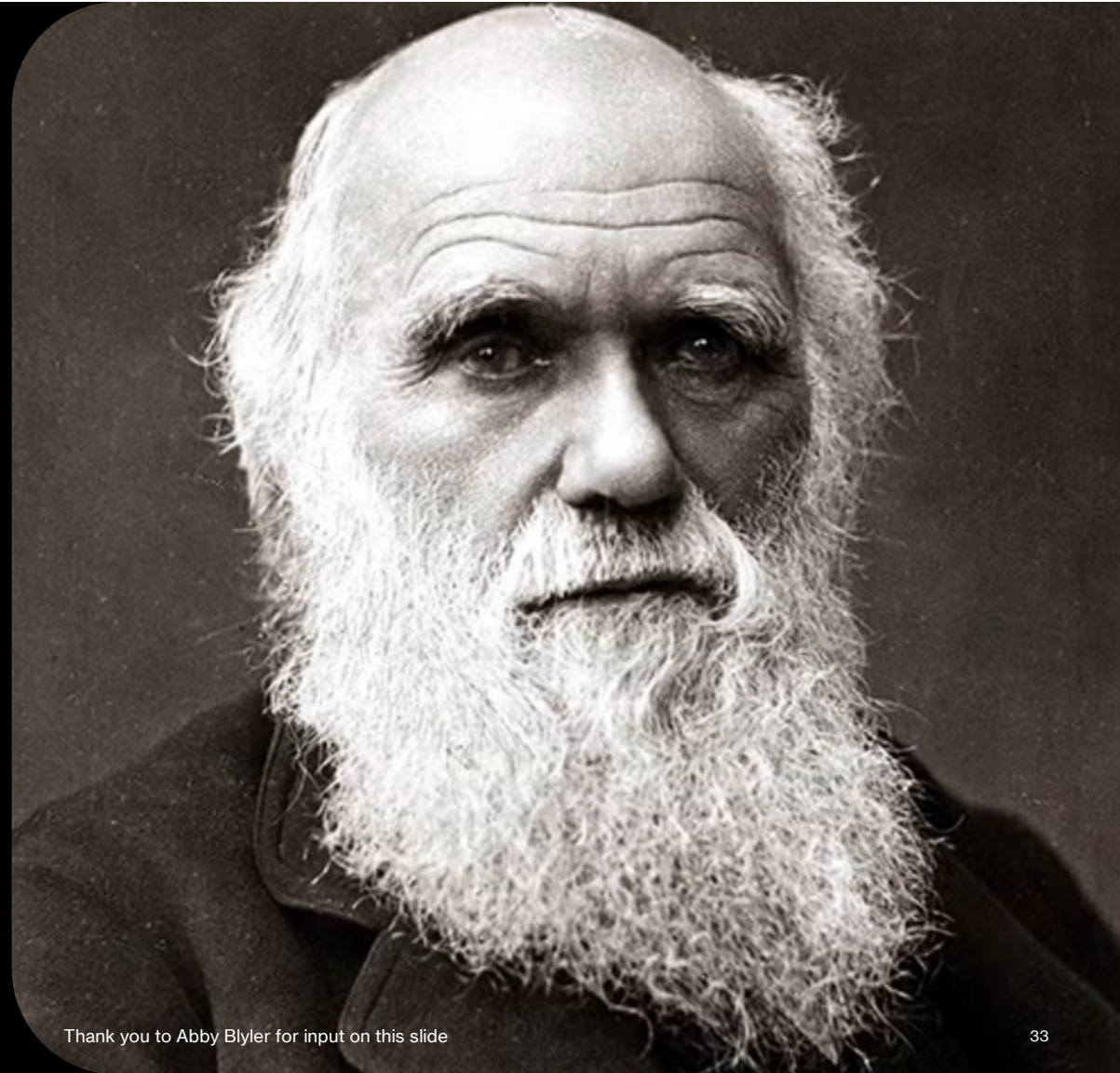


# Failure, or frustration, or just having a bad day

“But I am very poorly today  
and very stupid and hate  
everybody and everything.”

