

How to protect self-esteem when a career goal dies

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Many people fail at achieving their early career dreams. But a new study suggests that those failures don't have to harm your self-esteem if you think about them in the right way.

Researchers found that people who viewed [career](#) goal failures as a stepping stone to new opportunities never lost self-esteem, no matter how many times they failed. But those who thought their failures left them worse off showed a drop-off in how they felt about themselves.

"It's not how many times you have had to give up. It is how you felt about the failures, and whether you thought they led to something better for you," said Patrick Carroll, lead author of the study and associate professor of psychology at The Ohio State University's Lima campus.

Carroll conducted the research with Joshua McComis, a former [student](#) at Ohio State. The study was published recently in the [Journal of Adult Development](#).

Many [young people](#) start off with ideas of what they want to be in the future, and those ideas of "possible selves" can be influenced by friends, family and teachers, among others, Carroll said.

For example, a young woman might embrace becoming a doctor in response to encouragement from a faculty adviser who says she is qualified to succeed in medicine. But she could later abandon that dream because others felt she was not qualified, and decide to pursue psychology.

"It could be that she thinks this is a step down for her, and that she failed. That would harm her self-esteem," he said. "But she could also view psychology as more appropriate for her and a better fit, in which case her self-esteem would not suffer, despite the failure to become a doctor."

The researchers conducted two studies. In one study, 59 [undergraduate students](#) completed two surveys, one at the beginning of a semester and another at the end. In the first survey, the students were asked, "How

many times have you given up on a career goal?" No time frame was given.

They were then asked to rate the extent to which they regretted giving up on past career goals to pursue their present goal on a scale of 1 (definitely not) to 9 (definitely). Participants also completed a measure of their self-esteem that asked them to rate how much they agreed with statements like "I feel like I have a number of good qualities."

All students rated their self-esteem again three months later, at the end of the semester. Results showed that students reported giving up on career goals between one and five times.

Overall, the study found that the more times students reported giving up on career goals, the more their self-esteem dropped over the semester. But when regret was factored in, those who showed low regret on changing career goals averaged little change in self-esteem, while those who had high regret did suffer from lowered self-esteem.

The second study involved 64 undergraduate students. The study setup was similar, except the participants were also asked to rate the extent to which past revisions to their [career goals](#) ultimately led to a better career path.

"We found that when people felt their career goal failures led to something better, that takes away that hit to [self-esteem](#)," Carroll said.

The findings suggest that people should approach failure in a way that can help them in the long run.

Although this is beyond the scope of this study, Carroll said there are techniques people can use to help make failure a way to learn and grow. For example, benefit finding is a way to find the good in a bad situation.

"We're all going to have failures, some more than others. But it is how you interpret those failures that matters in the long run in terms of how you feel about yourself," he said.

More information: Patrick J. Carroll et al, The Consequences of Quality and Quantity of Downward Revisions in Possible Selves on Revisions in Core Selves, *Journal of Adult Development* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s10804-023-09461-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10804-023-09461-8)

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