

Bounce back

Despite what your inner critic may blather on about, you already have the will and the way to outsmart stress and insecurity. Here's how!



Nothing dashes excitement for the future quite like the sting of falling short. Whether you put yourself out there and got rejected, or failed at a goal, it's easy to feel crushed, self-critical and convinced you couldn't possibly pick yourself up and try again.

But your next success may be a lot closer than you think: "Resilience is something that can be learned and cultivated and strengthened," says psychotherapist Linda Graham, author of *Resilience*. "Scientists have proven the *neuroplasticity* of the adult brain, or its ability to grow throughout our lives; you can harness the brain's capacity to change to become more resilient." In other words, you're never too old to learn new ways of responding to disappointments that will leave you stronger, braver and more optimistic!

The best news? Strengthening those mental muscles can actually feel *good*: "Any positive emotion creates resilience," says Graham. "Gratitude, awe, self-compassion and delight shift the functioning of the brain out of reactivity, contraction and negativity and into a more open space." Facing a tough hurdle? Give yourself a pep talk. Missed an opportunity? Head outside to admire the view as you rethink your strategy. "Your brain reacts and functions differently when it's under pressure versus when it's feeling possibility," says Graham. "You can actually *feel* your thinking opening up to greater awareness and receptivity, an inner space from which it's easier to problem-solve."

Read on for the expert-backed strategies to bounce back from anything.

from *any* setback

Slipped back into a bad habit?

You worked hard to stop stress-eating, but with an overwhelming task list and mounting family tensions, you've started reaching for chips again to take the edge off. "The anticipation of the reward sends dopamine to the part of your brain that manages impulses and choices," explains Graham. "There's dopamine flowing through your system and you think, *If I indulge, I'll feel better.*"

Rewire your brain with a new routine

Instead of trying to break the habit, replace it with a new one, like knitting, to cope with stress, suggests Graham. Make the behavior routine by creating a cue (like watching the news while you knit) and focusing on the reward (feeling calm). Then when the impulse to give in to snacking arises, pull out your knitting project. Says Graham, "The positive habit rewires your relationship with the old habit so it won't have the same power."

Failed to achieve a goal?

You tried launching a side hustle selling skincare products, but had to stop when the venture started *costing* you money. "Even before we fail, we have mind-sets already encoded in our brain," says Graham. "There are 'fixed' and 'growth' mind-sets, which filter our perception of the setback." A fixed mind-set says, *I just don't have what it takes.* A growth mind-set believes, *I can do better.*

Take a moment to identify your "why"

To move past these mind-sets and get back on track, ask, *Why did I pick this goal?* suggests positive psychology expert Caroline Adams Miller, author of *Getting Grit*. Perhaps you wanted to spend more time with family. "To bounce back, you have to understand the intrinsic motivation behind your goal," says Miller. "Research shows the happiest people have clear-cut reasons *why* they set goals and this restores their confidence to keep going."

Lost to a competitor?

You put a bid on a dream house, only to learn that another couple snapped it up with a cash offer, and you're beating yourself up over the loss. "Most of us have inner messages that get into the territory of failure, shame, not-good-enough," says Graham. "We're raised in families and cultures that tend to use shame as a motivator: *What's wrong with you? Do better!* These self-talk scripts can become automatic."

Harness the power of second place

"There's something called 'the psychology of the near miss,'" says Miller. "If you go for something that's important to you and you don't get it, it can rekindle desire and cause you to work harder." This can push you to succeed. The key? "Use the experience to come up with new approaches," says Miller. "Ask, *What can I do better next time?* Looking for positives helps you make meaning out of setbacks and refine your strategies."

Made a big mistake?

Because of a calendar mix-up, you missed the deadline for an important grant application for your volunteer group. Now everyone is scrambling to find resources and you're trying desperately to save face and figure out solutions—all while your inner critic is screaming at you. "Most people tend to want to fight, get rid of, repress or ignore the inner critic, but none of that will work," asserts Graham. The reason? "The inner critic is an instinctive response and really believes it has a very valuable job to do: to keep you safe and help you survive."

Put your "wise self" in charge

To quiet that harsh inner voice so you can move forward, Graham suggests first comforting yourself. "Try any gesture of warmth and compassion: You can put a hand on your cheek or your heart," she says. Then call up a moment when you felt loved. "This releases oxytocin, the brain's hormone of safety, trust and belonging that is the immediate antidote to stress." Then she suggests putting your "wise self" in charge: "It's stronger than the inner critic and has a voice that loves and respects you—from a self-nurturing place, it's easier to see your next step."