

Max Irzhak: (00:01)

What would life look like if every risk you took ended in success? That one simple question took my next guest on a lifelong journey to discover that rejection is merely opportunity in disguise. And in today's episode, you'll learn why success isn't measured by the outcome and why at the end of every rejection, we win or we learn, but we never lose. This is Motivational Mondays. I'm your host Max Irzhak and joining us is the New York Times bestselling author, Harlan Cohen. Harlan, great to have you with us.

Harlan Cohen: (00:31)

Hey max, it's great to be here. Thanks for accepting me and not rejecting me today, although we're early in the conversation. So I don't know how it's going to go.

Max Irzhak: (00:39)

Yeah, you never know. Let's talk about fear. Fear of asking someone out, fear of raising your hand in class or at work fear of standing up for something you believe in. Why are people so afraid of rejection in the first place? What's at the root of this fear?

Harlan Cohen: (00:54)

Rejection is pain. Our brains process rejection, the same way. It processes physical pain. There's actually been research and science on the physiology. So when it comes to fear of rejection and saying what we want and going after the things that really align with our purpose and passion, there's something deeper going on. So anybody who's like, gosh, you know, why can't I do this? It's because, you know, it's painful if you really care and really want it. And a lot of people have been through a lot of pain and discomfort and they just don't want one more thing to cause more pain and discomfort. So we tend to avoid taking risks where we aren't, uh, assured of the outcome and, and that's where it starts to snowball.

Max Irzhak: (01:37)

Interesting. Why do people get rejected? Is that a breakdown in how they're communicating what they want? Is it merely bad luck? What are some of the reasons we hear the word? No.

Harlan Cohen: (01:51)

Well, you know, there is a truth of the universe. It's a law of nature. It's unavoidable. And I really think it should be on the periodic table of elements. And if I were to give it initials, I would, I would label it. U R T and the U R T is an unavoidable irrefutable law of nature that says not everyone and everything will always respond to me the way I want everyone in everything to respond. It is a law of nature. And this is something that we don't, we don't learn about. We're not taught. And when we encounter rejection, we take it so personally, and we get so confused because we think, how could someone not want me? You know, I'm so interesting. I'm so attractive. I'm so dynamic. I'm so charismatic. I'm so talented. I'm all these things. And I say this and I'm still, and you know, I reject myself and I'm like, you know, please, you know, everyone listening, don't think I'm talking about me.

Harlan Cohen: (02:50)

What I'm talking about is *you*, because *you* are all of those things. But growing up, we learned that we are less, the game is to make everybody feel like less, so we can all feel like more. And then we don't recognize that there's this truth of nature that says not everyone and everything is going to respond to me the way I want. And we start internalizing rejection thinking that we're not worthy and deserving, which complicates everything. So when we get rejected and hear this, we get very confused. So I want everyone to recognize there's this truth, this universal rejection truth. And you can be amazing, interesting, dynamic, intelligent, attractive, charismatic, all these things and not everyone will always respond to you the way you want. And there's only one thing that you should do. And that's accept this and embrace it

Max Irzhak: (03:44)

In your mind. Is there a difference between the fear of rejection and the fear of failure?

Harlan Cohen: (03:51)

So I think that we, so I think that what we do is we complicate the two, we mesh the two, we look at rejection as failure and we take it. So personally, we look at it as something that is a reflection of our self-worth and value. And we confuse the two because rejection is not failing. Rejection is just not getting what you want. The first time rejection is about learning about an experience. And it's about processing feedback. It's about taking that information and figuring out what can I do so that I can get the results I desire when we look at it as failure, we're internalizing it, we're making it so personal. And, and, and then we ended up beating ourselves up because you know, that doesn't feel good, but when you could recognize rejection and what it is, and also embrace the universal rejection truth, you're able to reframe rejection.

Harlan Cohen: (04:43)

So it's not about winning or losing. It's not about failure. It's really about winning or learning and being in a place where you can listen and process when you don't always get what you want. So I, I mean, no, it is, it is, it is not failing. Thomas Edison would say, you know, you failed, uh, you know, a thousand times till he created, uh, you know, the electricity or the light bulb or, and, uh, all of a sudden, you know, you look at those failures as a part of the process to get you to the desired outcome.

