

# Handling Mistakes

In an ideal world, where perfect parents raised perfect children, there would be no connection at all between mistakes and self-esteem. But your parents probably weren't perfect. As a child, you were necessarily corrected when you did something your parents considered a mistake. You might have pulled up some flowers instead of pulling weeds. If the message "you're bad" came along with your mother's correction, then you were started along a deadly path. This path leads to the conclusion that making mistakes always means you're bad.

As you grew up, you internalized these parental corrections and blame. You took over the job of criticizing yourself for making mistakes. In short, you created your pathological critic. To this day, when you uproot a flower while weeding, your critic says, "Nice move, stupid. Why don't you just plow the whole garden under while you're at it?"

The contradictory values of our society helped you in creating your critic. You found that to be a good member of society you must be equal *and* superior, generous *and* thrifty, spontaneous *and* controlled, and so on. This lose-lose system of mutually exclusive values allows your critic to find some evidence of error in any action and blow it up, way out of proportion.

You may grow up defensive, rationalizing all mistakes. You may join the group whose members are so afraid of the slightest mistake that they can admit to none. Or you may follow the more common route of chronic depression over all your mistakes.

In extreme cases, paralysis sets in. You ruminate over past mistakes and constrict your activities and relationships to avoid any chance of future mistakes. Afraid of doing something wrong, you try

to do the bare minimum perfectly. But even this little is impossible because change and mistakes are inevitable. You're trapped.

The fact of the matter is that self-esteem has nothing to do with being perfect. Self-esteem has nothing to do with avoiding mistakes. Self-esteem is rooted in your unconditional acceptance of yourself as an innately worthy being, regardless of mistakes. Feeling good about yourself is not something you do after all mistakes have been corrected—it's something you do *in spite of* mistakes. The only really serious mistake is agreeing with your pathological critic when he says that mistakes are evidence of worthlessness.

## Reframing Mistakes

Reframing means changing your interpretation or point of view. You put a new frame around a picture or an event to change the way you look at it and thus change its meaning for you. For example, when you wake up from a nightmare your heart is pounding. You are genuinely frightened, convinced that you are falling or being pursued. Then you realize that you were just dreaming, and you feel a wave of relief. Your heart stops pounding and you calm down. Your mind has "reframed" the experience, changing the meaning from "I'm in danger" to "it was just a dream." Your body and your whole mood follow your mind's lead. Reframing mistakes means learning to think about them in ways that remove their nightmare qualities. Instead, you view your mistakes as a natural, and even valuable component of your life. This new view in turn allows you to respond more flexibly when you do make mistakes, to learn from them and move on.

## Mistakes as Teachers

Mistakes are a function of growth and changing awareness. They are an absolute prerequisite for any learning process. Last year you bought the cheap paint, thinking it would do. This year you are a different person, grown older by a year and wiser by watching the paint fade. You are different by virtue of information you didn't have a year ago. It will solve nothing to damage your self-esteem now by castigating yourself for not having been able to see into the future then. Chalk it up to experience and go out and buy some decent paint. Pay for your lesson once, but only once. Attacking yourself is like paying twice: once for the new paint and once in the form of a mugging from your critic.

There is no way you can learn any task or skill without errors. This process is called successive approximation: getting closer and closer to successful performance through the feedback provided by mistakes. Every error tells you what you need to correct, every error brings you incrementally nearer to the behavioral sequence that works best for completion of the task. Rather than fearing mistakes, you need to welcome them during the learning process. People who can't stand making mistakes have trouble learning. They are scared to get a new job because they would be faced with new procedures and challenges. They're afraid to try a new sport because of all the errors they'll have to make before their body learns the subtle adjustments necessary to swing a racket or use a sand wedge. They won't buy a word processor or try rebuilding their carburetor because the inevitable mistakes in doing something new are just too painful.

Framing mistakes as necessary feedback for the learning process frees you to relax and focus on your gradual mastery of the new task. Mistakes are information about what works and what doesn't. They have nothing to do with your worth or intelligence. They are merely steps to a goal.

## Mistakes as Warnings

The dream of perfection turns mistakes from warnings into sins. Mistakes can function like the bell on your typewriter that keeps you from going off the page, or the buzzer that warns you to put on the seat belt in a car. If you have a minor traffic accident, it can serve as a warning that you need to concentrate on your driving more closely. If you receive a D in a course in school, it can be a warning that your study habits need improvement. When you and your mate have a big fight over a small issue, it can be a warning that you aren't communicating about some other, underlying issue. But perfectionism changes the warning to an indictment. And you become so busy defending yourself from the attacks of your pathological critic that you have no opportunity to heed the lesson of the mistake. You can fight perfectionism by focusing on the warning rather than on your culpability.

