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Managing Mistakes

A Self-help Tool

Introduction

Everybody gets things wrong and finds that things does not work out. In fact, research shows that people typically underestimate the difficulty of challenging tasks (The Decision Lab, 2023), so is it any wonder we sometimes fall flat on our faces?

Although failure is painful, it can also be powerful. The business guru Peter Drucker deliberately hired people who had made mistakes, arguing that a lack of mistakes implied a lack of expertise because, as he wrote, ‘Nobody learns except by making mistakes.’ (Drucker, 1954, quoted by Martin, 2008).

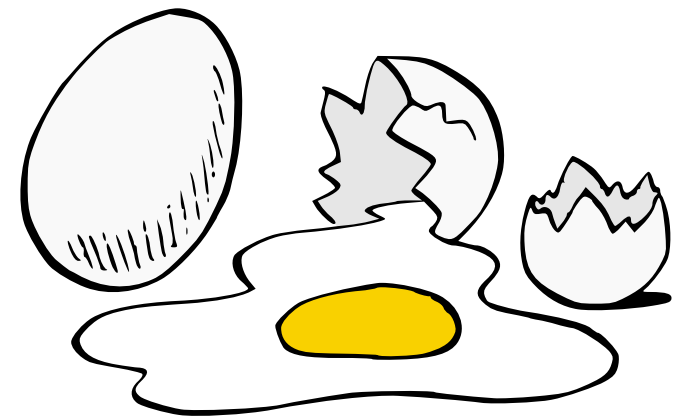
So, if you stuff up, you are in good company. But how can you respond in a way that is constructive? We believe that there are three crucial competencies that are central to the secret of managing mistakes effectively. Read on to find out more.

This tool is designed to...

- Help you respond with self-compassion when you have made a mistake.
- Help you find the positive learning from mistakes.
- Help you improve your performance going forward.

Consider using this tool if you...

- Have made a mistake you feel bad about.
- Have made a mistake you want to learn from.
- Find that the fear of failure is getting in your way.



How to use this tool

Managing mistakes is a three-part process. The steps connect and are mutually supporting. You may find it helpful to cycle round more than once to fully process a particular issue or incident.



First, give yourself some kindness.

Embarrassed, disappointed, deflated, worried, horrified - sounds familiar? Having something go wrong is horrible. It threatens our sense of self and makes us worry about how we look to others. As humans, we are wired to react more strongly to bad things than good things. Negatives are experienced more intensely than positives. We feel pain more than gain (Kahneman, 2011, p282-3.). So, it is unavoidable that we hate making mistakes.

Failure and the self-criticism triggers the flight or fight response (Gerber and Neff, 2019, citing Gilbert 2009). This can go two ways: instant denial ('It wasn't that bad, pretend it didn't happen and blank it out'); or attack, which may be turned outwards (perhaps to the person who spotted your mistake), or inwards, to yourself ('Why am I always such a hopeless idiot? I hate myself.').

Neither response is constructive. Research suggests that mindful self-compassion is a more effective approach. Tests show that using self-compassion reduces fear of failure and makes people more likely to try to try again after a set-back (Germer and Ness, 2019, p.39-41). This entails:

- Noticing the painful emotions ('I was really disappointed when x happened...').
- Recognising that the emotions hurt ('This is a difficult moment for me which is upsetting after all the work I have put into this project...').
- Connecting to your common humanity ('It is natural and normal for someone who cares about their job to feel really disappointed in a situation like this.')
- Giving yourself some compassion ('This is really tough for me, I need to be kind to myself right now...'). You may find that a soothing gesture, like softly stroking your arm, helps to reinforce the sense that you are tenderly taking care of yourself. If it is hard to know what to say, use the supportive words that you would say to a good friend if they were in the same situation.

Think about what else you can do to be kind to yourself. Do you need to find a shoulder to cry on? Do you need to take some time out, go for a walk, talk to a supportive friend, or treat yourself to a nice cup of hot chocolate?