Max Irzhak: (05:15)

You mentioned something really interesting. That's come up a couple of times with other guests. When we hear the word, no, for a lot of people, it means that the door is shut. That's it? There's no way forward. It's the final input. But in reality, good leaders, they find a way to push past that barrier to ultimately get to the yes. Do you think about it the same way?

Harlan Cohen: (05:42)

Yeah. I think no. Is, is, is part of the conversation. I mean, it's someone saying that what you want, they don't want. And when someone says no, instead of trying to get them to say, yes, well, I flipped the switch of, gosh, I'm trying to why, you know, I'm curious because no sparks my curiosity. So when you know, you have value, when you know you're good enough, when you

know that you're worthy and deserving of something, when someone says no, instead of getting frustrated and attacking or hating or hiding, or trying to manipulate, or turn the tables in your favor, uh, you can ask why, but here's the problem. Max, when you ask someone why they might tell you the truth, you know, they might say, Harlan, your ears are big. I know you guys can't see me, but my ears are big. My ears are huge.

Harlan Cohen: (06:30)

One woman told me on the dance floor, I stepped on her foot and she turned to me and she was like, what the? Your heirs are huge. And I tried to be cool. And I'm like, Hey, do you find that attractive? And she goes, no, you're ugly. And for the rest of the night, I felt like a big air walking around the dance floor. And, uh, that did not feel very good. So we live in this world where there are so many people who are going to tell us and, and, and say certain things to us that will hurt our feelings. But when we recognize that there's this truth of the universe, and when we feel good enough, when someone says no, or someone says your ears are big, or someone says, you didn't get the job, or someone says not now, well then all of a sudden it becomes, thank you for being so honest.

Harlan Cohen: (07:15)

I really appreciate your honesty. I'm just curious why, like, that's the that's, that is the gift. Like that is the gold. When someone says no, and you, and then you say why, I'm just curious why, and you say it with respect and you say it with genuine curiosity. All of a sudden, they think who is this person? Like, they actually care why, you know, my whole career was built and has continued to be built on people saying, no, you know, I became a syndicated advice columnist, uh, nine years after I graduated college. And for nine years people said no. And every time someone said no, these high level executives who would reject my advice, column submissions, I would call them on the phone. And I would say, thank you so much for reviewing my materials. Uh, I wanted to know if I could ask you a couple of questions about my submission. And every time they were so kind, and I built relationships with people because they rejected me. And because I learned why, and the reasons why I didn't get syndicated and didn't get the job I wanted. Uh, it wasn't because I wasn't good enough. It was because of all of these other circumstances that made it not a possibility, but eventually those circumstances changed. And I was offered two contracts from two of the largest syndicates in the world. And then I was the one who rejected one of them.

Max Irzhak: (08:39)

Uh, life is all about building our team. You teach people to build their support system that will be there for them when they do get rejected. Can you talk a little more about this notion of people, places and patience?

Harlan Cohen: (08:54)

The question I have for all of you, and even for you, max, is what do you want? Like, what do you want, what do you want? That's going to excite you when you want, that's going to create light. What do you want? That's going to fill you with energy. A lot of people struggle even going after what they want. A lot of people struggle answering this question, especially when we get

so beaten and bruised. So you gotta want something, you got to give yourself permission to want something. That's so key. Something that sparks that excitement and joy. Like I want to help as many people as possible to be great at wanting and going after what they want to create the support system, the dynamics, so that they can tolerate discomfort and continue to move on. So to answer the question you have to start with, what do you want when you want something that's big and bold enough, it's going to be uncomfortable, right?

Harlan Cohen: (09:46)

Especially if it's something where there's an emotional attachment. And the only way to work through that discomfort is to first recognize that you can be worthy and deserving and not always get what you want the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, who knows how many times, but you can still be worthy and deserving. So don't let that stop you. But in order to tolerate the discomfort that comes with not always getting what we want, we need people, places and passions. We need our five people, our people in our corner, who we can turn to people who will love us, but will also tell us the truth. We want people who are going to not just tell us what we want to hear, but what we need to hear. So we find those people. And then we find places, places where we can always find connection and community places where we can always be included places where we can always share what it really makes us uncomfortable so that we can work through the why and be able to move forward.