## Mistakes: Prerequisite for Spontaneity

The fear of mistakes kills your right to self-expression. It makes you afraid to be your spontaneous self, to say what you think and feel. If you are never allowed to say the wrong thing, you may never feel free enough to say the right thing—to say that you love someone or that you hurt or want to give comfort. The dream of perfection

makes you stifle all of that because you have no right to a faux pas or excessive sentiment.

The willingness to make mistakes means that it's OK to disappoint people, to have a moment of awkwardness, to have the conversation take an uncomfortable turn. Consider the case of Andrea. She hangs out with the same two people at work because any new relationship would be too unpredictable. Suppose the new person didn't like her jokes or thought that some of her remarks were stupid. She'd have to watch everything she said. Andrea's situation illustrates how the fear of mistakes can (1) isolate you because you're afraid of the judgments of someone new and (2) choke off spontaneity because you have to vigilantly watch what you express.

### Mistakes: The Necessary Quota

Allow a quota for mistakes. Some people have the pathological attitude that all mistakes can be avoided, that competent, intelligent, worthwhile people don't make them. This is paralyzing hogwash that can leave you afraid to take any chance in life. The healthier position is that everyone deserves a quota for mistakes. You should be allowed a certain number of social gaffes, work mistakes, poor decisions, blown chances, even failed relationships. This is a good time to start thinking in terms of reasonable error quotas, rather than the hopeless dream of perfection. A rule of thumb for most people is that between one and three decisions in every ten are dead wrong. And several others may be in a doubtful gray area. For mechanical, over-learned processes like typing or driving, the quota goes down. You don't expect to have an accident every tenth time you get in the car. But sooner or later you will have one, hopefully only a fender-bender, and you will need to chalk that one up as a mistake that you are entitled to under your error quota.

### Mistakes as Nonexistent in the Present

To understand this concept, it will be helpful to first examine the most common categories of mistakes.

1. *Errors of fact.* You hear "highway 45" on the phone, write down "highway 49," and get lost.
2. *Failure to reach a goal.* Summer arrives and you are still too fat to get into your bathing suit.

3. *Wasted effort.* You gather 300 signatures on a recall petition that fails.
4. *Errors of judgment.* You decide to get the cheaper paint, and it fades.
5. *Missed opportunities.* The stock you decided not to buy at \$5 is now at \$30.
6. *Forgetfulness.* You get all the way to the potluck and realize that your salad dressing is still at home in the refrigerator.
7. *Overindulgence in legitimate pleasures.* The party was fun, but you have a hangover.
8. *Inappropriate emotional outbursts.* You yell at your spouse and feel awful about it later.
9. *Procrastination.* You never got around to fixing the roof, and now the dining room wallpaper is ruined.
10. *Impatience.* You try a bigger wrench on the nut and the bolt breaks.
11. *Violation of your moral code.* You tell a white lie: "I'll be out of town this weekend." On Saturday, you run into the person you're avoiding.

This list could go on and on. Classifying the ways to go wrong has been a popular human pastime since Moses came down from the mountain with the ten commandments.

There is a common thread running through these examples that will help in understanding mistakes. *A mistake is anything you do that you later, upon reflection, wish you had done differently.* This applies also to things you *didn't do* that you later, upon reflection, wish you *had done*.

The key word here is "later." Later may be a split second or a decade after the act. When you apply too much force to the nut and the bolt breaks, "later" is very soon indeed. It seems like "immediately," but it's not. There is a lag between the action and the regret. It is this lag time, short or long, that is the key to freeing yourself from the tyranny of mistakes.

At the exact moment of action, you are doing what seems reasonable. It is your later interpretation that turns the action into a mistake. "Mistake" is a label you always apply in retrospect, when you realize you could have done something *more* reasonable.

## The Problem of Awareness

ou *always* choose the action that seems most likely to meet your needs. This is the essence of motivation: wanting to do something more than any other thing.

Motivation comes down to consciously or unconsciously choosing the most desirable alternative for meeting the needs at hand. The potential benefits of the action you choose seem, at least at the time, to outweigh the foreseeable disadvantages.

Obviously, the action that seems best at the time will depend on your awareness. Awareness is the degree of clarity with which you perceive and understand, consciously or unconsciously, all the factors relating to the need at hand. At any given moment, your awareness is the automatic product of your innate intelligence, your intuition, and your total life experience up to that point, including our current emotional and physical state.

