



HOW TO OVERCOME ANYTHING

The last few years have turned our world upside down, and many see dark clouds on the horizon. It's tempting to let regret, grief, or fear consume us. But if we are not in control of what happens, we are also far from helpless. Here are four ways to conquer crisis when it comes your way.

STOP OBSESSING OVER 'WHAT IF?'

It's natural. It's unproductive.
And with a little work,
you can take back
control of your thoughts.

by **JASON FEIFER**



Have you ever messed up, and then obsessed over how you could have done better? *I should have said this. I should have done that.*

Psychologists have a name for that. It's called "counterfactual thinking"—in essence, thinking about things that could have been. Entrepreneurs are especially susceptible to it.

"There does seem to be a sense of control, and feeling like you're in charge of your own destiny, that relates to counterfactual thinking," says Amy Summerville, Ph.D., a social psychologist who researches regret. "If you have that worldview, which I think is almost necessary to be an entrepreneur, it would lead you to say, 'Oh, I should have controlled this thing or acted differently to change this.'"

Scientists debate why we do this, but many believe it's a byproduct of learning. Our brains seek lessons from bad experiences and then get stuck in a loop—wishing we could apply what we learned to what already happened. But Summerville says that even if we *think* we know what went wrong, we might not be right.

"People tend to focus on things that happen early or late in a string of events," she says. Basketball is a classic example: If a player misses a shot at the buzzer and their team loses, people often feel like that player lost the game. But that's not true; the game was lost because many people, at many times, missed many shots.

If we fixate on one part of a larger problem, we may miss the point, or beat ourselves up over an unsolvable problem. When a business goes under, for example, the founder might obsess over what could have saved it. In reality, the answer was...*nothing*.

"A lot of ventures fail not because people made bad choices," she says. "Things

failed because there were massive forces outside of anybody's control and ability to predict."

So what should we do instead of obsessing over "what if?" Psychologists have a few ideas, if no simple solutions.

"This is going to sound a little funny," says John V. Petrocelli, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Wake Forest University. "But the trick is: Consider other counterfactuals."

When we repeat a counterfactual to ourselves, Petrocelli says, it starts to feel true. That's because of a phenomenon called *repetition-induced memory*—basically, the more something is repeated, the easier it is to remember, and the truer it feels. That's why misinformation spreads so easily. To counter this, he says, we should consider many other alternatives. How could our bad situation have actually gotten *worse*? How could different decisions have led to different outcomes?

Summerville says it's also helpful to shift your perspective. Studies of Olympic athletes offer a useful insight. When people look at Olympic medalists on the podium, and are asked to rate how happy or upset those Olympians look, the results are consistent: Bronze medalists look much happier than silver medalists. Why? Because silver medalists are thinking about how close they came to gold, while bronze medalists are thinking about how close they came to not winning at all.

So yes, maybe you bombed that pitch—but isn't it better to have been in the meeting at all? At least you've had an experience like that, so you can adjust for next time. "Take the long view," Summerville says. "Five years from now, what do you think you should have learned from this moment, or is this even a thing you'll care about?"

When you think like that, you're countering the counterfactual.