- Persistence

HOW TO bounce back FROM REJECTION

We've all experienced the deep hurt of being dismissed or snubbed, whether in romance, our friendships or our careers. The pain is real, but there are clear, science-backed ways to rebound.

BY JENNIFER KING LINDLEY

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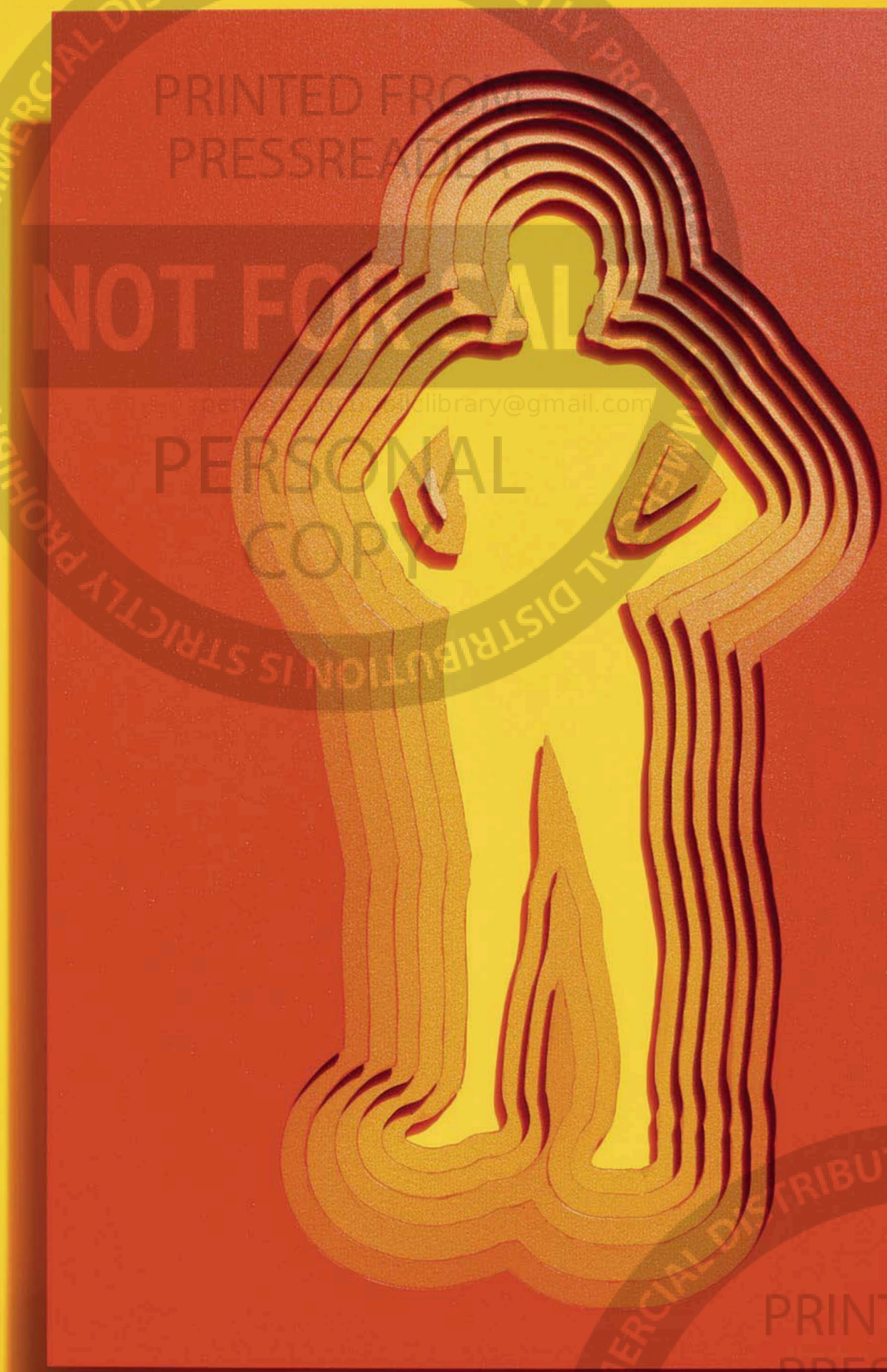

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friends told Laine Doss that she and her husband had the perfect marriage. "He was a pilot, so we travelled to amazing places," she says. "We loved to go running together. I was that person on Facebook who was always posting 'OMG, I have the best husband in the entire world.'"

