

Want to rebound from failure? Feel the pain

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Feeling the pain of failure leads to more effort to correct your mistake than simply thinking about what went wrong, according to a new study.

Researchers found that people who just [thought](#) about a [failure](#) tended to make excuses for why they were unsuccessful and didn't try harder when faced with a similar situation. In contrast, people who focused on their emotions following a failure put forth more effort when they tried again.

"All the advice tells you not to dwell on your mistakes, to not feel bad," said Selin Malkoc, co-author of the study and professor of marketing at The Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

"But we found the opposite. When faced with a failure, it is better to focus on one's emotions—when people concentrate on how bad they feel and how they don't want to experience these feelings again, they are more likely to try harder the next time."

While thinking about how to improve from past mistakes might help—this study didn't examine that—the researchers found that people who reflect

on a failure do not tend to focus on ways to avoid a similar mistake.

When asked to think about their mistakes, most people focus on protecting their ego, Malkoc said. They think about how the failure wasn't their fault, or how it wasn't that big of a deal, anyway.

"If your thoughts are all about how to distance yourself from the failure, you're not going to learn from your mistakes," she said.

Malkoc conducted the study with Noelle Nelson of the University of Kansas and Baba Shiv of Stanford University. Their results appear online in the *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*.

The researchers conducted several studies. In one, 98 college students were asked to price search online for a blender with specific characteristics, and with the possibility of winning a cash prize if they found the lowest price.

Before they found out if they won, half the participants were told to focus on their [emotional response](#) to winning or losing, while the other half were instructed to focus on their thoughts about how they did. They were told they would write about their response afterward.

The price search task was rigged, though, and all participants found out that the lowest price was \$3.27 less than what they found.

After writing about their failure, the students had a chance to redeem themselves.

The researchers wanted to find out if the effort put forth by participants in a new task would be related to whether they focused on their thoughts or emotions involving the previous failure. The researchers believed that a task similar to their failed job - in this case a search for the lowest price - would trigger participants into recalling their unsuccessful attempt, while an unrelated job would not.

So the participants were given another task. Half were asked to search for a gift book for a friend that was the best fit for their limited college-student budget. In other words, they were looking for the lowest price, as they were instructed in the first task.

The other half of the participants were given a non-similar task, which was to search for a book that would be the best choice as a gift for their friend.

The results showed emotional responses to failure motivated participants much more than cognitive ones when they were faced with a similar task.

Emotionally motivated participants spent nearly 25 percent more time searching for a low-priced book than did participants who had only thought about—rather than dwelled on the pain of - their earlier failure.

There was no significant difference in effort made by participants when the second task wasn't like the first (when they were searching for the best gift, rather than the cheapest).

"When the participants focused on how bad they felt about failing the first time, they tried harder than others when they had another similar opportunity," Malkoc said.

"But the situation has to be similar enough to trigger the pain of the initial failure."

One reason why an emotional response to failure may be more effective than a cognitive one is the nature of people's thoughts about their mistakes.

When the researchers analyzed what participants who thought about their failure wrote about, they found significantly more self-protective thoughts ("This wasn't my fault," "I could not have found it even if I tried") than they did self-improvement thoughts ("I know how I can do better next time").

Unfortunately, that may be the default mode for most people, at least in many everyday situations.

In another similar study, the researchers didn't tell some [participants](#) how to respond to their failures.

They found that these people tended to produce cognitive responses rather than emotional ones, and those cognitive responses were the kinds that protected themselves rather than focused on self-improvement.

Malkoc said that in most real-life situations, people probably have both cognitive and emotional responses to their failures. But the important thing to remember is not to avoid the emotional pain of failing, but to use that pain to fuel improvement.

"Emotional responses to failure can hurt. They make you feel bad. That's why people often choose to think self-protective thoughts after they make mistakes," she said.

"But if you focus on how bad you feel, you're going to work harder to find a solution and make sure you don't make the same [mistake](#) again."

More information: Noelle Nelson et al. Emotions Know Best: The Advantage of Emotional versus Cognitive Responses to Failure, *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* (2017). [DOI: 10.1002/bdm.2042](https://doi.org/10.1002/bdm.2042)

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