Charles Darwin

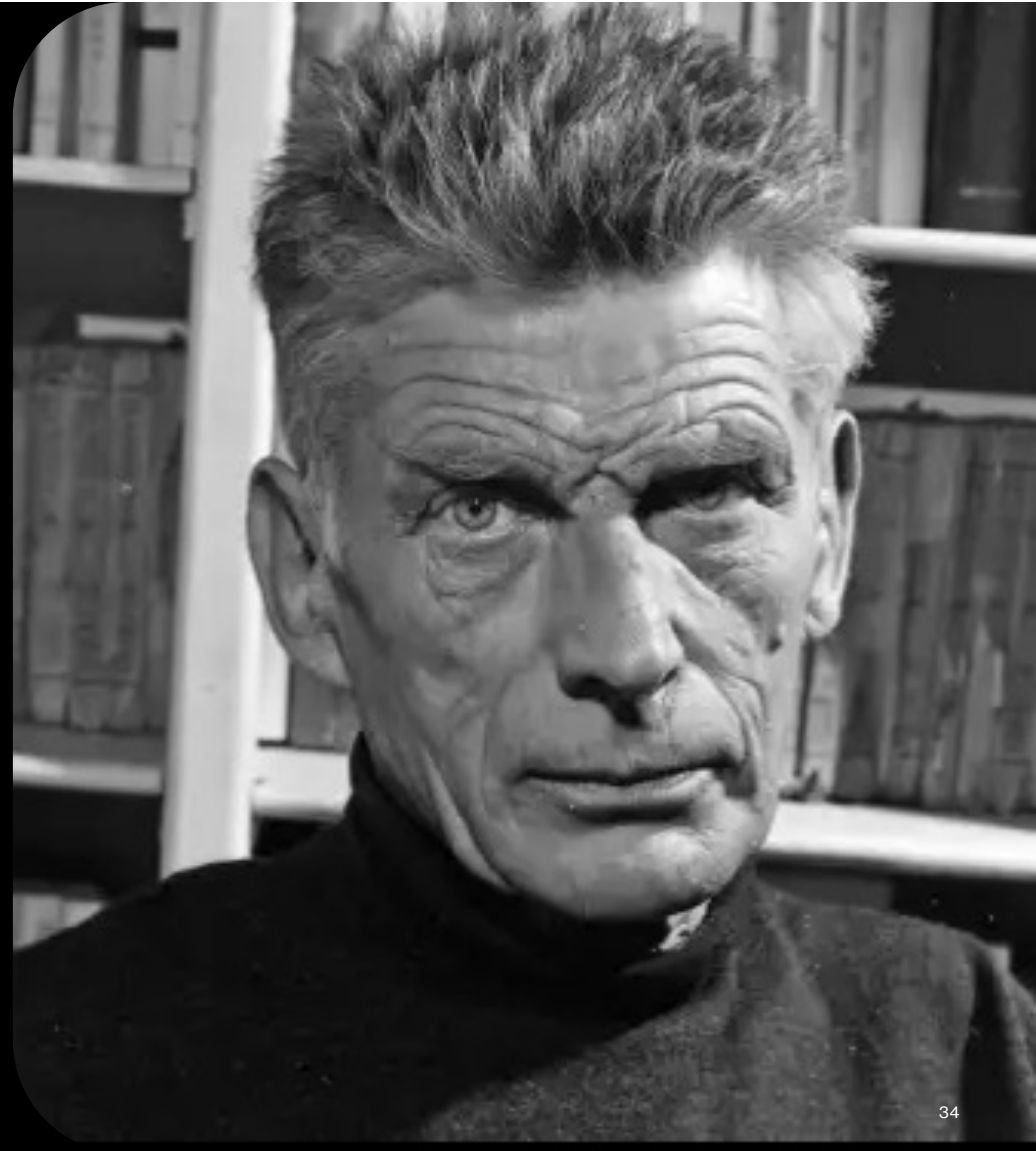
Maybe don't make life altering  
decisions when you are feeling at  
your worst; don't quit on a bad day.  
Ask yourself, “Am I also having a  
really bad day?” and if so, maybe  
delay the decision to pivot or quit.



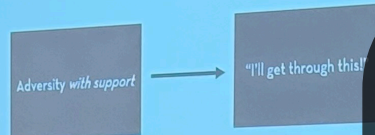
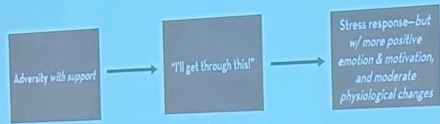
Thank you to Abby Blyler for input on this slide

**“Ever tried.  
Ever failed.  
No Matter.  
Try again.  
Fail again.  
Fail *better*.”**

***Samuel Beckett***



3/16/25



# Thank you to Angela Duckworth

This presentation was inspired by and heavily borrows from her class *Leading With Grit* at the Wharton School/University of Pennsylvania, February 18, 2025.

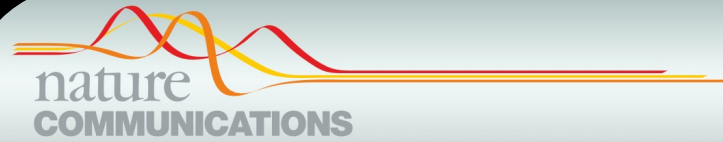
Thank you also to Abby Blyler and Jodi Wellman for comments on drafts of this slide deck.

WITH MUCH GRATITUDE, ANGELA, I COULD NOT DO THIS WITHOUT YOU!

# Later:

I went through this quickly in the classroom. I encourage students to go back and carefully read the article abstract, think about it and discuss it. Parents too! I think this is interesting/thought provoking/worth discussing. This is interesting research that can help us all think about our situations.

*-Coach Flatow*



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