Harlan Cohen: (10:51)

Then we need to be patient because everything is cyclical. You know, we've all faced a lot of discomfort over the past. We've all been pushed and what I've seen it, yeah. Is the people who struggled the most. They didn't have their people. They didn't have their places. They got impatient. And they panicked those who found joy, who were able to still connect virtually or in some capacity to their people and their places were able to work through it and get patient and be patient. A lot of first-generation students, underrepresented students, they go to PA, they go to campuses and they don't have their people in places. A lot of students who have had a lot of success while all of a sudden they're in a place where they don't have people in places and they struggle. And they start to question themselves. When you go from college to career, you're in a new environment where you don't have friends, you don't know people, but you have to find people in the places within organizations where you can find support and connection and community. Because if we circle back to what I mentioned earlier, our bodies have a physiological reaction when it comes to rejection and just like a boxer who gets beaten and bruised in order to tolerate the pain and discomfort that comes with going after what you want, you need to build the emotional tolerance. You need to train, you need to work. And the only way to do that is if you have people and places and patients, and understand this universal truth of nature,

Max Irzhak: (12:13)

Many of our listeners will soon be graduating from college and applying to their first jobs and internships. And inevitably many of them will get rejected. What's your advice for dealing with that sharp's thing of rejection when they don't get the job?

Harlan Cohen: (12:26)

First thing you have to do is celebrate. You're amazing. You're incredible. You took a risk, you put yourself out there. So like, you're amazing. You're incredible. And you are in an incredible position of power. Now you're thinking like, wow, like Harlan, I got rejected. How am I in an incredible position of power? So now you're in a position of power because you can ask the question why, and what you're going to do is learn. It's going to be incredible because all of a sudden, you're going to discover something that you might be able to change or something you might not be able to change. And you're going to build a relationship with someone who's in a position of power and influence. And the minute you can say, thank you. I just wanted to understand why is the minute that you distinguish yourself from everyone else? Because this is not just a one and done.

Harlan Cohen: (13:09)

This is a long game. And it gives you an incredible opportunity to do this. You also now can take what you've received in terms of the feedback. And you can turn to your people. You can turn to your advisor, you can turn to someone in the career center. You can turn to a mentor. You can turn to the people who have been in your corner, who have been helping you along the way. And you can use that information to grow and improve. There was a student. I was talking to a first gen student the other day, he applied to a hundred internships. He applied to a hundred, he got 10 responses back. From those 10, he had an interview and got rejected from those 10. He turned to his advisor and shared his experience. This advisor offered him some feedback. He also then was introduced to someone from Microsoft.

Harlan Cohen: (13:56)

The advisor introduced him to someone at Microsoft. Well now, because he had all of these experiences. He walked into this meeting with the Microsoft individual, with confidence, with clarity. He had practiced. And now the kid, he got an internship at Microsoft. He got the internship. So it was collectively this experience of putting yourself out there, feeling what it's like to interview, getting wonderful feedback, turning to the people in your corner that ultimately helps you. And you know, any of those people who said no, now you've got a wonderful relationship with those people because you're going to see them during your professional journey. It's a gift. Congratulations.

Max Irzhak: (14:35)

While learning to embrace rejection is fantastic. The ultimate goal is to get what we want. How can people get better at getting a yes.

Harlan Cohen: (14:46)

Yeah. We've talked a lot about rejection and even the word rejection invokes some, you know, people don't like to hear it. They don't want to talk about it. They don't want to think about it. And, and thanks max for reminding me. I mean, the goal is yes, we want to get the things we want. And the way to get a yes is to make sure that you are comfortable with no, because the only way that you're going to listen and grow and improve is if you're willing to get any response. I've been going through this exercise where I release myself of expectations, meaning that when

I walk into a situation, no one is required to say or do anything other than what they're going to say or do. So, no one's required to give me anything. And when I walk into a situation like this in this mindset, all of a sudden I've really surrendered and I can be present and I can listen so many times we're so tied to the outcome that we get.

