



## Cognitive Appraisal and Psychological-Behavioral Responses After Selection Failure: A Systematic Literature Review

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### Abstract

Selection failure in educational, occupational, training, and certification settings is an evaluative event that may trigger psychological distress, self-doubt, avoidance tendencies, and reconsideration of future plans. Yet these responses cannot be explained solely by the difficulty of the selection process; they are also shaped by how individuals evaluate the meaning of the event and the resources available to cope with it. This systematic review maps the cognitive appraisal components most consistently examined, especially primary appraisal of threat, challenge, harm/loss, and benefit, as well as secondary appraisal of perceived control and self-efficacy, and explains their links with post-failure psychological and behavioral responses. Following PRISMA 2020 principles, 500 records were identified, 62 full-text articles were assessed, and 12 studies were included in the core synthesis. The findings show that threat-dominant appraisal and low perceived control are more consistently associated with psychological distress, avoidance coping, and lower persistence. In contrast, challenge/benefit appraisal and stronger secondary appraisal tend to relate to more constructive coping, adaptive performance, and greater readiness to reattempt. These findings underline cognitive appraisal as a key mechanism for understanding post-selection-failure responses.

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## Introduction

Failure in educational, employment, training, or certification selection processes is not merely a matter of not being accepted. Such experiences can generate psychological distress, feelings of shame,

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anxiety, diminished self-confidence, withdrawal tendencies, and doubts about future plans. For some individuals, failure leads to disengagement and avoidance of subsequent evaluations. For others, however, failure becomes a starting point for improving strategies, learning from mistakes, and trying again. This difference suggests that what matters is not only the selection outcome itself, but also how individuals interpret and respond to the experience.

Within the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping, responses to stressful events are explained through the process of cognitive appraisal regarding the meaning of a situation and the resources available to cope with it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1991). Primary appraisal concerns whether a situation is perceived as a threat, challenge, harm/loss, or benefit. Secondary appraisal refers to whether individuals perceive themselves as having control, confidence in their abilities, social support, and effective coping strategies to deal with the situation (Bandura, 1977). Following the initial response, individuals may also engage in reappraisal by interpreting the event more adaptively, for example by reconstructing the meaning of the experience or shifting their focus from loss to learning opportunities (Gross, 1998).

Previous studies have shown that experiencing failure does not automatically lead to learning. Fear of failure, negative perceptions of failure, and reluctance to engage in self-evaluation may sustain psychological distress and promote less effective coping strategies (Conroy et al., 2002; Eskreis-Winkler & Fishbach, 2019, 2022; Tao et al., 2022). Therefore, selection failure should be viewed not only as an event but also as a psychological experience shaped by cognitive appraisal processes. In this article, the term *psychological and behavioral responses following selection failure* is used to encompass psychological distress, coping strategies, tendencies toward avoidance or persistence, changes in adaptive functioning, and readiness to try again. This term allows for a more focused discussion that extends beyond a single consequence, as research indicates that the impacts of selection failure emerge in several interconnected forms.

Recent studies have examined cognitive appraisal across various contexts, including sports, workplaces, classrooms, health settings, entrepreneurship, post-disaster tourism, and crisis situations. A recurring pattern suggests that appraisals dominated by threat perceptions and low perceived control are more frequently associated with psychological distress, negative emotions, and avoidant coping strategies. In contrast, appraisals emphasizing challenge, benefit, and strong secondary appraisal are more often linked to psychological well-being, adaptive functioning, learning from mistakes, and more constructive coping strategies (Chu et al., 2022; Crowe & Sarma, 2022; Fernandez De Henestrosa et al., 2023; Götz et al., 2020; Jordan & Prayag, 2022; Kleine et al., 2024; Krok et al., 2023; Majeed & Naseer, 2021; Mansell, 2021; Maurin & Martinent, 2023; Riepenhausen et al., 2022). However, studies that directly investigate individuals following selection failure remain limited. Therefore, a synthesis focusing on cognitive appraisal mechanisms is still needed as a foundation for future research in this context.

