

>>> 'If you are trying to do anything interesting, failure is inevitable at some stage,' he says. 'Look at very successful people who've achieved things – from Richard Branson to Steve Jobs – you see lots of mistakes along with the successes. You don't get to make a dent in the universe without taking risks and failing sometimes. Stretching yourself always involves some degree of making mistakes.'

Learning to make mistakes is 'a very important life skill', Harford adds, but it

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doesn't come without pain. He likens it to exercise, where in order to get results we're used to pushing ourselves until our muscles reach their limit, but in the case of mental abilities the endpoint may be

an embarrassing mistake. And the fear of that can cripple us.

Think of the language that goes with it. 'I wished I could've faded into thin air,' says illustrator John White about a gaffe he made at a book fair. 'I congratulated a client who I thought was soon to have a baby. She turned crimson and said "I am not pregnant!" I was so ashamed.'

Ashamed of what? Making an honest mistake? That makes no sense, but as Kathryn Schulz, author of *Being Wrong: Adventures In The Margin Of Error* (Portobello Books, £9.99) says: 'We talk of "losing face" as if our mistakes really did cause us to disappear – as if our identity was rubbed out by the experience of being wrong.' We fear it so much, she believes, that when we do make a mistake we often go into denial, which may compound the damage.

HOW TO MOVE ON FROM MISTAKES

By Jessica McGregor Johnson, author of *The Right T-Shirt: Write Your Own Rules And Live The Life You Want* (Unilk Books, £11.50)

Looking back with regret stops people moving forward. We get stuck in the past. But often we think we've made a more serious mistake than anyone else will have picked up on. We're so involved in our own lives, we assume others will think constantly about this mistake we've made. But is it really as bad as you think or are you blowing it out of proportion?

■ If it's something you've said, is there a real consequence?

■ If there's something you want to do to make things right, do it. Then you'll know you've done all you can, and you can let yourself off the hook.

■ If you've done what you can to make amends and you are still worrying, then the only person suffering is you.

■ Ask yourself: do you have any proof that your actions caused a disaster?

■ If you are bound up in regret, stop and check in with yourself. Stop the thought. Take a deep breath, notice where you are in the moment. Right now, everything around you is fine.

■ Remember: you can control your thoughts. You can choose to respond rather than unconsciously react.

■ When you think about what's gone wrong, focus on how you'd want to do it in the future. Break the pattern. Take a moment to visualise how you'd have done it differently. Reflect, and you will become more aware of your tendencies.

■ When you think about something you've done or said, there's a physical

sensation that comes just before you open your mouth to speak. Think: what was going on in my body? This should become your alarm, telling you to behave differently. It will help you become aware of what you're doing, which is the best way to avoid making the same mistake again.

■ Remember, you made the best decision you could at the time.

■ Regret keeps you stuck, weakens your creative potential and drains your confidence. You become worried about making any decisions at all. If you start out in the wrong career, you'll be in a position to discover the right one. You don't have all the answers at the start. Ultimately, it's about moving forward and taking action.

Denial and tilt

In the most serious cases, this can lead to disaster. Miscarriages of justice, for example, can be the result of denial. A prosecutor may not be able to accept that they, a decent professional, have sent an innocent person to jail – albeit through genuine error. Even in the face of compelling new evidence, they may come up with extraordinary justifications of how the person really did do it in order to protect their sense of self.

Another destructive response to a mistake is going into what poker players call 'tilt'. 'This is where you realise you've made a mistake and start doing stupid things to compensate,' Harford says. 'It's a double or quits mentality, you see it in everything from City dealing to relationships – this relationship's going really badly, so the best thing to do is redouble my efforts. Only often it isn't. So it's not the first mistake that gets you, but the bigger ones you make thereafter.'

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