



a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap

Episode 55 - How to Handle Mistakes

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

Dinur: And I'm Dinur Blum. I'm a college professor in Los Angeles.

Adam: And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn and how we teach and how they overlap.

Dinur: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 55 - how to handle mistakes.

Dinur: When you make a mistake, one of the things we have to learn is how to handle mistakes. And the best way of handling them is owning them, acknowledging them, and letting them go.

Adam: Now, too many of us have been raised with fixed mindsets and with the feeling that if we do something wrong, we should beat ourselves up. But we've also been raised to believe that beating ourselves up for making a mistake is the same thing as fixing the mistake. Now tell me: if you have had a bad grade on an exam because of mistakes you made, does beating yourself up for the mistake fix the problem of not doing well on the exam? No, it doesn't. If you've said something that hurt your friend, does kicking yourself for hurting your friend change the fact that you hurt them, or do anything to fix it? No, it doesn't. And in fact, some people may say, "why are you beating yourself up? That's self-serving. You don't actually have to do anything about the mistake. You hurt my feelings. Maybe you need to do something about that," And we're not willing to. So we think that beating ourselves up basically gives us a pass on having to do the things that will make it right.

Adam: Too many of us also blow our mistakes out of proportion. There has to be some kind of sense of scale. For example, if you bumped into someone by accident, that's not the same thing as shoving them out of the way. But too many people respond as if they've shoved, whether they shoved or bumped.

Adam: And finally, too many of us - and I speak from experience here - try to take responsibility for things that are actually an accident or totally outside of our control, because we're either close to what happened or we are, in some way, involved with someone that it happened to and because of the way we were raised, we feel responsible.

Adam: The problem is in all three of these cases, we're not handling the mistake. Sometimes we shouldn't be the one who handles the mistake. Sometimes we make a big deal out of something small, but we try to downplay something big, and none of these help us own them, handle them, and let them go.

Dinur: And that process - those three steps - those are the keys for handling our mistakes.

Dinur: So when we say “owning a mistake,” that means you admit the mistake and you accept responsibility, you acknowledge it. There are no excuses. You're not trying to find someone else who's responsible. You're just saying, “I made this mistake.”

Dinur: But this also means, if something happened and it was beyond your control, you cannot blame yourself for it.

Adam: Now, let me speak to that thing, because that's something I've done a lot in my life. As someone who sees cause and effect, I'm really good at seeing cause and effect and effect and effect and effect and effect. And because of being abused as a child, I was trained to see everything as my fault, no matter how weirdly tangential or completely unrealistically I was connected to it. So, I could connect it back to, for example:

- My little brother is crying.
- Before he started crying, I bumped into him.
- I bumped into him because I wasn't paying attention to my feet.
- The reason I wasn't paying attention to my feet is because I was looking at what my mom was trying to tell me.
- So, obviously, it's my fault.

Adam: No! And that train of thought, at best, it was an accident. But when we try to beat ourselves up for accidents, it actually makes it harder to take responsibility for things that we did either deliberately or unintentionally, which is not the same thing as an accident. An accident is just, “I tripped over something and I bumped into you, so sorry,” okay, as opposed to: “You were in my way and I shoved you.” That second one, then I'm responsible for him crying when he hits the floor. The first one, “Oh God, I tripped over his toys. Maybe he's responsible for it. He left his toys on the floor. I tripped over them,” right? At some point you have to stop searching for ways to make it your fault if it's not actually, obviously, your fault.

Adam: But the flip side of that is: if it is your fault, stop casting around for someone else to blame. Admit that it's you. Own your mistake and say, “Yeah, I did that. I screwed up.”

Dinur: I have a few friends who referee sports professionally and I've chatted with them, asking them, what happens when there's a mistake made on the field when they feel like they've made the wrong call? And one of the things they've said is, “We tell the players, I goofed that. I made this mistake. I'm not going to let it happen again.” And that helps defuse a lot of tension right away because right away they're saying, “Hey, there was a mistake made. I made it, I'm going to make sure to do my best that that mistake is not going to happen again.” So that's owning it.

Dinur: Handling a mistake means you go to the people who were harmed by the mistake and you make amends if possible. And this comes from my own experience as a teacher, where I've made a mistake, for example, on an answer key, and that means everyone's score was lowered unfairly. And I've apologized to my students saying, “Hey, I made a mistake here. The way I'm going to correct it is by awarding everyone and then X per point,” okay, right? It's taking that mistake and saying, “Okay, here's where I came in, here's what I'm going to do to make sure that you are not hurt by this mistake.” And again, the whole idea is you're not repeating the same mistakes. Adam and I have talked about the OLI method: observe, learn and improve. And you want to identify where you made that mistake and what you are going to do differently in the future.