"Mistake" is a label that you apply to your behavior at a later time when your awareness has changed. At this later time you know the consequences of your action, and you may decide that you would have acted differently.

Since you always do your best (or choose what seems most likely to meet your needs) at any given time, and since "mistakes" are the result of a later interpretation, it follows logically that making mistakes should not lower your self-esteem.

"But," you say, "sometimes I know better than to do something, and I do it anyway. I know I shouldn't have dessert if I want to lose weight, but I go ahead and have that bowl of ice cream anyway. I feel awful afterwards, and I *should* feel awful because I let myself down."

If this is your line of reasoning, you're missing a crucial point about motivation. To "know better" is not sufficient to "do better" if our *awareness* at the time is focused on a stronger and opposing motivation. At the time, your desire for the ice cream was stronger than your desire to lose weight, so the "best" thing—indeed, the only thing—you could do was eat the ice cream.

If you label the choice you make "good" or "bad," you end up unjustly punishing yourself for actions you couldn't help performing. More relevant labels would be "wise" or "unwise" and "effective" or "ineffective," since these terms make the more compassionate and accurate judgment that your actions were made out of a limited awareness. In any event, a firm commitment to expanding your awareness will work much better than a grim resolve never to make the same mistake again. Because you *will* make the same mistake again, until you expand your awareness.

## Responsibility

All this talk about always doing your best may sound like you are not *responsible* for your actions. Not so. You are definitely responsible for your actions.

Responsibility means accepting the consequences of your actions. Consequences always come home to roost. For every action there is a cost to be paid. If you are highly aware of the costs and willing to pay, you will choose relatively "wise" actions, have fewer occasions to label your actions later as mistakes, and feel better about yourself. If you have a limited awareness of the costs incurred by your actions and aren't willing to pay when the costs come due, you may choose unwise actions, label them as mistakes later, and suffer blows to your self-esteem.

But in either case, you are responsible for your actions in that you will inevitably pay the price—willing or not, conscious or not. Becoming a more responsible person means increasing your awareness of the price you pay for your actions. And it's worth the effort, because low awareness means you are later surprised and dismayed at the cost of some of your decisions.

## The Limits of Awareness

Your awareness of the probable consequences of your acts is limited by five important factors.

1. **Ignorance.** Many times you have no valid way of predicting consequences because you have *never* been faced with similar circumstances before. In effect you are flying blind. If you've never sprayed a nozzle too close causes the paint to run. If you don't know how to fold the egg whites for your first soufflé, it may not rise properly.

2. **Forgetting.** There is no way to remember every consequence of every act you have ever performed. Many events are lost to awareness because they are not sufficiently painful or important. As a result, you frequently repeat mistakes because you simply can't recall how things turned out the last time. One of the authors, who had not been camping for several years, forgot how much he suffered from mosquitoes. As a result, he again neglected to bring repellent on last summer's trip.

3. **Denial.** People deny and disregard the consequences of previous mistakes for one of two reasons: fear or need. Sometimes they are so afraid of change or of doing things differently that they deny or minimize the negative consequences of their mistakes. Faced with

the same choice again, they repeat a painful error because all the alternatives seem too threatening.

An example is the man who goes on dates and bores women to death with long recitations of his achievements. He suspects it might turn some people off but denies the consequences of his bragging: few repeat dates, no relationships. He clings to denial because he is so afraid of real communication, of letting his hair down and talking about his authentic feelings.

Overwhelming need creates the same kind of denial. If you really need something, you tend to deny the negative consequences of getting it. Consider the woman who keeps leaving and then going back to an abusive, alcoholic husband. At the moment she decides to go back she is most in contact with her feelings of love and dependency. Meanwhile she has to deny or minimize the inevitably painful consequences in order to have what she needs so much.

**4. No alternatives.** Many mistakes get repeated because people are simply unaware of any better way to act. They lack the skills, ability, or experience to generate new strategies and solutions. Consider the case of the woman who kept blowing job interviews because she stared at the floor, made brief, one-sentence answers, and couldn't sell herself.

**5. Habits.** Some habits, ingrained for a lifetime, prevent you from evaluating or having the slightest awareness of your choices. You don't think about the consequences because you don't know you're making a decision. A classic example is the habit of choosing a short-range benefit while ignoring a long-range disaster. A woman went from one dead-end relationship to another. She chronically made the mistake of gravitating toward men who reminded her of her father. Their apparent strength and authority attracted her, but in the long run their coldness and emotional shallowness destroyed the relationship. Another example is a law school graduate who consistently chose the short-term pleasure of smoking marijuana and spending whole weekends in a daze instead of studying for his bar exam.

