

# So You've Made a Huge Mistake. What Now?

It's fine. You're fine. Everything is O.K.



By **Tim Herrera**

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*A quick note for New York readers: I'd like to invite you to come hang out with Smarter Living in real life! On June 25, three of your favorite Smarter Living writers — Jen Doll, Jolie Kerr and Kristin Wong — will join me for an evening of life advice and revelry. Tickets are available [here](#). See you there!*

Whoopsie: You completely bombed that career-making presentation, missed that deadline you could not miss or said something you absolutely should not have said. The world is going to crumble! Your life is over! Everyone will remember this mistake for the rest of your life!

Right?

No, of course we all know that isn't true. Everyone messes up all the time, and it's going to happen again. Our mistakes are rarely as big as we imagine them to be, and everyone else has more important things to do than think about your errors. And while it's true that some mistakes are more significant than others — realizing you chose the wrong career path or romantic partner, for example — they don't have to be the world-ending disasters we make them out to be. So let's all take a deep breath and realize that everything is fine and the world is not going to crumble, then figure out how to get through it.

One of the reasons we sometimes stick with things we know aren't working is the *commitment bias*, which is our tendency to let our past decisions and actions dictate how we behave now and in the future — even if we know we're being irrational. (Think of people who are miserable in their jobs and fully aware of it.) According to the Decision Lab, a behavioral design think tank, we “tend to interpret evidence in a way that makes our past idea seem better.” We want to be seen as someone who is consistent, and recognizing that a major decision we've made was a mistake shatters that image. Our brains are working against change here on multiple levels, compounding the difficulty to fix a major life mistake.

“The embarrassment and blow to your self-worth can manifest in unlimited ways — and sometimes it feels like it's manifesting in all ways — and our bodies' response to failure can even mimic that of physical pain,” Oset Babur wrote last year in a New York Times article about learning from failure.

So, yes: The first step to correcting a monumental blunder is to be honest and critical with yourself and to acknowledge that it was indeed a mistake. This is much easier said than done, but unless we're nakedly candid with ourselves about the mistake itself, there's no way to move past it.

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The second step is even more crucial: Accept that it was a mistake, but don't allow it to define you or your self-worth.

"Being overly critical of ourselves can increase anxiety about a setback. But overthinking, or ruminating on what happened, is like agonizing self-criticism on repeat," Rachel Simmons wrote in The Times's guide to overcoming failure. "Studies have found that overthinking — asking questions like, 'How could I (or they) have said that?' or, 'Why am I so anxious?' — can damage a person's motivation and problem-solving skills, and increase the likelihood of depression. It's more common in women."

After coming to terms with your gaffe and accepting that you've erred, the real work begins. Of course, no two mistakes are identical, but there are some practical ways to find a path forward.

If it's possible, stop digging. If this happens to be a mistake you continue to make (a position I have been in many times), do whatever is in your power to stop making the situation worse.

From there, the way out doesn't come in huge, life-altering adjustments and decisions all at once, but in "low-risk baby steps," according to Dr. Marty Nemko. Say you have realized and accepted you made a wrong career choice. Don't think of it in terms of just up and quitting tomorrow, but rather try to think of the smallest ways you could nudge yourself toward a career path that is better suited to you. Test the waters in other areas to see what interests you and that you could see yourself building a life around, then slowly work backward to figure out how you can get there. We want to avoid diving into something headfirst; that might be why we're in this situation in the first place. Instead, we want to gradually and methodically build a plan to get where we want to go, step by step.

Recovering from major mistakes is never easy, and there are both internal and external forces working against us, including the biases that make us want to stick with bad decisions and the social pressures that make us afraid to strive for change. But being aware of the obstacles in your way is the only path to getting around them.

How did you get around a major mistake? Tell me on Twitter @timherrera.

Have a great week!

— Tim

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## Tip of the Week

I knew I had made a mistake as soon as he answered, “Sure, but you don’t have to pay me.”

My question: “Can I pay you to create a graphic?”

What followed was weeks of my asking if there was a proof I could look at, and his apologizing for the delay, followed by a promise that he’d make time soon and no, it wasn’t necessary for me to find someone else.

These are tricky waters many of us have tried to navigate: asking a friend for a business-related favor. Favors from friends, though often asked for and promised with the best intentions, can be a surefire way to both sour a friendship and get work that doesn’t quite live up to standards but that you don’t feel comfortable nitpicking.

The solution? Just don’t do it. Paying someone, rather than calling in a favor, lets you dictate your timetable, make specifications in explicit (and annoying) detail, nitpick the work to death and keep at it until you’re completely satisfied — all guilt-free, because the person is being compensated for the effort. When there are deadlines, contracts and, most important, payments, the relationship is clear, direct and uncomplicated.

An unpaid favor, while having the veneer of a generous helpful offer, opens the door to a multitude of uncomfortable scenarios. And it’s just as irritating with roles reversed. Before I learned to set boundaries, I was often asked to edit writing for friends and falsely assured that “it will only take you five minutes!” And because I felt compelled to do a thorough job, I would spend an hour or more and feel resentful about it.

If you need something done, shell out the money or learn how to do it yourself. A free favor never pays off.

Tim Herrera is the founding editor of Smarter Living, where he edits and reports stories about living a better, more fulfilling life. He was previously a reporter and editor at The Washington Post. @timherrera • Facebook