

Deal with professional disappointment like a pro

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Few nurses escape the sting of professional disappointment over the course of their careers. Despite your best efforts, you can't always triumph. But you can prepare for a professional letdown.

Plan ahead

Before you take your next professional risk, consider what you'll do if you're disappointed. Write two or three short sentences to use if things don't go your way. Then practice saying them a few times.

You can acknowledge your feelings by saying something like, "I'm so disappointed. I'm at a loss for words." Then, you can tell the person who's breaking the news that you have nothing else to say right now. Better yet, say something positive about your competition. People will think highly of you for seeing the good in others even when you're hurting.

If circumstances allow you to reevaluate and correct things, you might say, "I'm really distressed about the site visit. Tomorrow, we'll begin to analyze what happened." This approach tells people that despite your unhappiness, you will revise your work—and you will succeed.

If something has helped you get through disappointment in the past, plan to use it again. If jogging helps, put jogging shoes in your locker. If chocolate helps, keep some in your desk drawer.

Take private time

After your initial reaction, take private time—15 minutes, an hour, or even a day. If a colleague can cover your patients, take a break in the bathroom or your car. If you feel vulnerable and unproductive, cancel your next meeting.

Allow only "safe" people to be around you—people with strong relational skills who can help you process the disappointment. Trustworthy listeners are more important than friends who believe they have all the answers or who minimize your distress by trying to cheer you up. (See Supporting a disappointed colleague by clicking on the PDF icon above.)

Let your thoughts and feelings flow in words or tears. Don't try to dull them immediately. Go for a jog or eat your chocolate. Take as much time as the situation allows. If you must resume your workday, plan to continue processing your disappointment as soon as possible.

Common feelings

Professional disappointment can trigger anger, shame, guilt, and sadness. Each is rooted in a core thought:

- Anger: I held an expectation that wasn't met.
- Shame: I publicly fell short of an ideal, and someone noticed.
- Guilt: I failed to meet a standard or expectation.

Sadness: I've lost something important to me.

Though your feelings may seem unmanageable, you can control your thoughts—and your feelings will follow.

Managing anger

You may reduce your anger through words or actions. If it helps, envision speaking to the person whose decision dashed your expectations. Perhaps you'll decide to imagine yelling at this person for a few minutes and then stop.

If you want to express your anger physically, avoid public displays. If you can leave the workplace, consider heading for the gym, where you can lift weights or pedal furiously. With each repetition, let your body express how upset you are about the outcome. An overhead arm motion helps diffuse anger for some people. Try swinging your old tennis racket down hard on the floor.

You can also manage anger with self-talk phrases to reframe your expectations. For example, you might say, "As a first-time applicant, I may have set my expectations a little high." Or, "I overestimated our resources for this project. We'll plan differently next time."

Reducing shame

Recognize your feelings of humiliation and embarrassment. Then use positive self-talk phrases, such as, "Everyone knows I had to be put back on orientation. I'm mortified, but with a little more guidance, I'll be a stronger nurse."

Time may heal situational shame. But nurses who experience toxic shame from multiple humiliating experiences may need counseling to ease long-standing feelings of inferiority.

Resolving guilt

When you feel guilt, you tend to label yourself negatively and use words like “should” or “should not.” Try to reframe your response to adjust your expectation: “I can’t excel at everything. I did the best I could under the circumstances.” Or, “I’m an expert clinician, but obviously I’m a novice shift leader. I expect my performance evaluation to improve next year.”

Working through sadness

Sadness may intensify after acute disappointment, reflecting grief or depression. Your loss is significant, so don’t minimize it. Let your mind and body wrestle with the meaning. Cry when you feel the urge. Talk to others about your feelings and write them down in a journal.

Recognize that symptoms of depression and grief may last weeks or months. Eventually, as you integrate the loss into your life, job satisfaction will return.

Returning to work

When you venture out in public after 15 minutes in the bathroom, a day off, or an impromptu vacation, people will be expecting a comment from you. Keep it short and on point.

Acknowledge the loss and express hope for the future. For example, say, “I think you can understand that I’m still sad because of the time we invested. But we are a good organization, and we will keep advancing.” Or, “I wish I could say it doesn’t really matter, but it does. I still believe I would make a good coordinator.”

When you’re able, congratulate the nurse who succeeded when you didn’t. Try rehearsing your words

to be sure they sound genuine. Here’s a sample statement: “Robyn, congratulations on being selected. You are very deserving.”

If appropriate, schedule an appointment with a manager or evaluator who can provide feedback. Ask how you can improve and be better positioned for future success. Be ready to accept what you hear, and take notes for later reference. After the meeting, write a thank-you note, even if the message was painful.

If you think the process was unfair, consider an appeal. Grievance procedures may apply. Inform your manager or the appropriate person that you plan to appeal. Then follow the procedures exactly.

Getting back on track

Eventually, you may choose to let go of your disappointment and move on emotionally. You may forgive, relax your expectations, and reject persistent negative thoughts.

You may also decide to transform your disappointment into energy for professional growth. Form an action plan. Ask for periodic reviews from nurses and leaders inside and outside your organization. Seek diverse perspectives and be open to suggestions.

The next time you apply for a certification exam, a new position, or an award, you might just hear yourself saying, “Though I hope I’m successful, the greatest value lies in how I’ll grow in the process and what I’ll learn along the way.”

Selected references

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