Harlan Cohen: (15:38)

so worried about the conversation and the engagement we could. So worried about the no that we can't listen. It's kind of like if you have a crush on someone and you walk up to that person and your heart's racing, and in your mind, you kind of have a script and you don't really listen to what they say. And then after you ask them, you know, a couple of questions, maybe, you know, you know, uh, about the weather or about a class, you have nothing else to say. It's because you weren't really listening. You were so afraid of no, that your mind was racing. When I was conducting my risk-taking experiment in the world of dating, uh, I had a rule that I had to approach. Like I said, anyone who gave me that feeling, and there was a woman in Starbucks who I found interesting, and she was reading a textbook.

Harlan Cohen: (16:20)

So I walked up to her and in my mind I had a script and it was she's reading a textbook. So she probably, uh, is a student and she probably lives in the area. So I was going to say hi, because it's nice to just know people in the area. So that was my script. And I walked up to her, I go, excuse me, are you a student? She said, yeah. And I said, Do you live in the area? And she said, no. And I said, oh —because I didn't have a script for that. I was so focused on getting what I wanted, that I couldn't listen. So I said, oh, that's great. Thanks. And then I walked away and it's like, Who are you?

Harlan Cohen: (16:56)

When you're great at no, it becomes very easy to listen. And when you listen and you can actually have a wonderful back and forth, you can build rapport, you can find a deeper connection. And that connection and rapport is going to ultimately help you to get to that. Yes. So being great at no helps you to be an amazing listener, which can help you to get to yes.

Max Irzhak: (17:21)

And part of listening that you sort of spoke about is having a contingency plan, right. When things don't go according to plan, what are you going to do? I think that's just as equally as important.

Harlan Cohen: (17:33)

Yeah. I think walking into a conversation, uh, being less focused on getting something and more focused on learning something, it really changes the whole game. You know, when, when I, when I encourage people to take it, what do you want to learn? You know, what are you interested in? What are you curious about? Because if you're interested in learning something and you have questions that genuinely reflect something that's core to you, then you can have a really successful conversation because you're genuinely curious, and you're not looking for someone to say or do one thing or another. So this is where if you have a genuine interest and

you can express that and walk into a conversation with questions, then it becomes a really wonderful experience. And you leave with something of value.

Max Irzhak: (18:27)

And since a lot of our audience today are college students. That mindset is just as crucial when it comes to networking, because a lot of people approach networking as I'm here to get something out of these people that I'm talking to. But if you shift that mindset and you actually walk in with, 'I am genuinely curious about the folks in this room, and I want to learn about them'—it changes the entire game.

Harlan Cohen: (18:50)

Totally. It changes everything. What do I want to learn about these individuals? You know, what am I curious about? And then all of a sudden it becomes this really fun exchange, uh, because it's not like, want me hire me, uh, notice me. It's you have done some things that I'm really just fascinated with. I mean, whenever I do an interview, I try to get a handle on who this person is and what are the areas where we have some common threads so I can learn. And if there's something that I'm not familiar with, gosh, like I want to know what that's like. I wanna know what it's like to be on the set of a movie with someone who's so famous and you being a PA and having to interact, and then somehow building a relationship with that person.

Harlan Cohen: (19:44)

There's another person that would be interviewing. So I love interviewing people because like, you guys have the most amazing stories. And I walk into an interview curious, and, and that's what networking is. Networking is not networking. Networking is learning, that's it, I'm in a learning situation where I want to meet interesting people who have fascinating life experiences. And when you walk into a situation like that, it becomes easy. When you're interviewing for a job, walk into it with an understanding of what makes you curious, what makes you interested in the person who's there. Who is that person and what are their life experiences? And you can ask them about that because that's the human part that connects us. And that's really what people love. And, that's what they enjoy.

Max Irzhak: (20:28)

What's your approach for setting goals and then making them a reality?

