


WORK

# You Screwed Up. Now What?

BY MELANIE MANNARINO



**STUMBLE-INA**  
After winning big at the Academy Awards, Jennifer Lawrence falls hard.



**HERE'S THE THING** about fails: Whether you've just gotten fired (work fail), completely blanked on an acquaintance's name at a party (social fail), or say, tweeted potentially offensive quips to your millions of Twitter followers (social media-career fail), it always feels like an epic blunder. (Unless you're Charlie Sheen or Donald Trump, who have elevated ignoring their mistakes to an art form.)

You can blame that heaping dose of humiliation on evolution, explains Brenda Bauer, a psychologist and psychoanalyst in NYC. "Humans are social beings, and we get a fair amount of our self-esteem from the tribe." And if we think the tribe disapproves of our behavior, we panic. There's even a term for that pit-of-stomach, full-face-flush feeling: narcissistic mortification. Put simply, says Bauer, "You feel like you've just died."

**SLIP AND SLIDE**  
Katy Perry takes the cake for the sweetest on-stage tumble.



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**BUSTIN' OUT**  
Nicki Minaj is near nip-slip after a quick change.



**MAKE IT A WIN**

## FOUL BALL

50 Cent's awful first pitch almost nails a cameraman.



## THE FAIL

At a group business dinner, your coworker makes a joke and you joke back, "Good one, Tubby." Only after the table falls silent do you realize (a) "Tubby" is not the meaningless term of endearment you and your college pals used to use it as and (b) your coworker is, in fact, obese.



## THE FIX

Immediately apologize, says Bauer. "Do not make additional jokes to cover up the first one. Accept that you've created this bad experience you're having." Keep your words short and sincere. "Look the person in the eye and say 'I don't know where that came from; it was inexcusable.'" Then take a drink of water while the group moves on—but don't run from the table. When you fail like this in front of a group, Bauer says it's key to follow up with a call to the person you've offended privately afterward, "so it doesn't look like you were just sculpting your PR for the others who were there."

## TAT TYPO

Life imitates body art? Hayden Panettiere's #NoRegrets ink is misspelled.

## THE FAIL

You flew into a rage last night at the bar, yelling about bad service and tossing your half-finished vodka soda at the bartender. Your friends were mortified—and today, you are too.



## THE FIX

A good first step is to apologize for your behavior. If you know you embarrassed your friends, tell them so. Then, says Bauer, take a big step back and don't make yourself the center of attention. No need to bring it up again once you've apologized. In fact, she says, stop feeling guilty—it's done. Consider your epic fail part of yesterday's news cycle, and move on.

## THE FAIL

Your observation about Caitlyn Jenner's latest wardrobe surprise seemed clever as you typed the tweet—but it only takes seconds before you're getting shamed for intolerance. That's totally not what you meant!



## THE FIX

Start typing—fast. "There are a lot of tools you can use to make up for a mistake, but some of it comes down to momentum," says Hiltzik. Bauer advises total honesty: "Acknowledge that you failed—you tried to make a joke, it didn't come out right, and you're sorry." And leave Ms. Jenner out of your tweets going forward, so as not to remind people of your earlier mistake.

## THE FAIL

You got a pot citation at a music festival. Which seemed like no biggie at the time, but now you realize it's basically like being arrested (read: you have to go to court, and could be sentenced). *Whah?*



## THE FIX

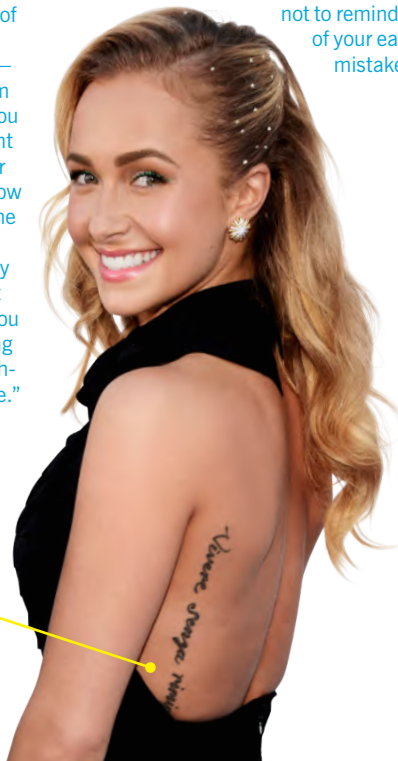
Before you take action, consult with a lawyer who specializes in this type of situation, says Hiltzik. Then follow his universal advice: "Accept responsibility and move on"—whether you're telling your parents why you need to borrow money to retain a lawyer or you're standing in front of the judge accepting your punishment. To make this a win, think about how this situation happened, what you learned, and how it has made you more resilient.

As if we're not hard enough on ourselves, our connected, 24/7 news-feed world makes it easy for others to jump on the public-shaming bandwagon—meaning yes, everyone might be obsessing as much as you are, if only for the few seconds it takes to forward a link. Even "private" fails aren't private, when a snapshot of regular, noncelebrity you emerging from the crystal blue waters of a Caribbean beach with your bikini bottoms askew can go viral in minutes.

"With so many more platforms for communicating than ever before, it increases the speed at which a fail can spread," says Matthew Hiltzik, founder of Hiltzik Strategies, a corporate and crisis communications firm in New York City. "Plus there's a presumption that people should know better."