Your awareness is mitigated by all of these factors. For many of your decisions, forgetting, denial, habit, and so on prevent you from making use of your experience. What you know and what has happened to you before is simply unavailable at the moment you decide to act. You cannot be blamed for this. Your awareness, however limited, was all you had to go on when you made the mistake.

But just because you aren't to blame, doesn't mean you can't do something about it. You can. The next section will show you how.

## The Habit of Awareness

The *habit of awareness* is very simple. It is a commitment to predict the likely consequences, both short and long term, of any significant act or decision. Here are the questions you should ask yourself to increase awareness at the point of decision.

- Have I ever experienced this situation before?
- What negative consequences came or might be expected to come from the decision I plan to make? (Be sure to consider both short- and long-term consequences.)
- Are the consequences worth it, given what I expect to gain?
- Do I know any alternative with less negative consequences?

The main requirement for developing the habit of awareness is to make a promise to yourself. You commit to examining the probable consequences of every significant thing that you do. This shouldn't take the form of neurotic worry. Rather, it is the stance of the questioning mind: you use your experience to develop likely outcome scenarios from each decision. If you are able to make this commitment to awareness, you will make fewer major mistakes.

**Chronic mistakes.** Everyone has one or more areas where similar mistakes are repeated over and over. To increase awareness in these areas you should do two things after each reoccurrence of the error.

1. Write down in detail the negative consequences of the mistake. The very act of writing, whether you keep the notes or not, is an important memory aid.
2. Determine your priorities. What was the main thing you got or hoped to get from your erroneous decision? Were you seeking a short-term pleasure, were you trying to feel safe, trying to be liked by others, avoiding loneliness? Is this priority a theme in your life? Is it the basis of other poor decisions? If the same priority chronically sucks you into mistakes, then you must include this factor in your awareness. The priority may be important, but it is also dangerous. Any critical new decision should be examined to see if it is motivated by that priority. If so, that's a red flag. You may be headed toward a repeat of the old mistake. Ask the four questions listed above. Slow down and really examine your choices.

## Raising Your Mistake Consciousness

Here are some exercises you can do to raise your mistake consciousness.

**1. Realize that everyone makes mistakes.** Even good guys and heroes. Political leaders, financial moguls, screen stars, great philanthropists, scientists, and healers all make mistakes. In fact, it's often true that the greater the person, the greater his or her mistakes. The Wright brothers failed many times before their plane finally flew at Kittyhawk. Salk struggled for years before he developed the polio vaccine. Mistakes are the inescapable by-product of learning or trying anything new.

Make a list of historical or public figures who have made significant mistakes. Only include those people for whom you have some appreciation and respect.

Make a second list of people you know personally and admire. List their mistakes. Even your beloved teacher may have lost his temper over a small mishap, the captain of your high-school football team may have been caught cheating on exams, and the top salesman at work may have bungled an easy sale.

Why is it that even good and admirable people make mistakes? The answer is that they didn't recognize their decision as a mistake at the time. They didn't fully anticipate the consequences of an act. Like every other human being that has walked this planet, they had an imperfect awareness—they could not predict with complete accuracy the rippling effects of a current decision on future experience.

Brilliant, creative, and powerful people all make errors because the future is hidden. It can only be guessed at. No amount of intelligence or understanding can generate a perfect forecast of what is to come.

**2. Realize that even you make mistakes.** Make another list of your own mistakes. Take some time at this, since you'll need this list for later exercises. If you seem to be always making mistakes and it feels like your list could go on indefinitely, edit your list down to your ten biggest mistakes.

Now comes the hard part. For the first item on your list, go back in time, back to the moment when the decision was made. Try to remember your thoughts and feelings just before the act. Did you know what would happen, or did you hope for some happier consequence? Did you have any idea of the pain that you or others would feel? If you were aware of the possibility of pain, try to recall how you weighed that against the image of some desirable outcome. Notice which factor seemed bigger at the time. Now try to remember

the need or needs that pushed you to the decision. Recall the strength of those needs and how they influenced your choice. Did any alternative action seem more attractive to you? Here is the most important question: If you were to return to that time, with the *same* needs, perceptions, and predictions of future outcomes, would you act differently?

Go ahead and repeat this process with each mistake on your list. Naturally, you should skip items where your memory is too hazy to really answer these questions.

**3. Forgiving yourself.** You deserve forgiveness for your mistakes, no matter how painful the consequences, for three reasons.

