

PSYCHOLOGY

# Dealing with Disappointment

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Robert didn't know what to think. How could he have misjudged the situation so badly? He felt angry, sad, and betrayed.

Because of his impending retirement, Robert had carefully groomed a successor to take over his key project. The company's executives assured him that they agreed with his choice. But when push came to shove, they vetoed his candidate. Instead, they appointed someone else to take the lead –

someone Robert didn't trust to continue the work that had been the capstone of his career. Robert was left kicking himself for not seeing it coming. The sense of futility and bewilderment was almost too much to bear.

Many people successfully work through their disappointments. Somehow, they have the strength to take stock of what has happened to them, learn from the incident, and move on. They come out of such disappointments stronger. But others, like Robert, struggle. In these cases, disappointment can even become depression. How can we learn to manage our disappointments effectively?

## **Managing Expectations**

Someone once said, "Expectation is the root of all heartache." The quote recognizes that when we experience disappointment, our hopes and expectations are out of line with reality. We all feel this way from time to time. Some of these disappointments will not make much of a difference, but there are also disappointments that can change the course of our lives.

Given the convoluted nature of desire, there are no experiences that are entirely free of disappointment. This is what makes disappointment such a complex and confusing feeling. Many of our desires that we pursue are unconscious, sublimated, and frequently contradictory.

Paradoxically, we may even become disappointed when we get what we want. For example, in Sigmund Freud's 1916 essay "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work," he explored the paradox of people who were "wrecked by success." Unconsciously, these people believed that their success was unjustified, so achieving it didn't feel satisfying to them. In other cases, even when we do get what we want – and think we deserve it – we may discover that what we wanted so badly doesn't bring the expected bliss and happiness.

## **Developmental Influences**

The way we handle disappointment is related to our developmental history – our relationship with our parents and other early, formative experiences.

Some people seek to avoid disappointment by turning into underachievers. They unconsciously set the bar low and avoid taking risks, to prevent themselves or others from being disappointed. Without realizing it, they have decided that the best strategy is not to have high

expectations about anything. Such behavior turns into a form of self-preservation. However, it also leads to a mediocre and unfulfilled life. Ironically, these people often turn into disappointments for everyone, including themselves.

Others, following a very different trajectory, seek to avoid disappointment by becoming overachievers. Although they tell themselves that their expectations of perfection are appropriate and realistic, these presumptions turn out not to be true at all. The bar is set far too high to ever make whatever they want to achieve attainable. They forget that perfectionism rarely begets perfection, or satisfaction – instead, it too often leads to disappointment.

Of course, there are also people with a more balanced developmental history. These people usually had parents who didn't try to be perfect, and didn't expect their children to be perfect either. By being “good enough” parents, they created a secure base for their children. These children feel secure in their relationships, supported rather than controlled, and are able to play, explore, and learn, thereby acquiring the inner strength to cope constructively with the inevitable setbacks that will come their way in their journey through life.

While it's helpful to know which way we lean, our developmental history is not our destiny. Whatever our developmental history may be – having a secure base or not – disappointment can provide us with valuable information about our beliefs about ourselves, other people, and what makes us happy.

## **Styles of Coping**

Major disappointments are often defining moments in people's lives. Constructively dealing with disappointment can be a self-curative process that can contribute to personal growth and make for greater resilience. Take Winston Churchill as an example. Early in his career, the disastrous First World War military campaign at Gallipoli forced him to resign from his position as First Lord of the Admiralty. Churchill had come up with a plan (later called “Churchill's Folly”) to send a fleet through the Dardanelles strait and capture Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), which he predicted would cause Ottoman Turkey to quit the war. But the plan utterly failed, and tens of thousands died. Churchill was disgraced and demoted.

To cope with this calamity and the subsequent humiliation, he refocused his attention and energy away from politics. Six months after his demotion, he became an infantry officer and joined the fight in France. During his time out of the political spotlight, he thought through what had happened to him and what it had taught him about dealing with life's challenges. While at first he felt overwhelmed by what he called his "black dog of depression," Churchill realized that it was much more constructive to reframe his disappointments as learning experiences in order to be able to cope better in the future, and to use disappointment as a catalyst for personal growth. Such soul-searching provided him with new information about himself, the world, and others.