Based on this background, this review aims to: (1) identify the cognitive appraisal components most frequently examined in the literature; (2) explain their relationship with psychological and behavioral responses following selection failure; and (3) formulate conceptual implications for future research on individuals who experience selection failure, particularly regarding persistence and the decision to try again.

## Methods

This review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The literature search was carried out using academic databases and search engines listed in

the author's working documents, employing combinations of keywords such as *cognitive appraisal*, *threat appraisal*, *challenge appraisal*, *selection failure*, *entrepreneurial errors*, *coping potential*, *failure*, *coping strategies*, *perceived control*, *resilience*, and *cognitive reappraisal*. For the core synthesis, relevant empirical studies and systematic reviews published within the last seven years (2019–2025) were prioritized, while classical theoretical works were used to provide the conceptual foundation.

The inclusion criteria for the core studies were as follows: (a) empirical articles or systematic reviews that had undergone peer review; (b) studies that explicitly measured or reviewed components of cognitive appraisal, such as threat, challenge, harm/loss, benefit, perceived control, coping potential, or self-efficacy; (c) studies that examined or synthesized the relationships between these components and indicators of psychological and behavioral responses, including psychological distress, emotions, coping strategies, adaptive functioning, health behaviors, learning processes, or persistence-related decisions; and (d) studies for which the full text was available for evaluation. Purely conceptual papers, editorials, or studies that did not clearly measure cognitive appraisal were excluded from the core synthesis, although some were used as supporting narrative references.

According to the study selection records, 500 articles were identified during the identification stage, with no duplicate records found ( $n = 0$ ). Subsequently, all 500 articles underwent title and abstract screening, resulting in the exclusion of 438 articles. A total of 62 articles proceeded to full-text assessment, after which 50 articles were excluded for not meeting the criteria for the core synthesis. Ultimately, 12 studies were included in the core synthesis. Two additional articles were used as cross-contextual narrative support to enrich the discussion of cognitive appraisal mechanisms, but they were not counted as part of the core studies.

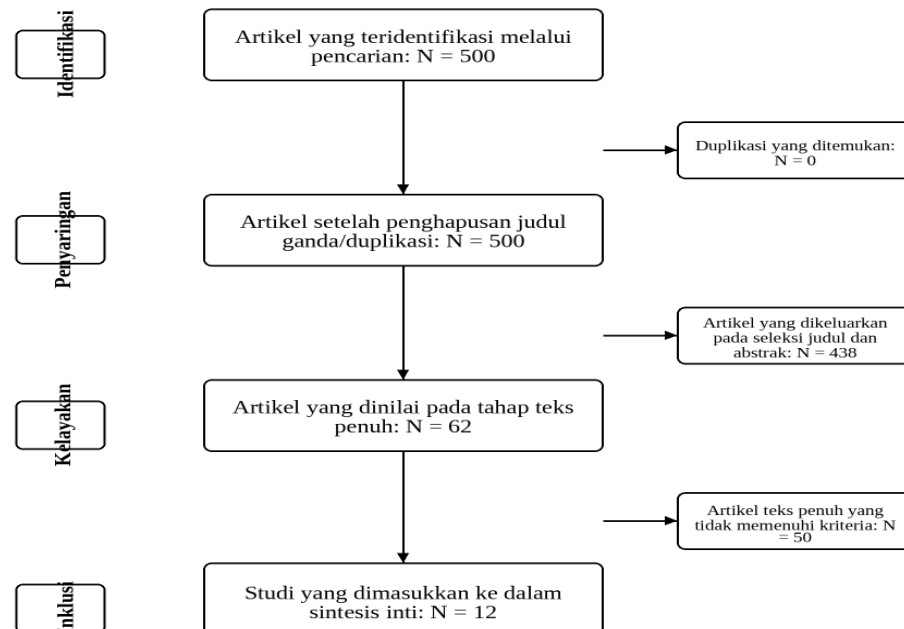


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flowchart for core synthesis.