(1) You made the only decision you could make, given your needs and awareness at the moment you made it. If you worked seriously at the previous exercise, you may have become clearer that you cannot act differently than your awareness allows *at a particular point in time*. You simply did the best you could.

(2) You have already paid for your mistake. Your error led to painful consequences. You have endured those consequences and felt that pain. Unless your mistake hurt others and you need in some way to atone, you have already paid the price of being human.

(3) Mistakes are unavoidable. You come into this world knowing nothing. Everything you have learned, from standing upright to running a word processor, has been accomplished at the price of literally thousands of mistakes. You fell hundreds of times before you walked, and you have probably "lost your files" more than once. The learning process goes on your entire life. And so do the mistakes. It makes no sense to kick yourself for something you can only avoid in the cemetery.

**Visualization.** To gain practice in viewing mistakes as a function of limited awareness, try this exercise, which combines relaxation, visualization, and affirmation.

Sit in a comfortable chair or lie down on your back. Uncross your arms and legs. Close your eyes. Take several slow, deep breaths. Feel yourself becoming more relaxed with each breath.

Starting at your feet, scan various parts of your body for tension and relax them. As you breathe in, notice any tension in your feet, then let it flow away when you breathe out. Keep your breaths slow and regular. Now notice any tension in your calves as you breathe in, and let the tension flow out as you exhale. Move up to your thighs for the next breath, then your buttocks and pelvis, then your stomach and lower back area, then your chest and upper back.

Now move your attention out to your hands. Inhale and feel any tightness, exhale and let it go. Do the same for your forearms,

your biceps, your shoulders, and your neck. Dwell on these areas for several breaths if you need to.

Notice any tension in your jaw muscles, and let it go as you exhale. Next concentrate on your eyes, then forehead, then scalp.

Continue to breathe, slowly and deeply, sinking further into relaxation. Now begin forming a picture of yourself. See yourself as you were after a recent mistake (perhaps one of the mistakes on your list). See where you are, see your face, see the position of your body. Be aware that you did your best, given your awareness at that moment. Say the following affirmations to yourself. Just let them drift into your mind:

*I am a unique and valuable human being.*

*I always do the best I can.*

*I love (or like) myself, mistakes and all.*

Repeat these affirmations three or four times, changing the wording to suit yourself.

Now visualize yourself moving through your daily routine. See what you will be doing the rest of today or tomorrow. See that you are unique, that you are valuable, that you are trying to live the best you can. Watch how you always do what seems best at the moment you do it.

Finish with this affirmation: "Today I like myself more than yesterday. Tomorrow I will like myself even more."

When you are ready, open your eyes and get up slowly. As you go about your day, repeat the affirmations whenever they come to mind. Do the full relaxation exercise twice a day. In the morning before you get up, and in bed before falling asleep are good times, since you are already relaxed and in a receptive frame of mind.

The exercise will work better for you if you make up your own affirmations. The affirmations that work best are short, simple, and positive. Complex affirmations don't seem to get through to your subconscious. Affirmations that contain negatives, such as "I will not criticize myself," seem to be understood by your subconscious as if the negatives had been dropped out: "I will criticize myself." Choose affirmations that are positive: "I will speak well of myself."

To help you compose your own self-esteem affirmations, here are some examples that have worked for others.

*I'm basically all right as I am.*

*I have worth because I struggle to survive.*

*I have legitimate needs.*

*It's all right to meet my needs as I see fit.*

*I am responsible for my life.*

*I accept the consequences of my actions.*

*I feel warm and loving toward myself.*

*I invariably do the best I am capable of at the moment.*

*"Mistakes" is a label I add later.*

*I am free to make mistakes.*

*Everything I do is an attempt to meet legitimate needs.*

*I am expanding my awareness to make wiser choices.*

*I am letting go of unwise choices in the past.*

*I can do anything I want, but what I want is determined by my awareness.*

*Everything I do involves a price to pay.*

*Shoulds, oughts, and musts are irrelevant.*

*In the moment of choice, I do only what my awareness permits. It's foolish to resent others' actions—they also do only what their awareness permits.*

*Since everyone is doing his or her best, I can easily feel compassion and empathy.*

*My basic job in life is expanding my awareness.*

*No one is any more or less worthy than I.*

*My mere existence proves my worth.*

*I can learn from my mistakes without guilt and worry.*

*Everyone's awareness is different, so comparisons are worthless. When*

*I feel unsure about what to do, I can examine the consequences.*

*I can invent new ways to satisfy a need and wisely choose the best option.*