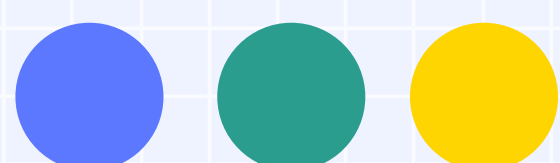




Health & Wellbeing
Office of the President



Managing Setbacks



setbacks

[set (v.) + back (adv.)]
to slow the progress of; to delay, hinder

In psychology, **learned helplessness**¹ is a psychological phenomenon whereby individuals continuously face a negative, uncontrollable situation and stop trying to change their circumstances, even when the opportunity arises.

Given their inevitability, the setbacks we encounter in life are no different.

Thus, one of the biggest challenges we face is knowing how to interpret our setbacks and bounce back from them and avoid the possibility of learned helplessness.

When setbacks happen, we are typically faced with the choice of either giving up or picking ourselves up and pushing forth ahead.

Acknowledging and recognising that we are human and that we all make mistakes and failures can help us to do bigger and better things — while maintaining our self-confidence in the process.



WORK

Setbacks happen regularly in work - from making a mistake during a presentation to not receiving a promotion you expected, but how do we bounce back from such situations?

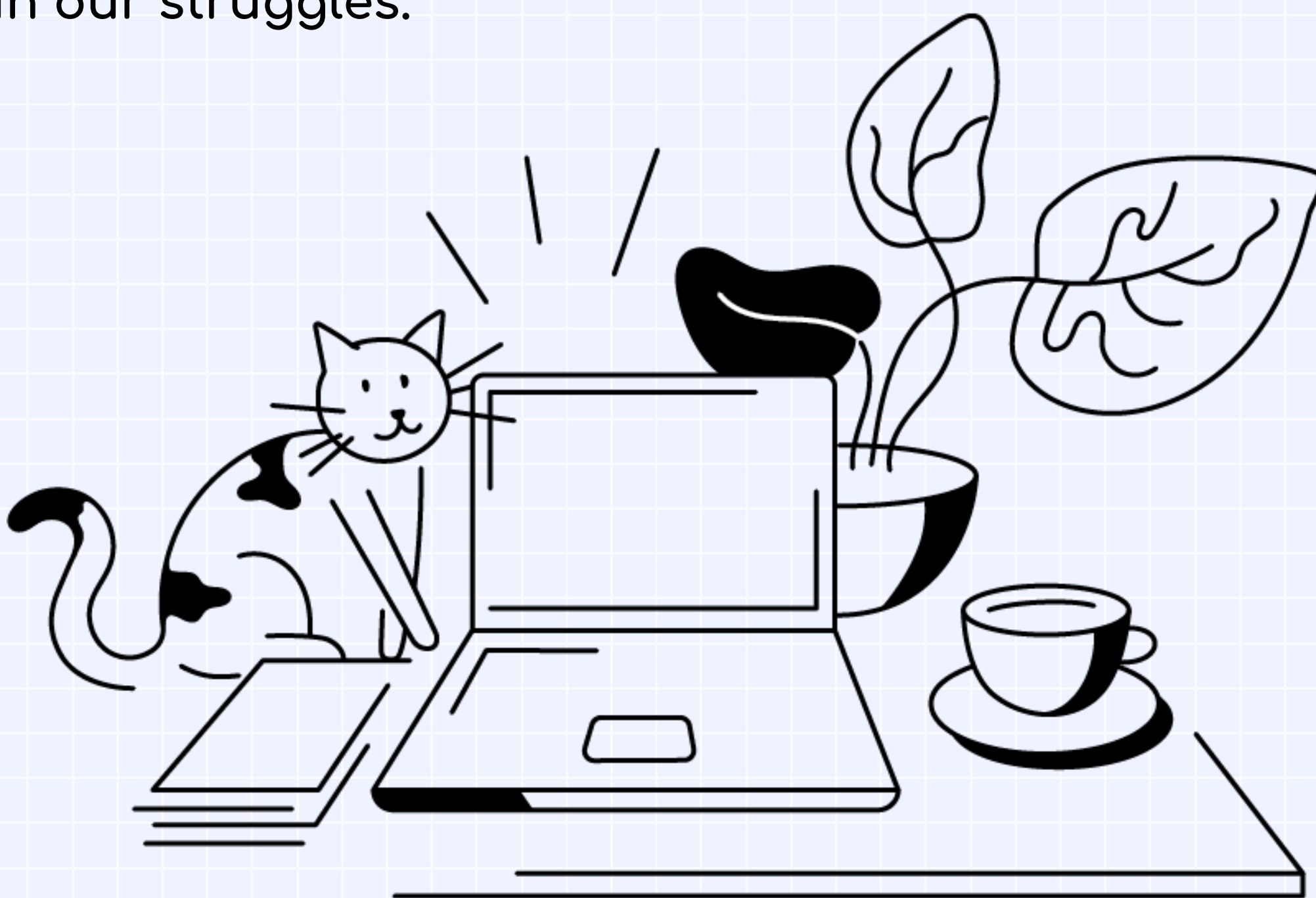
Psychologists believe that **resilience** plays a pivotal role.

Resilience has been shown to positively influence **work satisfaction and engagement**³, as well as **overall well-being**³, and can **lower depression levels**.⁴

One area in which we can build our resilience would be having a wide variety of meaningful interactions with people in our personal and professional lives.

Having these interactions can help us shift or push back on work demands and alter the magnitude of the challenge we currently face.

These robust **support systems**⁴ may serve to bolster our resilience by shifting our perspective and reminding us that we are not alone in our struggles.



School

Apart from work, setbacks can happen in academic contexts as well. Academic challenges, setbacks, and adversity are a reality of everyday school life among students.

Recent psychological research has identified a construct known as **academic buoyancy**⁵, a form of resilience that helps students overcome setbacks effectively.

Academic buoyancy is the ability to fail well, fail forward, and bounce back from the inevitable challenges experienced in school.

Why is academic buoyancy important?

- Firstly, one study⁶ found that academic buoyancy was linked to lower levels of test anxiety for a sample of secondary school students from England.
- Secondly, academically buoyant students likely **viewed setbacks as a challenge** rather than a threat to self-worth, confidence, and purpose.⁷
- Lastly, higher levels of academic buoyancy **lowered students' academic anxiety, failure avoidance, and lack of control in academic performance.**⁷



Here are three strategies for recovering and thriving when you face setbacks in life:



1. Acknowledge the emotional pain⁸

Setbacks often trigger painful emotional doubts about our competence and self-worth, so we either try to avoid it or pretend that it does not matter.

However, it is important not to dismiss how you are feeling. Experiencing setbacks hurts, and the physiological response it creates in our bodies and minds is akin to physical pain.

Acknowledging that you are hurt can help you move past the ache faster.

2. Avoid engaging in self-blame

Recent studies⁹ suggest that when people attribute setbacks to a lack of fit instead of blaming themselves or another person involved, they are less likely to give up and more motivated to improve.

3. Embrace your strengths¹⁰

Know that you are more than the bullet points on your résumé and your academic grades.

If you look back for too long, rather than persevering in a direction where your talents can shine, you risk the possibility of neglecting fresh opportunities.

Remember that opportunities are available at every corner and that just because a setback happened once, it does not mean that future situations will result similarly for you!

Success can come in many forms!

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