Adam: Because, think about how you feel when someone makes the same mistake over and over and over again. And they keep apologizing, but they don't actually do anything to fix it. That means they may have owned it, but they didn't handle it. And it makes it hard for either you or them to let it go - them, because they'll keep beating themselves up about, "Oh, I'm such a jerk. I keep on doing this thing!" and you, because it's like, "Well, you're such a jerk. Why should I trust you anymore? Why should I like you anymore? Why should I be around you anymore?"

Adam: So handling it includes saying, not only "This is where I screwed up and how I'm going to fix it this time," but also "Here's how I'm going to change what I'm doing so I don't do that again."

Adam: That brings us to the third part, letting it go, and this may be the toughest part because we are all so conditioned to keep blaming ourselves, shaming ourselves, and beating ourselves up. So after you've owned it and handled it, you've acknowledged "This is my thing. I did this. It's my responsibility. I am fixing it in this way and I'm going to take these steps to make sure I don't do it again." Sure, it's going to come up in your mind a week from now. It's going to come up in your mind a month from now and you're going to think, "Oh God, how could I have done? I was so stupid. I shouldn't have done - I hurt that person," and you're going to start beating yourself up.

Adam: Well, that's when you need to remind yourself, "Hey, wait, I owned it and I handled it. I have to let it go. You've got to stop beating yourself up. Remind yourself, I've made amends. I've identified what I'm going to do differently and I've never done it since," and this may take some time, but you can do it.

Adam: You can eventually get yourself to the point where you're like, "Okay, I screwed up. I yelled at my teacher in class. I owned it to the entire class. I went to the teacher and apologized. I made amends by writing a reflection saying, 'I will not do this again. I was completely out of line and here's how I'm going to handle my anger. If I get angry again in the future, I will walk out of class and come back afterwards.' I got to remind myself, I've set that up. I'm, I have not deviated from that since. There was the time that he made me mad about a week later; I got angry about something he said, I got up and left and went to the bathroom and I came back. I calmed myself down. I am doing the right things."

Adam: This may take some time but you can do it - it just takes practice.

Dinur: And I think part of it also comes from fear. I know for example, for me, one of the first times I made a mistake, like I mentioned about a mistake on a test answer key where every student who took the test was affected, I was 100% sure that by the end of the semester that that was the one thing they were going to remember from me, and that I was going to get fired for it.

Dinur: And no one mentioned it. The evils and that tells me that you know what? We handle it. We acknowledge the mistake was made. I did what I could to correct the mistake to take that harm away, and we were all able to move on and let it go. And we might think, "Wow, I can't believe you'd think of that."

Dinur: But think of how often you've beaten yourself up for making a mistake on a test. And you'd go, "Wow, that was a dumb mistake. Everyone probably is going to make fun of me." Like, in your mind, you're thinking that your professor's putting it on the learning management system for every class. They're putting it out as an announcement. They're going to send it out to the faculty listserv and everyone's going to know. But that's never been the case.

Dinur: We have to keep in mind that we've got to look at the size or the scale of the harm that was done. We have to look at who to apologize to. And the people we apologize to are the people who are directly affected. Okay, we make amends, we correct the situation and we let it go.

Adam: And the key, when you are apologizing, when you are making amends, it is not to grovel. It is not to get down on your knees and kiss their feet and beg forgiveness.

Adam: For one thing, that's almost always bigger than the scope of whatever it is that you did. And secondly, all it's going to do is make them uncomfortable. The key is not to humiliate yourself while you are apologizing and making amends. It is to show humility. Now humility, it can be best defined as, instead of "thinking less of yourself," which is humiliation, it is "thinking of yourself less."

Adam: When you apologize, put the focus on the needs of the person you're apologizing to. What hurt them? How do you fix it? What do they need in order to make things right? And then do those things. The key is not to either - and the other thing is not to aggrandize your apology. "Oh, I'm such a wonderful person for making amends and apologizing." No, now you're trying to make them kiss your feet in gratitude for your apology. The key is to find humility. Instead of thinking less of yourself, you think of yourself less, and the person you harmed more - and you work on fixing the problem that they have because of what you did.

Dinur: Right? It is quite literally a selfless way of thinking because you're valuing, you are centering that other person, and you're working with them. And something to keep in mind is that we can view mistakes as signs of progress, rather than evaluations of who you are as a person, as a student, as a teacher, as a worker. And I know that in different episodes I've mentioned the idea of making mistakes, but the whole idea is you want to make new mistakes in life. Because this means that the old mistakes? You've learned from them. And now you've moved on to new mistakes and new ideas. You've acknowledged your old mistakes. You're trying to get rid of them. But now, accept that you will make new mistakes, try and minimize the harm. When you do hurt someone, acknowledge it, take care of them - like, make sure that the harm that you've caused has been corrected - and learn to let it go.