## SHIFTING BLAME

But should you really know better? Megan McArdle, author of *The Up Side of Down: Why Failing Well is the Key to Success*, is willing to cut us all a break. "We underweight the role of luck," she says. "We overpersonalize our failures, thinking we are bad



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or stupid or that we don't have what it takes to succeed. And while it is very rare to see a failure in which a person didn't make at least one dumb decision, some people make mistakes and nothing bad happens." McArdle offers a simple math equation: mistake + bad luck = failure. "It's always about coincidence."

To follow the equation through: You may have made a handful of mistakes, but it's the one your boss catches that could cost you your job. It's the same with social fails. Naturally, you have acquaintances whose names you can't recall on demand, and it's bad luck if you're forced into introducing one you should remember to your new boyfriend at a party. And there are thousands of inappropriate tweets, posts, and comments sent out into the world every day (every minute?)—it's a combination of who you are, what you said, when you sent it, and who read it that can get you into trouble.

McArdle's advice: "Give yourself permission to suck," she encourages. "Know that when you're failing at something, you are also learning to do something better—whether it's that same thing or something else."

## FLIP THE SCRIPT

No matter how badly you've messed up, there is a way to redeem yourself, says Hiltzik, and even to spin your blunder into a win. First, consider your own reputation (at the office, in your alumni clique, online). "Ask yourself: How deep

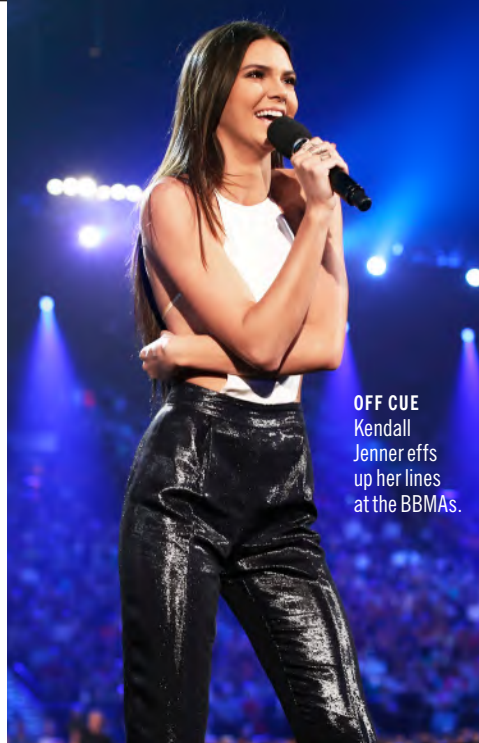
is the preexisting reservoir of goodwill? How deep is the reservoir of hate? Is this repeat behavior?" he says.

In other words, if you're a first-time offender and people generally like you, your odds of turning around your flub are excellent. Hey, even if you've got a fairly healthy group of haters—hi, Gwyneth—your post-fail actions can help spread amnesia in your peers. Remember the massive outcry over her use of "conscious uncoupling" during her split with Chris Martin? Yeah, we barely remember either. That's a win. She turned that epic fail around by just moving on.

"Part of succeeding is identifying when to stop trying," says McArdle. If you can get past your mistake, others should also be able to. "The public is generally very forgiving," says Hiltzik. (And yes, your friends and family are considered part of the public.)

Once people have gotten over it, you can flip the script and come out ahead. "Adversity sometimes breeds opportunity," says Hiltzik. Humor and self-deprecation can often fast-track forgiveness. Just look at Justin Bieber. "By agreeing to a Comedy Central roast, he owned his gaffes and took them back," says Bauer. "He let others make fun of his immature mistakes and he got an enormous amount of media buzz for it." Bieber's win? A new audience of potential fans who respect his ability to laugh at himself.

Once the flush of humiliation drains from your face and you've made sincere apologies where necessary, step back and see what you've learned. "Challenges are opportunities to learn to do something better," says McArdle. "None of us are born knowing how to do things. We learn by failing."



**OFF CUE**  
Kendall Jenner effs up her lines at the BBMAS.

## FAIL CONFESSIONS + LESSONS

"I showed up for my first styling job—a music video—with one trench coat. That's all the client needed...or so I'd thought! But the coat drowned him. His publicist snapped two fingers in my face, telling me, 'Always have options, sweetie. Now go out and get some before you cost us more time and money.' I learned to give people more than what they expect from you!"

—JUNE AMBROSE, CELEBRITY STYLIST

"I'd made a béarnaise sauce upon request for a very famous guest. When it came time to serve, the butter had parted ways with the sauce. I wanted to crawl in the fridge and hide! I was able to collect myself. I stopped, thought, and whisked in a simple splash of warm water. The sauce came back together."

—ALEX GUARNASCHELLI, EXECUTIVE CHEF AT NYC'S BUTTER, FOOD NETWORK'S *IRON CHEF*

"While at the White House for winning the 2014 women's basketball championship with UConn, I fell off the stage. On national television. President Obama came to help me and give me a hug. I turned beet red—I was so embarrassed. Then I realized that you have to be able to laugh at yourself, so I gave a quick curtsy and played it cool. My fall and quick recovery earned me a top spot on ESPN's Not Top 10!"

—STEFANIE DOLSON, 2016 OLYMPIC BASKETBALL HOPEFUL



**FASHION RISK**  
Madonna's cape drags her down mid-performance.

FROM TOP: CHRISTOPHER POLK/GETTY IMAGES FOR DCP; SAMIR HUSSEIN/REDFERNS VIA GETTY IMAGES.