
The Five Stages of Making a Mistake

Stage 1: The deed. You goof, err, blow it, slip up, screw up, stumble, bumble, or otherwise make a mistake.

Stage 2: Embarrassment. You blush, cry, cover your face with your hands, withdraw, or run away. You are absolutely convinced that people will remember your mistake for the rest of your life.

Stage 3: Denial or downplay. You refuse to acknowledge your mistake (“I could have gotten 100 percent on that math test; I just didn’t want to set the curve too high for the rest of the class”), or you blame your mistake on some convenient other (your sister, your teacher, your dog), or you proclaim your indifference to the fact that you flubbed (“So what? I’m only human”). But deep down inside, where no one else can see, you hold onto the self-appointed title of “World Champion Dolt.”

Stage 4: Laughter. This usually occurs anywhere from one minute to one year following your mistake. It all depends on the mistake. You can overcome minor infractions (a lower-than-usual test grade, a stupid remark made at a party) within a week. For bigger blunders (destroying someone’s confidence, getting caught doing something expressly forbidden by your parents or teachers), it can take many months before you’re able to crack a smile. Even then, the laughter doesn’t minimize the seriousness of your mistake; it’s just a step in the healing process.

Stage 5: Acceptance. Again you proclaim, “I’m only human,” only this time you really mean it. You know that you messed up in a minor or major way, you apologized for an error in judgment if it was appropriate, but you also know that mistakes are a part of life . . . thank goodness.

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