



Experience and failure are great teachers, and you don't even need to take out a student loan to benefit from their lessons. No matter how prepared or skilled, no matter how good our intentions, we're bound to make mistakes or deal with work-related mental or emotional challenges. Will you fail occasionally? Yep. Will you say the wrong thing at the wrong time to the wrong person? Probably. Will you feel stressed and overwhelmed? Likely. There are some things you can do to prevent these issues, but there will be times when you, well, are presented with the opportunity to learn from your mistakes.

This chapter covers tips that can help you gracefully tackle the challenges you may face in your career, from making mistakes to feeling burned out.

Making mistakes

The question is not, "Will I make mistakes?" but rather, "How can I deal with mistakes once I've made them?" Successful people learn from their missteps and bounce back. A professional who handles his or her mistakes well will learn resilience and gain valuable experience. Here's how to fail well:

Be accountable. Own up to your mistakes immediately. Don't hope that no one will notice or that it will somehow go away if you ignore it. The longer you wait to accept responsibility, the worse the situation is likely to get.

Apologize, but don't make excuses. A sincere apology is necessary, but a litany of why the mistake was made or why it wasn't your fault will make a bad impression.

Learn from the mistake. Evaluate what you did wrong, how you handled the situation, and what you can do differently next time to avoid the same snafu.

Avoid careless mistakes. You are going to make mistakes no matter how hard you try not to, so take care to avoid making careless ones.

Don't beat yourself up. You've made a mistake, you've dealt with it the best you can – now forgive yourself and move on. There's nothing to be gained by dwelling on your mistake or becoming angry. Remember that at some point the mistake will be five days ago, five months ago, a year ago, three years ago, etc. Will it seem like that big of a deal when you look back at it from those vantage points?

Embarrassment

Embarrassment is not fatal, but sometimes it feels that way. It's awkward and unpleasant at best, I-want-to-crawl-into-a-cave at worst. But, like taxes, death, and political scandals, it's part of life. If you do or say something embarrassing (or someone else does), you can't go back in time and change it, but there are things you can do to minimize the negative impact of the moment.

Maintain your composure. By maintaining control and acting confident and respectful, you will show others that you are not easily shaken. If it's not possible to maintain your composure, excuse yourself so you can deal with your emotions in private.

Avoid drawing attention to other people's embarrassment. If someone else embarrasses him or herself, do what you can to divert attention from the situation and minimize the embarrassment. However, if the person tries to use humor to diffuse the situation, laugh with him or her.

Don't linger on the situation. Everyone knows what it feels like to be embarrassed and will probably try to do what they can to help you recover. If you need to apologize, do so but don't draw the process out so much that it makes others uncomfortable. If you don't need to apologize, just regain your composure and move on.

Boredom

At times, you may find that you are bored at work. Being bored from time to time isn't a big problem, but if you have lost your overall enthusiasm and passion for your job and find yourself settled into a mundane and uninteresting routine, your boredom might negatively affect your job performance. Worse, it could make you feel dissatisfied and unchallenged. Try the following to alleviate your boredom:

Break up mundane tasks with exciting ones. If you spend days on end filing, you are bound to get bored. If possible, file for a few minutes every day and spend the rest of your day on the more interesting and creative aspects of your job.

Volunteer for new projects. Even if it is something as small as volunteering to plan the office holiday party or joining a committee, adding new responsibilities and challenges to your daily routine can add new dimension to your work day. Plus, you might find that you have undiscovered talents or interests.

Discuss your situation with your boss. You might not want to use the word "bored." But do let him or her know that you are available to take on new challenges and interested in trying new things.

Consider a change. If you've tried everything and still find that you are bored with your job, you may need to seek employment that is more challenging and better suited to your skills and talents.

Motivation

In the early days of your career, motivation is not usually a problem. A new job! A paycheck! All sorts of stuff to learn and people to meet! But as time goes on you might experience a temporary rut or find yourself losing passion and motivation. Here are some things you can do to boost your attitude:

Add fun and variety to your work routine. Change things up, whether it's the way you approach tasks or your lunchtime routine. Branch out and make more social connections with coworkers. Challenge yourself to vary your workday.

Seek leadership roles at your organization. Leading projects and people will give you a sense of purpose.

Concentrate on your goals and the big picture. Remind yourself how your work – no matter how mundane or boring – is contributing to the mission of your organization and helping you to develop valuable skills and experience.

Seek feedback from supervisors and colleagues. Positive feedback will make you feel good; constructive criticism will help you set goals.

Cultivate a positive outlook. Notice everything you're accomplishing. Notice the things that make your workplace good. Take time to connect with those coworkers who are interesting and inspiring.

Handling criticism

Some people make a career out of being the lightning rods for criticism. For most of us, however, it's a necessary but sometimes unpleasant part of the job. Learning how to handle criticism objectively and professionally is important.

Listen. As you are receiving criticism, don't interrupt. Let the person finish to make sure you get all of the information.

Stay calm. Keeping your cool will give you the emotional and mental space to figure out the best way to respond. On the other hand, getting angry or defensive will probably escalate the situation and make you appear too volatile.

Make sure you understand. Confirm what you have heard to make sure you got all of the points.

Seek privacy. Being criticized in public is not acceptable. If you find yourself in this situation, calmly ask the person if you can continue the situation somewhere private. If the person refuses, you may have to consider cutting the conversation short and continuing later in private.