## Results and Discussions

### 1. Results

The twelve core studies come from the contexts of sport, work, health, education, entrepreneurship, post-disaster tourism, and crisis situations. Although none of the core studies directly examined individuals immediately after failing a selection process, all remain relevant because they address cognitive appraisal mechanisms in stressful, uncertain, or risky situations. To maintain the neatness of the manuscript and to accommodate the limitations of tables used in journal articles, the results section still displays two main tables that best align with the research objectives.

**Table 1.** Core Study Characteristics and Focus of Key Findings

| Study                       | Context                                                               | Appraisal Focus                       | Key Findings                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mansell (2021)              | Athletes, $n = 415$                                                   | Threat vs. challenge                  | Challenge appraisal was associated with better psychological well-being, whereas threat appraisal was associated with depressive symptoms and lower vitality.      |
| Maurin & Martinent (2023)   | Competitive goalkeepers, $n = 36$                                     | Threat, harm/loss, challenge, benefit | Resilience was associated with higher benefit appraisal, lower threat appraisal, and better adaptive functioning.                                                  |
| Majeed & Naseer (2021)      | Paired service employees, $n = 321$                                   | Threat/hindrances vs. challenge       | Job demands perceived as challenges were associated with positive stress and better work outcomes, particularly among individuals with high psychological capital. |
| Krok et al. (2023)          | COVID-19 recovery patients, $n = 266$                                 | Threat                                | The effect of threat appraisal on health behaviors operated through coping strategies and meaning-making processes.                                                |
| Riepenhausen et al. (2022)  | 99 studies across contexts                                            | Positive cognitive reappraisal        | Positive cognitive reappraisal was generally associated with greater resilience and better mental health, depending on context and stress level.                   |
| Crowe & Sarma (2022)        | Pregnant women during the pandemic, $n = 761$                         | Perceived control                     | Lower perceived control and higher levels of worry were associated with greater psychological distress; avoidant coping strengthened this relationship.            |
| Götz et al. (2020)          | Students, classroom experience-sampling study                         | Control and value appraisals          | These appraisals mediated the relationship between supportive teaching practices and more positive classroom emotions.                                             |
| Jean-Baptiste et al. (2020) | U.S. adults during the early stage of the pandemic, qualitative study | Primary and secondary appraisal       | Differences in threat appraisal, challenge appraisal, and perceived social support helped explain variations in stress responses and coping strategies.            |

|                                       |                                       |                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Chu et al. (2022)                     | Undergraduate students, $n = 774$     | Threat, challenge, control, self-efficacy | Higher threat appraisal was associated with greater psychological distress, whereas challenge appraisal combined with effective coping strategies was associated with psychological growth.                    |
| Fernandez De Henestrosa et al. (2023) | Nurses during the pandemic, $n = 419$ | Challenge, threat, coping potential       | Threat appraisal predicted negative affect, challenge appraisal predicted positive affect, and coping potential emerged as an important predictor of affective states.                                         |
| Jordan & Prayag (2022)                | Christchurch residents, $n = 37$      | Centrality appraisal and control          | Appraisals regarding event significance and control were associated with emotional responses and coping strategies, including social support seeking and positive reappraisal.                                 |
| Kleine et al. (2024)                  | Entrepreneurs, $n = 649$              | Challenge and threat appraisal of errors  | Individuals with high challenge appraisal and low threat appraisal showed the lowest levels of disengagement-related rumination and were more likely to maintain efforts to manage the consequences of errors. |

In general, primary appraisal of threat or harm/loss is the most consistent pathway associated with less adaptive responses. In athletes, threat is associated with higher depressive symptoms and lower vitality (Mansell, 2021). In health contexts, threat indirectly influences behavior through coping and meaning-making (Krok et al., 2023). In college students, higher threat appraisals are associated with psychological distress, while avoidant coping is associated with higher distress and lower psychological growth (Chu et al., 2022). In nurses, threat appraisals of work demands predict negative affect, while potential for coping is an important predictor of affective state (Fernandez De Henestrosa et al., 2023). In pregnant women during the pandemic, low perceived control and high worry are associated with higher psychological distress (Crowe & Sarma, 2022). These findings suggest that when individuals perceive a situation as threatening and feel unable to influence it, responses tend to include psychological distress, feelings of vulnerability, and avoidant coping.

