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It Was a Mistake! From big to small, how to get over our everyday bloopers

Gallery



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we can move on and figure out why we made the mistake in the first place.

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By Abby Luby

Yeeesh. Did I really do that? What a klutz I am!

This familiar utterance is the immediate aftermath of any "faux pas," only to be followed by a good dose of recrimination.

But how, exactly, do we get over our mistakes? Obviously, we're all human, which means we fumble, fall, say foolish things. For some, overcoming

mistakes is a mere bump in the road; for others, it's a major hurdle. We can slip up and laughingly say, "I'm such a goof ball!" shrug, and move on. But when we really screw up and make a mess of things, feeling awful about it is hard to shake. Maybe you mishandled a big account that cost your company millions, or it could be that senseless one-night stand when you are happily married. Either way, the guilt and self-blame becomes a nagging, inner voice.

If we can accept the fact that we are sometimes wrong, we can move on and figure out why we made the mistake in the first place. Buddhist nun and writer [Pema Chodron](#) often speaks about being compassionate and honest with ourselves, which helps us to face our mistakes instead of ignoring them. She advises listening to our inner voice that criticizes ourselves and others.

Once we hear that voice, Westport psychologist Dr. [Lawrence Birnbach](#) advises trying to figure out where it comes from. "Some people are used to being criticized by their partner or maybe they grew up in a household where they were being criticized a lot and got into the habit of criticizing themselves," he says.

An unhappily married woman Birnbach knew had an affair, and her husband immediately divorced her. She blamed herself for years, never admitting that she initially had the affair because her marriage wasn't working. "She never forgave herself for having an affair," he says. "She never remarried and she lived like a hermit, allowing the mistake to punish herself for the rest of her life."

We grow up learning that doing something wrong has consequences. Understanding our own fears about messing up is the first step toward knowing that mistakes are OK.

Birnbach, who has just co-authored *How to Know if it's Time to Go* with his wife, [Beverly Hyman](#), says it's important to come up with a reason why you made a mistake. "If you said something intemperate to someone and you regretted it, there's usually a reason behind it -- perhaps the person made you nervous or you weren't at your best," he says.

Considering the specific circumstance of the error is one of the best strategies to deal with making a mistake. "Try to be specific and not global," advises Dr. [Ellen Horowitz](#), a psychologist in Ridgefield who has practiced family and marriage counseling for over 20 years. "You may generalize and say 'I'm so stupid' or 'I'm so incompetent.' The more productive reaction would be 'I messed up in this particular situation on this particular day and I'll try not to do it another day.' Give yourself permission to be imperfect."

But there are those who are very hard on themselves after making a mistake. If you fail a test, suddenly you are "stupid" and believe you will flunk the entire

course. Horowitz suggests a healthier reaction would be "I must not have studied enough and I will talk to the teacher about how to do better."

Being sorry is a way to make good and move on after saying something unkind or acting in an unpleasant manner. "Apologizing can make up for a mistake," offers [Barbara Lavi](#), a Weston-based psychotherapist who has been in practice more than 40 years. "A lot of people have trouble apologizing but I tell them that it's OK."

Lavi, who counsels performing and visual artists, often cites an ancient practice that hails from Judaic culture as well as from the Hopi Indians; artists in both tribes intentionally put a mistake in their creations. "The reason behind it was to say that only God is perfect and that human beings make mistakes," Lavi says. "This idea allows us to aim for not perfection, but to be as good as we can and to do our best. The story helps people relax about making mistakes, especially about those obsessing over minor errors."

Degrees of self-blame can run the gamut from those who are in total denial and minimize their mistakes to those who plunge into guilt and self-loathing. "People who don't take responsibility for their mistakes worry me more as a therapist," Lavi says. "If you erred in life and you act as if it wasn't a mistake, then you can't learn from it."

In and of themselves, mistakes are not bad. In fact plenty of great inventions started with an accident. If we're given enough emotional space that allows for mistakes, who knows? Anything might happen. Being relaxed about making mistakes also means you are comfortable with taking risks.

"Making mistakes is sometimes a good thing and can open opportunities for you," says Dr. [Michael S. Johnson](#), a Danbury psychologist. "Unless you try something new, you're never going to get anywhere - like learning to ski. You can't learn unless you fall lots of times."

A mistake by definition means nobody wants it to happen, says Horowitz. "People who carry mistakes around have scripted themselves as people who mess up," she says. "People who are healthier allow themselves to make mistakes and say 'I made a mistake,' and move on, and do it differently next time." HL

Getting over mistakes

- Know that you are not the only person who makes mistakes.
- Understand why you made the mistake: Were you careless? Hurried? Not thinking?

- Think positively and realistically about how bad the mistake really is.
- Don't obsess and replay the mistake over and over.
- Don't define yourself by your mistakes.
- Learn from the mistake.
- Seek help. If you have difficulty getting over the incident after considerable amount of time, consider seeing a therapist.

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