At the end of this Self-help Tool, we have listed a self-compassion Self-help Guide.

Self-compassion is an important first step in moving on from mistakes, but what comes next?

Second, look for the learning.

Mistakes are the stuff of life. As small children we learn about the world by exploring what is around us. Is that stone rough or smooth? Can we reach that toy on the sofa if we really stretch, or do we need to stand on tip toes too? Does the water fall out of the cup if we tip it up? By experimenting, we gradually build up a picture of how the world works (Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development, 2023).



As we grow up, we add in formal education and planned training. But trial and error is still unavoidable. Many problems at work (and outside) are too novel, too messy and too unpredictable for there to be a playbook that tells you what to do.

For the management theorist and Philosopher Donald Schön, a defining feature of professional careers is that they involve dealing with situations where neat theories and clear-cut answers no longer apply - situations he vividly described as 'the swamp' (1987, p3).

Not only are mistakes inevitable, they can be beneficial. Educational research shows that if we make a mistake and are aware that it is a mistake, we can learn better than if we simply got it right first-time round (Levinsohn, 2018, citing a range of studies). Mistake-making, in fact, is integral to Design Thinking, a methodology that underpins Engineering and Product Design. This promotes a 'bias towards action' or learning by doing (Roth, 2015, p121). In Design Thinking, a potential solution or prototype is tested, to see what works or does not work (Roth, 2015, p12). In academic research, a hypothesis is also developed and tested for the same reason. Both are done to see what can be learnt.

So, let us begin by understanding what actually happened. You will need to break the situation down and look at the facts. Mind Tools recommends using these questions:

- What was I trying to do?
- What went wrong?
- When did it go wrong?
- Why did it go wrong?



Now you are ready to think about your role in the mistake.

- Was this mistake something that could have been foreseen? Many things only become clear after the event. No one has a crystal ball, so do not be too hard on yourself.
- Most mistakes are due to a combination of factors. What factors affected your situation?
- How much were things down to you, or to others?
- Did you know it was going to be a mistake or was that only clear afterwards?
- What part did inexperience play?
- Were there extenuating circumstances? Perhaps you were under pressure and over worked? Did you have too much responsibility? Were you properly supported?

Often, the most important insights we gain from experience are accidental; things that could not have been predicted. This is shown in this example, from Lindsay Patton, a Content Manager:

“Early in my career, I was given a lot of responsibility at a young age. I made a lot of mistakes out of inexperience and naivete, but those mistakes shaped my skills, knowledge and experience. At 24 years old, I built an intern program from scratch and managed people who were only a couple years younger than I was. I had no idea what I was getting myself into and made management mistakes that were painful, but helped me grow. If it were not for that bumpy time, I would not have the management confidence I have today. In those 10 years, I have led intern programs at three out of my four jobs and managed more than 200 interns throughout my career. I have my first job and my mistakes to thank for that.” (Khidekel, 2019).

If you make a mistake, the message is clear: look for the silver lining, look for the positives in a negative situation. In psychology, this is known as ‘benefit finding.’ Benefit finding can be helpful in coping with many life challenges, including serious illness. It is associated with reduced depression, positive wellbeing and, in some instances, better physical health. However, benefit finding can lead to negative thoughts about the situation coming back to haunt you later (Cassidy, et al, 2014 citing Helgeson et al, 2006). It is possible that if you try to avoid the painful reality by too quickly looking for the benefits, before you have properly acknowledged the reality of your situation, the difficult feelings you have suppressed will pop up later. This is why we recommend using mindful self-compassion first, before moving on to look for the benefits.

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Here are some questions to help you find the benefits in your situation:

- What have I learnt about myself?
- What have I learnt about other people?
- What have I learnt about this type of challenge?
- What might I have done differently at the time?
- What would I do differently with hindsight?
- How can this experience help me in the future?