Dinur: I know that I've mentioned one of the big mistakes that I've done, and that was miskeying an exam, but I know that there've been times where the key was correct, and it turns out I really didn't cover some of the material that I was testing my students on. That's not really fair to them. One of the things I did is I would ask them, "When we talked about this...." and if I had five or six students go, "But we never did!" then I'd go, "Okay, that explains why I saw these problems." And at that point, I see I take those questions out of the test, or I award those number of points back, so that that harm isn't done.

Dinur: But I also made sure to spend time with my students discussing that material, because I don't want to shortchange them on the ideas that I thought I'd covered and apparently did not. But I also really don't want to penalize them, because it's unfair for me to evaluate someone on material that they haven't had a chance to discuss with me yet

Adam: And my own mistake, and what prompted this as a topic for our episode, was - about, probably, two years ago, I made the mistake of using a word that described my own experience with bullies that turned out to deeply hurt several of the students in the class. I'm a white man, but when I was a little kid, my mom decided to curl my hair in very, very tightly held kinky curls, which was a thing in the 1970s.

Adam: Well, my last name is Sanford. There was a TV show during the 70s called "Sanford and Son," and it was about a black man who was - who ran a junkyard. I took an enormous amount of abuse from my entirely

white school. All the bullies at my white school called me a “white N-word” for about, probably, two months until my hair grew out enough that I could cut it off.

Adam: So in the meantime, I'm getting called this word, over and over again. I'm hearing the bullies in my head, I'm telling the story in class, and the N-word comes out of my mouth - because that's what I was hearing in my head. It hurt several of my African-American students, and one of them came to my office hours and challenged me on it. And I was really - I had to wrestle with that, because I thought “I was just describing my own experience!”

Adam: But instead of getting defensive, I made a point of acknowledging to the class and owning it - not to just to that class, but to all of my classes that semester: that I had done this thing, that I had dropped the ball - that I had screwed up. I explained how I would handle it (by never using that word again, and I never have!) and letting it go.

Adam: Beating myself up would not have done anything positive for anybody, and it might even have come across as showing off how contrite I was, or how sorry I was, which would create the opposite effect - that I'm not actually apologizing, I'm bragging about how contrite I am. That would ruin the apology. That would ruin the amends I made.

Adam: Remember, you've got to keep the scope of the apology inside the scope of the harm. If you go too minimalist or too overdone, either way, it's not a true apology when you do that - and students can tell that, your colleagues can tell that, your friends can tell that, so you've got to own it, handle it - which I did - and then let it go.

Dinur: Now something for students to keep in mind is - one of the things I tried to emphasize to my students in my classes is - that we are all equally human. And what that means is we're all equally likely to make mistakes. Well, we're all equally likely to make mistakes, then one thing that we can say is unless there's evidence to the contrary, something proving otherwise, then we can assume that mistakes are made by accident, rather than on purpose.

Dinur: And that means that if you get a test back, for example, with a lower grade than you feel that you've earned (going back to our previous episode), show where that mistake was made. And that gives your professor a chance to acknowledge if there is a mistake, and to move on. But don't assume, without any proof that the professor is out to get you. Because realistically, why would they, what incentive exists for that to be a realistic possibility.

Adam: And teachers just along the same lines, admit you made mistakes. Please don't try to be the “sage on the stage” who knows everything and never makes a mistake and is infallible - even if you're Catholic, only the Pope gets to be that. Okay? - You've got to admit that you made mistakes. Model making mistakes for your students. Show them it's not the end of the world. Show them how you're going through the “observe, learn, improve” process and the “own it, handle it, let it go” process. Part of what I did when I told each of my classes, “I used this word in front of a crowd of people who included African Americans. I am horribly embarrassed about it. I am owning that right now and here's how I'm handling it: by not hiding it, I'm admitting I did it. I am apologizing for doing it, and I will make sure I never use it again.” That is me showing, in real time, “This is how you handle it when you screw up.”

Adam: But if you don't model it for your students, they're going to assume you've never made a mistake. And if they see you as someone who never makes a mistake, it's going to make it that much harder to admit when they do.

Dinur: And for the professors who are out there to get students the exceptions to that rule, don't be that professor. Seriously, what do you gain from hurting someone trying their best to improve in life? So don't be that person. If you know that person, work with them so that they can improve on their teaching in that sense.

Adam: Because we've all had that professor, but I think most of us would prefer not to have been that professor.

Dinur: So that's what we have for you in Episode 55. If you're finding this podcast helpful, please share it with your friends! We're always hoping to get new subscribers, so we can help more people. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Android. We're hosted on Blubrry.com. Also, we'd appreciate it if you wrote a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Adam: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 56, when Dinur and I will talk about basic self-care for people who learn.

Adam: You've been listening to Learning Made Easier, a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Dinur: We want to say thank you to all of our supporters on Patreon, who make this podcast possible.

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Dinur: We look forward to seeing you next week!