Far too many people, when faced with disappointment, tend to attribute negative life events to their personal failings. They resort to obsessional self-blaming, as they feel ashamed or humiliated of not measuring up to the image of their ideal self. As a result, they direct their anger *inward*, to themselves. It may prompt them to say that they deserved it, that they were not good enough. Others, however, will turn their anger *outward* toward others, to people who didn't fulfill their expectations. It will contribute to feelings of spite, vindictiveness, and bitterness.

Unfortunately, both emotional reactions keep the person stuck in a web of disappointment. In many instances, disappointment can turn into a lingering sadness – a feeling of loss, of being let down, or even of betrayal. In particular, this is the case when disappointment has been inflicted by people whom they trusted deeply, as in Robert's case. How can we overcome it?

## **Overcoming Disappointment**

Unpleasant as disappointments may be, we can always learn something from them.

To constructively deal with disappointment, we need to first understand what has happened. Some instances of disappointment are predictable and preventable. But there are others that are unavoidable and beyond our control. To manage disappointment, we need to differentiate between situations that fall within our control and factors that are beyond it. Being able to recognize the difference will help us to deal with our frustrations more appropriately.

We also need to check whether our expectations are reasonable. Are we having unrealistically high expectations, and thus aiming too high? Or are we setting our goals too low? If you belong to that group of people who set their expectations too high, working constructively through

disappointments may help you to modify expectations. You may learn to move away from perfectionistic standards; you may start to accept what is “good enough.” For those who have set the bar too low, what they should stop doing is hanging on to false beliefs about life like, “There is no more hope” or “Nothing ever works for me.” Avoiding disappointment is not possible in life; trying to do so is not a very constructive way of dealing with life’s challenges.

When disappointment occurs regularly, it may be advisable to reevaluate our perceptions and behaviors. We can examine whether we are inviting disappointment. Could we have been clearer in our communication of what we were expecting from others? Do we really know what we expect from ourselves? Are we listening to what others are saying to us? Could we have done something different to arrive at a different outcome? Also, given what we know about ourselves, how can we adjust our expectations to be more effective the next time? And what support and resources do we have at our disposal to help us move through our feelings of disappointment successfully?

To deal with disappointment constructively, don’t let it deteriorate into apathy and depression. Sustained negative rumination is not a prescription for change. When we become preoccupied by bad news, we lose sight of what is right in our lives and in the world around us. We only internalize feelings of sadness and anger. Hanging on to these feelings can result in us unconsciously making them a part of our identity.

When we catch ourselves thinking negatively, we should redirect our energy and focus on positive solutions. Although from an unconscious perspective we may be reluctant to let go of a disappointing experience, in the long run it will be more detrimental to continue holding on. When we become too preoccupied with thinking about situations that have not met our expectations, we only create unnecessary stress.

Disappointment is not meant to destroy us. If taken in stride, it can strengthen us and make us better. In spite of its devastating emotional impact, we may even consider encounters with disappointment as journeys toward greater insight and wisdom. But to be able to make these journeys of self-reflection and reevaluation meaningful, we need to look beneath the surface. Only by working through painful associations will we be free from them.

In spite of whatever disappointing experiences come our way, our challenge will be to not let bitterness take root. We would do well to keep in mind that although disappointment is inevitable, being discouraged is always a choice.

*Editor's note: A previous version of this article wrongly attributed the quote "Expectation is the root of all heartache" to William Shakespeare. While HBR.org is not the first to make that mistake, we've updated the attribution to prevent others from repeating it.*

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**IAN KIRKBY** 3 months ago

Thanks for this helpful article: we all have to face disappointments in our lives.

This is actually part of a bigger chain which is dangerous if not broken: disappointment - discouragement - despair - defeat. Recognition is the first step, followed by a choice to address the root cause/s. Others can help us do so and if we are prepared to risk being vulnerable it gives others the freedom to reach out to us in turn.

Ian Kirkby, Aspire Management Consultancy Ltd

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