

ADAPTATION: LEARNING FROM OUR PAST

The United States Air Force has increased its capabilities exponentially within recent years in order to create unparalleled dominance in air, space, and cyberspace. With ever-expanding mission sets, and with ever-increasing importance in the joint warfare landscape, the USAF has achieved preeminence as not only a force with which to be reckoned, but also as the standard for offensive and defensive aviation throughout the world.

A key reason the United States Air Force has realized such success, is its ability to **adapt**. Learning from past successes and failures, the USAF has committed to a constant evolution of equipment, TTPs, and strategy to adapt to the changing world around us. This growth process necessarily involves failure, setbacks, pain, and hard lessons learned; however, the end result has always been a stronger fighting force. In much the same way, we—as individuals—face a choice when we encounter life's failures, setbacks, and potentially-traumatic experiences: we can (1) allow them to haunt us, leading to sustained impairment that prevents us from living up to our potential; (2) work to recover, striving to resume our previous/standard mode of operation; or (3) learn from the experience, reconfigure our mindset and perspective, and ascend to a greater level of being.

The secret to successfully adjusting to such challenges is our attitude and will to persevere. Nothing is gained from striving to “go back to the way things were,” and we can't change the past. We can, however, create a better future.

- **Reframe past challenges as “learning experiences.”** This doesn't mean to ignore the pain, heartache, or grief; rather, embrace it. Let the experience serve as a motivator to guide your future actions, and ask yourself what you can learn from the event, what was the significance or meaning of it, and what it means for you going forward. Learning lessons from past “failures” will also help keep you from falling into the same trap over and over.
- **Focus on where you want to be.** Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl is quoted as saying, “Man is ultimately self-determining.” We can't always control what happens to us, but we can control how we react to it. Rather than revel in the past, concentrate instead on what you want to be different—about yourself, your relationships, your life, etc.—and then actively pursue it. This also means preparing for the uncertain future challenges.
- **Improve the lives of those around you.** The greatest testament to personal growth is paying it forward; I've seen men who used to struggle with finances mentor younger Airmen in managing their debt, sexual assault survivors devote their time and empathy to fellow victims of abuse, and entire families lend aid to neighbors in a time of need. Adaptation and growth may start as an internal process, but they require outward expression to truly actualize.