



Get Back to Happy

6 tips for regaining your happiness after a setback.

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Whether you bounce back from setbacks quickly -- or take a tumble and are slow to recover -- you can train yourself to spend less time worried and more time happy.

In day-to-day life, we all cope with challenges that can range from relatively minor stresses, like a bounced check, to longer-term challenges, like job loss, a heartbreaking [divorce](#), or bad news from your doctor.

These setbacks don't have to set you back for long. Here are six ways to handle these events better so you can move from harrowed to happy faster.

1. Do rely on a supportive network of family and friends.

Jim Stevens, 59, an artist in Wheat Ridge, Colo., discovered what resilience experts say is a sure-fire way to bounce back from adversity: Reach out to others for support.

While serving in the Vietnam war, Stevens was shot in the head by an enemy fighter. Doctors couldn't remove the entire bullet. For the next 20 years, Stevens had severe, recurring migraines.

In 1994, a particularly painful migraine triggered a [stroke](#) and Stevens lost all but 2% of his [vision](#). He was angry. One day, in a fit of rage, he destroyed much of his unfinished art pieces and notes.

In time, he opened up about his feelings to his youngest daughter. "She convinced me I was still needed," Stevens says. "That broke my heart and finally got my attention."

David Myers, PhD, a psychology professor at Hope College and author of *The Pursuit of Happiness*, tells WebMD, "Self-disclosure can be healing. Talking about our troubles can be open-heart therapy."

2. Don't check out. Do stay committed and engaged.

During their key talk, Stevens' daughter suggested he learn karate as a way to regain self-control. He set a new life mission for himself: to become a martial artist.

"I was back on track, looking forward to things again and not behind me," Stevens says.

After four years, he earned a black belt. Today, he is the only legally blind man to win the Martial Arts Tournament of Champions men's fighting competition. He says spectators were unaware of his blindness.

Years ago, when he was deeply frustrated with his situation, Stevens could have quit. Instead, he worked to master his anger and took charge of the situation.

"Control is the opposite of powerlessness," writes Joan Borysenko, PhD, in her book *It's Not the End of the World*. "It's not about being a control freak or bending people to your will. It means agency-- that I-can-do-it feeling, which leads to effective action."

3. Take Small Steps and Be Persistent.

"Start acting as if you were happier, by doing," Myers says. "Begin with tolerably small steps and do the things that happy people often do: Get out of the house, meet friends, and engage with your faith community."

After two years of studying karate, Jim Stevens' karate instructor suggested he try to work on his art again. He tried and failed twice.

His youngest daughter came to him on one of his bad days and said, "Dad, you promised not to quit." So he tried again. This time, Stevens experimented with different types of visual lenses to help him. He says he slowly started to make quality art again, using the lenses and his sense of touch, and in 2009 was honored by the Kennedy Center for his work.

4. Exercise Regularly.

Don't let a setback bench you. [Physical activity](#) may help you handle uncertainty and [stress](#) and may help to boost your mood. Exercise has been shown to increase the production of the feel-good chemicals endorphins.

If you haven't exercised in a while, check with your doctor before launching a new fitness plan. And don't forget about the other basics of self-care: a healthy [diet](#), getting enough [sleep](#), and tending to any health conditions you have.

5. Don't Take Things Personally.

Try not to blame yourself or others for your problems. Instead, analyze your choices to strive to avoid making the same mistakes twice.

For example, if you've had a nasty breakup, try not to beat yourself up ("I have terrible luck with men/women") or trash your ex ("That liar deserves what s/he gets.") Instead of spending that energy rehashing the past, use it to move on.

"Taking things personally leads to guilt and shame, which are disempowering emotions," Borysenko writes in *It's Not the End of the World*. "Taking responsibility for your actions, on the other hand, can lead to helpful and empowering insights."

6. Be Flexible.

A setback often includes a life-altering change. Experts say many people would do well to be more flexible in handling those changes.

For example, suppose you lose your job -- but you know the exact job you want next. While on the hunt, you get another job offer -- but it falls short of your dream job, so you don't take it. In being inflexible, you missed a source of income and may have slammed a door that could have led to other opportunities.

"Just knowing you can be more flexible is half the battle," says George Bonanno, PhD, professor and chair of Columbia University's counseling and clinical psychology department and author of *The Other Side of Sadness*. "You can reorient yourself during a crisis and change course as things change. You can say: 'OK, I can handle this. What do I need to do now?'"

How to Solve Problems Like the Best

Step back with a cool head and do a little detective work to see if you could handle your setback better.

Charles Figley, PhD, distinguished chair in disaster [mental health](#) at Tulane University, suggests asking yourself these questions:

1. What happened?
2. Why did it happen?
3. Why did I act like I did when it happened?
4. Why have I acted the way I have since then?
5. What if something like this happens again?

By answering those questions, "you get the benefit of self-knowledge and self-feedback," Figley says. "But the main thing is to get what is inside out."