Conversely, appraisals that emphasize challenges or benefits tend to be associated with more constructive responses. In athletes, challenge appraisals are associated with better psychological well-being (Mansell, 2021). In competitive goalkeepers, resilience is associated with increased appraisals of benefits and decreased appraisals of threats, ultimately related to better coping (Maurin & Martinet, 2023). In work contexts, pressure perceived as challenging is associated with positive stress and better work outcomes, particularly when psychological capital is high (Majeed & Naseer, 2021). In entrepreneurial contexts, appraisal profiles high in challenge and low in threat are associated with a lower tendency to ruminate about abandoning business goals after making mistakes (Kleine et al., 2024). In educational contexts, appraisals of control and value also bridge the gap between supportive teaching and more positive classroom emotions (Götz et al., 2020). In the context of post-disaster tourism, appraisals of the significance of the event and controllability influence emotions and coping strategies through social support and positive reappraisal (Jordan & Prayag, 2022).

Secondary appraisals are important differentiators because they relate to perceived control, self-efficacy, coping skills, and the belief that resources are still available. When secondary appraisals are strong, individuals tend to be better able to withstand stress, choose more purposeful coping strategies, and remain committed to their goals. Conversely, when perceived control is low, failures or stressors tend to be viewed as uncontrollable, leading to avoidance. Furthermore, several studies have shown that the influence of cognitive appraisals rarely ends with direct relationships. Coping, meaning-making, positive stress, positive cognitive reappraisal, and damage control after failure are interconnected processes that bridge emotional and behavioral changes (Chu et al., 2022; Fernandez De Henestrosa et al., 2023; Krok et al., 2023; Majeed & Naseer, 2021; Riepenhausen et al., 2022). Two supporting articles are used narratively to enrich the cross-contextual reading. Li and Chua (2025) reinforce the idea that threat appraisal and self-efficacy beliefs play a role in threat detection in a cybersecurity context, while Marzouki et al. (2021) demonstrate that protective factors such as social support can weaken the threat pathway during times of crisis. These two were not included in the core synthesis, but they help broaden the explanation of the mechanisms involved.

**Table 2.** Synthesis of appraisal patterns and their implications for contexts after selection failure

| Appraisal Pattern                                        | Dominant Responses                                                                                 | Implications in the Context of Selection Failure                                                                                          |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Predominantly threat appraisal and low perceived control | Psychological distress, feelings of vulnerability, avoidant coping strategies, reduced persistence | Interventions should target threat interpretation, perceived control, and confidence in facing future evaluations or selection processes. |
| Predominantly challenge/benefit appraisal                | More constructive coping strategies, better adaptive functioning, improvement-oriented mindset     | Failure is more likely to be viewed as a learning opportunity and a basis for developing new strategies.                                  |
| Strong secondary appraisal                               | Lower psychological distress, more goal-directed coping, greater readiness to try again            | Strengthening self-efficacy, progress-oriented goals, and social support becomes important following failure.                             |
| Adaptive cognitive reappraisal                           | Healthier meaning-making, greater resilience, reduced negative emotions                            | Helps shift the meaning of failure from an absolute loss to a manageable challenge that can still be addressed effectively.               |