Harlan Cohen: (20:34)

So I'm a big fan of jumping to the future. And one of the steps in the winter learn book is tell your story as if -so, when you tell your story, as if it's already happened, you really change your mindset. You your brain into actually feeling what it's like to achieve, what it is you desire, smelling what it's like to be in that office. Uh, imagining what the sounds are like, imagining what it feels like to sit at your desk and imagining all those things. Now it's scary to do that because if we don't get that, then all of a sudden, well, we're setting ourselves up to get hurt. But the thing is like, your brain doesn't know the difference. So give it the joy of experiencing it. So when you tell your story, as if you leapfrog the fear and anxiety, you get to the place you want to be, then you deconstruct. So deconstructing means saying, let's say, let's pick a date in the future.

Harlan Cohen: (21:25)

It's one week in the future, I had the most incredible week. I accomplished filling in the blank. The most challenging part was filling in the blank. I was able to work through the discomfort by leaning on these people. I found help in these places. Uh, it took me this amount of time to get what I want. I'm so proud of myself in this experience. So all of a sudden, now we know what that's like. We felt it, we've experienced it. And it makes it so much easier for us to then take action to go after the things we want. So creating goals based on jumping into the future, whether it's one week, three months, a year, setting that date and then deconstructing, and then reaching out to the people in the places who are going to help you, who you visualize, who you've seen, who can help you. And if you can't come up with three places and three people then find one person and say, hey, you know, who are some other people that I could reach out to, to help me to get where I want to go? Because I feel like I'm already there.

Max Irzhak: (22:20)

You have this fantastic new book 'Win or Learn.' What's the number one lesson you want readers to walk away with after reading it,

Harlan Cohen: (22:28)

It's going to be okay, no matter what. It is going to be okay, no matter what. And we're so afraid of taking a risk and saying what we think and expressing how we feel, because we're so, we're so scared. It's not going to be okay, but it's going to be okay. It will be okay because it's always okay. And it really is. And anyone can challenge me on this and I can tell you, you know what, no matter what happens, there's a way to make it okay. And when you have people in places and when you can embrace the universal rejection truth. And when you can tell your story as if it's happened and learn to celebrate, reflect, and repeat and do this again, and again, and again, you become unstoppable. You become unstoppable. And I truly believe that when people read this book and it's a simple book, it's an easy book. You read it in like a couple hours. It's got big print and pictures, but when you, you can digest this and actually apply the steps. Want something, get comfortable with the uncomfortable, people, places, patience, tell your story as if to celebrate, reflect and repeat. If you do this again and again, and again, your world opens up and you start to live a life that's really bright and hopeful, and you become someone who can help others to continue to move forward and do the same.

Max Irzhak: (23:39)

How can people learn more and find additional tools to embrace rejection?

Harlan Cohen: (23:44)

Well, every day just asking yourself the question, what do I want? You know, what do I want to create? What do I want to experience? What do I want to change? And leaning into that and opening yourself up to that and experimenting with that. Because every single day we encounter these feelings and every single day, I know me. I mean, I'm, I'm an expert on this. I struggle with it. I'm challenged every single day. And when I have that feeling, I think, all right, I'm going to embrace this truth and I'm gonna push through it. And amazing things happen. So for anyone

who wants to experiment with risk-taking and go after what they want, you know, I'm in their corner. I'm excited to be here with you, to help you along the way. You can find me on YouTube.

Harlan Cohen: ([24:30](#))

You can find me on Tik TOK. You can find me on LinkedIn, Harlancohen.com. That's where you can reach out to me. I get back to people. And if I ever reject you, know that I probably didn't see it, or it got lost in my inbox. So reach out to me again, because I really care. Oh, and this is the last thing, Max, if I don't get back to you, you could write, I thought you cared. Right? Cause when people say, I thought you cared. I'm like, oh man, oh man, I care. So please use that carefully. But I really do care. And I believe that you can do and be anything. And I'm just grateful to be in your corner.

Max Irzhak: ([25:05](#))

One of the best answers I've heard to that question. That's awesome to close this off, Harlan, a huge thank you for your time and for teaching us to find victory in every risk, that success isn't measured by the outcome, and most importantly, to stop living in fear, go out there and take a chance.

Harlan Cohen: ([25:23](#))

Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity to share. I'm just so grateful. And I look forward to continuing this conversation.

Max Irzhak: ([25:32](#))

That's awesome. Thanks again for being here. We'll see you all next time on motivational Mondays.