Consider the criticism. Ultimately, there are two things to deal with when you've been criticized: the manner and the message. If someone criticizes you harshly and in public, it's much more likely to trigger a defensive response, even if the criticism could ultimately help you. Take time to reflect on the situation and determine which parts of the criticism were valid. Also, reflect on the interaction: what went well and what didn't? How would you respond to a similar situation in the future?

Stress

Stress can be positive. For instance, it can motivate us and drive us to find new and better ways of doing things. However, if stress becomes overwhelming it can wreak havoc on your physical and emotional well-being, not to mention your work performance. The symptoms of stress include

Physical: Experiencing weight loss or gain, headaches, fatigue, changes in sleep patterns, stomach problems, muscle aches, and tightness.

Emotional: Feeling easily angered or frustrated; experiencing nervousness, irritability, and mood swings.

Mental: Feeling confused, demonstrating a lack of interest in favorite activities, loss of concentration, and forgetfulness.

You will have your fair share of stress in your job. Ultimately, the way you manage it will depend on your situation and your personality. Here are some ways to reign in your stress:

Identify your stressors. Determine what stresses you out so you can deal with it. Hate being late? Make sure you plan more than enough time to do everything. Freak out when you have to give reports at meetings? Take a public speaking class.

Manage your time. A lot of stress results from not having enough time to complete tasks. Keep a calendar and a running to-do list to help you manage your time, and make sure that you fairly assess how much time it will take you to complete something – then add 15 minutes to account for unplanned interruptions.

Organize. A lot of stress also results from disorganization. When you can't find things, don't have set systems for dealing with situations, and are generally disorganized, you add a lot of unnecessary stress to your life.

Prioritize. Decide what is really important and what can wait.

Ask for help. Learn to ask for assistance or delegate.

Say no. It's difficult early in your career to say no, but it's important to take on only those things you know you can do and do them well.

Avoid procrastination. Set deadlines and stick to them.

Take time for yourself. Take breaks when necessary throughout the day, take vacations, and fill your nights and weekends with things you enjoy, like hobbies and friends.

Keep your perspective. When you are feeling really stressed, take a step back and ask yourself how the situation will really affect you or others. Will you lose your job? Will someone be harmed? Will it affect your life for years to come? Probably not. In fact, in two months you will most likely have forgotten all about it. Putting things in perspective is an instant stress reliever.

Create a strong support network. Having friends, mentors and supporter is important to handling stress. Vent, get advice, laugh—don't feel alone in your stress.

Get professional guidance. If you feel that your stress is out of control, you may need professional help in learning to deal with it. Seeing a counselor is one option, but you may also consider taking a class in meditation or taking a seminar in stress reduction.

Burnout

Burnout is serious emotional exhaustion resulting from your job. It's not uncommon – most people experience it at some time during their career – but it can be serious. People who have job burnout lose interest in their jobs, stop giving their best effort to their work, often experience emotional and physical turmoil that affects their quality of life, and may even end up losing their jobs. If you suspect you may be experiencing job burnout, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you dread going to work?
- Do you find yourself longing for Friday night all week long and feel a sense of dread on Sunday afternoons because you know you must return to work the next day?
- Do you do the bare minimum at work and just coast along, but still feel drained at the end of the day?
- Are you experiencing health problems like headaches, stomachaches, and fatigue?
- Do you feel irritable, moody, and resentful when it comes to work?
- Do you find that you no longer enjoy parts of your job that used to be a pleasure?
- Are you jealous and resentful toward people who claim to love their job?
- Do you lose your temper easily?

If you can answer yes to one or more of these questions, you may be on the track to job burnout.

People who work under a lot of job stress, are fearful of losing their job, work with a toxic supervisor or coworkers, or are working at a company undergoing a lot of change or turmoil (layoffs, bankruptcy or scandal, for example) are prime candidates for job burnout. But burnout can happen to anyone. Here's how to deal with it:

Admit it. If you are feeling burned out, admit it so you can take the steps to fix it. Pretending that everything is okay will just make things worse.

Take care of yourself. Eat right, get enough sleep, exercise, and see a doctor regularly. Feeling unhealthy can contribute to job burnout or make it worse.

Nurture your relationships at work and beyond. Having a strong support system of coworkers, friends, and family can help you cope with the stresses of your job.

Take a break. Make sure you use your vacation time, take sick days when you aren't well, and take regular breaks throughout the day to do something you enjoy.

Draw the line. Burnout often occurs when a person doesn't know how to stop working. Make a commitment that you will not take work home with you on a regular basis, that you won't check your email at midnight, that you will turn your cell phone off after a certain time, and that you will begin to set limits on how much you are willing to give and do at work. Work can't be your entire life.

Make time for fun. Whether it's planning a fun Friday lunch for coworkers, forwarding a great joke to your office mates, or planning activities for the weekends, take time to laugh.

Communicate. Let your supervisors and coworkers know, in a positive way, that you are making changes to help you refocus on your work. Find someone you can vent to and use as a sounding board.

Prioritize. Be realistic about what you can accomplish and decide what is really important to you and what things you can let slide—both at work and at home.

Reclaim your power by making a plan. You are not powerless over your work or your life. Set goals and make a plan for how you will create the kind of work life you want. Maybe this includes more education, a new position, a different focus, or a new job.

Face that it might be time to move on. Burnout doesn't necessarily mean that you are in the wrong career, the wrong position, or at the wrong company—but it can. If you have come to realize that you have chosen a career that is all wrong for you, that your position doesn't fit you or your skills at all, or that your company has a culture that doesn't fit with your values, get out. Make a plan for moving on—and then do it.