## 2. Discussion

The main findings of this review indicate that cognitive appraisal is the primary process guiding responses after selection failure. Therefore, this manuscript focuses not only on psychological distress but also on psychological and behavioral responses after selection failure. Psychological distress is indeed the most frequent response, but changes are also evident in coping styles, tendencies to persist or avoid, ways of interpreting oneself, and the likelihood of trying again. This framework provides a better alignment between the phenomenon, the study's objectives, and the synthesis results. In primary appraisal, selection failure can be understood as a threat to identity, status, abilities, and future plans. When individuals interpret events primarily as threats or losses, psychological energy is more invested in self-protection, feelings of failure, and anticipation of negative consequences. This pattern helps explain why threats are more frequently associated with psychological distress, negative emotions, and

avoidance. Conversely, when individuals can still perceive the situation as challenging or even beneficial, failure is more likely to be treated as a signal to adjust strategies, rather than as the end of the effort.

In secondary appraisal, perceived control, confidence in one's abilities, and available support determine whether individuals feel they still have room to act. This section is crucial for understanding persistence after failure. Individuals who still perceive resources are more likely to withstand stress, set improvement goals, and assess the feasibility of trying again. Conversely, low perceived control increases the likelihood of avoidance coping, withdrawal, and abandonment. In the context of selection, these findings confirm that the decision to try again is explained not solely by objective ability, but also by the sense of efficacy that persists after failure. This review also suggests that the influence of cognitive appraisal operates through a cascade of processes, not just a direct relationship. Coping, meaning-making, positive stress, and positive cognitive reappraisal provide pathways that bridge emotional and behavioral change. This means that post-selection mentoring should not only target technical skill improvement but also help individuals develop more realistic and constructive perspectives on failure. Clear feedback, measurable improvement goals, non-judgmental social support, and cognitive reappraisal exercises can help shift the meaning of failure from an absolute threat to a manageable challenge.

Practically, these findings provide a foundation for post-selection mentoring programs. Explanation or feedback sessions can be directed at helping participants separate selection results from their overall self-worth, identify controllable aspects, and develop concrete steps for improvement. For selection institutions, these results demonstrate the importance of more informative results delivery, beyond simply stating whether they passed or failed, as the manner in which results are presented can influence participants' initial assessments. This review does have limitations. Most of the core studies come from the contexts of sport, health, employment, education, entrepreneurship, tourism, and health crises, so applying the results to selection contexts requires caution. Although the number of core studies has been expanded to 12, few studies have directly followed participants after receiving a failed selection result. Furthermore, this synthesis relies on search notes in the authors' working documents, so technical details such as search strings and database names need to be more fully explained in the manuscript version of the journal, if available. Nevertheless, the primary value of this review lies in mapping assessment mechanisms that can serve as a basis for research that directly examines participants after failing selection.

## Conclusion

This systematic review indicates that cognitive appraisal plays a key role in shaping psychological and behavioural responses in high-pressure evaluative situations. Appraisals dominated by threat perceptions and low perceived control are more frequently associated with psychological distress, avoidant coping strategies, and reduced persistence. Conversely, appraisals that view situations as challenges or opportunities for benefit, together with stronger secondary appraisals, are more consistently linked to more constructive coping strategies, greater adaptability, and a stronger willingness to reattempt. Conceptually, these findings support the use of the term *psychological and behavioural responses following selection failure* to provide a more comprehensive explanation of the consequences of failure. Accordingly, psychological distress may be positioned as the primary response, whereas coping strategies, meaning-making processes, and decisions to try again can be understood as subsequent outcomes arising from the appraisals that individuals develop.

First, further research needs to be conducted directly on participants who failed the selection process, for example, using a longitudinal design, from before the test, after receiving the results, to the

time of making the decision to re-apply. Second, protective factors such as self-efficacy beliefs, resilience, social support, and coping strategies need to be tested as mediators or moderators to clarify and measure the mechanisms of post-failure persistence. Third, in practice, post-failure mentoring programs should include modules targeting cognitive assessment, such as cognitive reappraisal exercises, strengthening realistic control, and constructing meaning, to make the learning process from failure more adaptive.

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