Third, put it in context and take control.

Mistakes can be beneficial, if you build on them. Building upon your mistakes is about taking the learning up to the next level. This is where you put it in perspective and decide what you want to do about the experience, going forward. You will need to answer questions like:

- How bad was it really?
- Who was affected and what do I need to do to put the problem right?
- What do I want to do differently next time?



The Big Picture -

mistakes come in all shapes and sizes.

- Ask yourself: how much will this really matter in 12 months' time or even 6 months? Do not sweat the small stuff!
- Research shows that other people are much less likely to remember embarrassing things than we think they will do (Wiseman, 2009, p.47, citing Gilovich, et al, 2000). Am I getting this out of proportion?
- OK, so this did not work out, but what about all the other things you have done that have gone well?
- Research also shows that in some situations, making mistakes shows that we are fallible, which can make others like us, more than if we were 'Mr Perfect' (Wiseman, 2009, p.55-56, citing Aaronson, 1966).
- Can you get a wise view on the situation from a trusted colleague?

Reality Check -

simplistic judgements are unhelpful. Instead, try to make an honest and nuanced assessment of the causes.

- Are you 'catastrophising'? That is, blowing the issue up out of all proportion. Clues are phrases like 'That was a total disaster;' 'Everything went completely wrong.' If you are, look at the article on 'cognitive restructuring' by Concordia University Health Services (n.d.).
- Have you set the performance bar too high for yourself?
- How realistic were your expectations? The UK Government's guide to project management (The Green Book, 2022, 13.1) cautions against 'optimism bias' – 'the demonstrated systematic tendency for appraisers to be over-optimistic about key project parameters, including capital costs, operating costs, project duration and benefits delivery.' Maybe, when set in context, your project was not so bad after all?

Response –

this is where you synthesise insights, draw conclusions and identify what you need to do going forwards.

Fixing it.

- Were others (e.g. teammates) negatively affected and, if so, how much?
- What do you need to do to take responsibility for it and make a genuine apology to show you have learnt from your mistake (Smith, 2021)? This will help you draw a line underneath it. See Smith's article in the Harvard Business Review (2021) and D'Angelo (2023) for advice on this.

Understanding it.

- What does your mistake tell you about your mix of strengths and weaknesses?
- Has this mistake revealed a gap in your skills package? What can you do to fix the gap?
- What strengths were hidden in the situation? Were there things that you did well or that point to future potential? How can you build on these?

Growing stronger and wiser from it.

- Often, strengths and weaknesses are related. A big-picture thinker may struggle with detail. Or, someone who is great at planning may find improvisation harder. How could you use your strengths to manage future risks? For example, if you are good at making strategic plans, can you collaborate with someone who is good at detail?
- What would someone who was good at avoiding this type of mistake do? How could you learn from their behaviour?
- How would preventing this type of mistake from reoccurring benefit you?
- What advice would you give to someone like you in the same situation?
- What practical steps do you need to take going forward?

Pause, Reflect, Act.

- What are the key insights you have taken from this Self-help Tool?
- What actions do you need to take now to build on this exercise?
- Who could help you with this?
- Are there other related Self-help Tools you would like to use as well?

NB: Because everyone is different, this tool may not work for you, so please look at our other Self-help Tools as well.

Other Self-help Tools that are related to coping with mistakes and failure include:

- Hands Over Heart – finding the compassionate words we need to hear when things are tough.
- Listen to the Learning – reflecting on what experiences teach us and the skills you develop through them.
- Helpful Habits – how to use routines and habits to make it easy to achieve your goals.
- Fresh Start – how to use significant dates to kickstart a change or take action.

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If you are a member of staff from another educational organisation and want to use a limited number of our Self-help Tools with your students, we would love to hear from you and share good practice. We would ask that you retain references to University of Huddersfield as a matter of courtesy and acknowledge the other sources we have used. Thank you.