Then, six years ago, the relationship started getting tense and distant. Still, Laine was not prepared when she arrived home from work one Wednesday and found that her husband of 14 years had simply walked out. "He had cleaned out his wardrobe and taken all his clothes," she says. "No crying together. No tries at therapy. I was in complete shock, embarrassed and ashamed. This doesn't happen in normal life. Your husband is not supposed to ghost you."

Rejection. Our stories are all different, but we have all felt its sting. The pain can be so vivid that we feel it physically. And though romantic jilting might seem the most difficult type to manage (and result in the sale of the most tubs of full-fat ice-cream), all kinds of brush-offs can feel brutal: the "we regret to inform you" email after the interview for a dream job, the wedding invitation snub, and, if you're in the online dating jungle, all those left swipes!

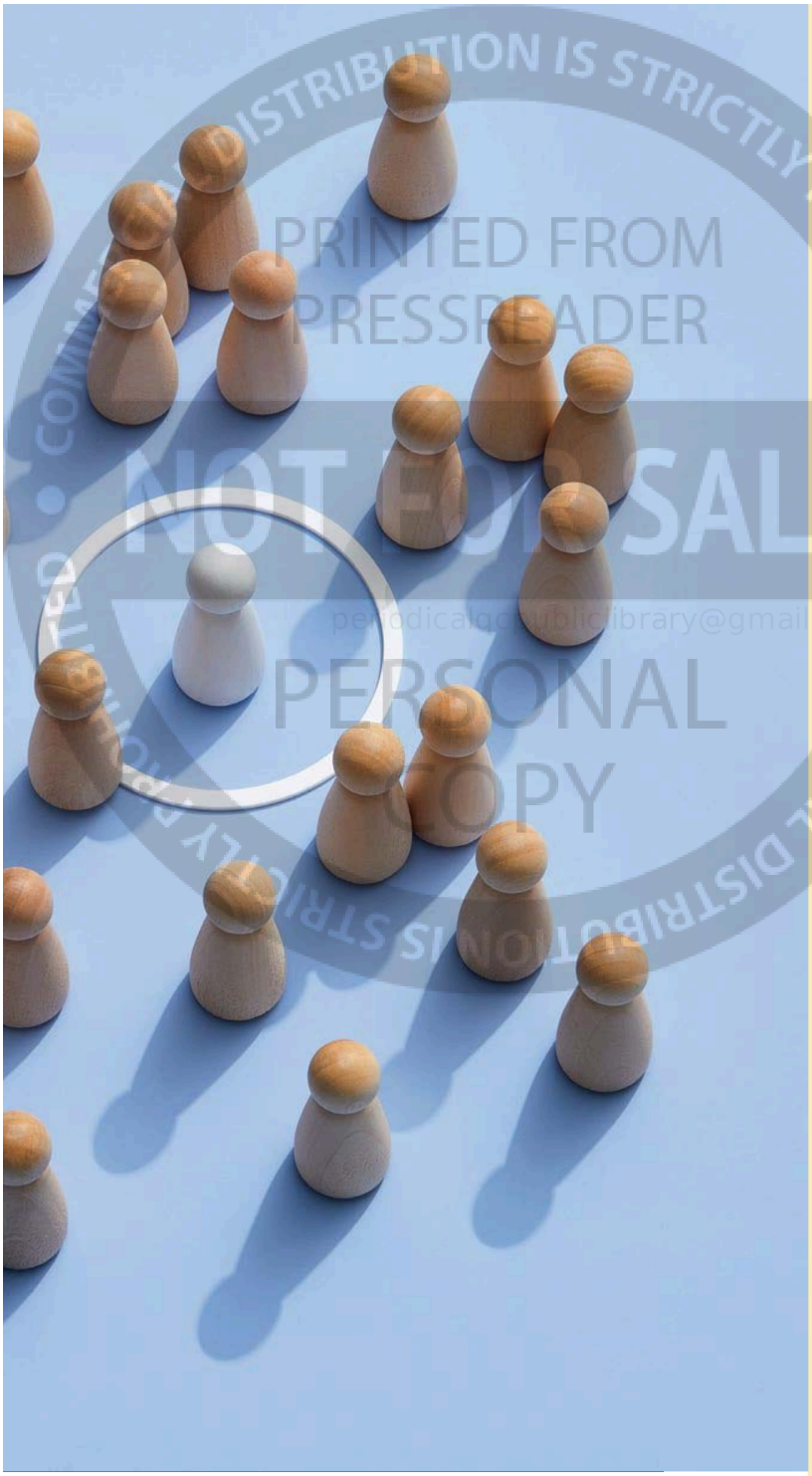
"Rejections are the most common emotional wounds we sustain in daily life," says Dr Guy Winch, author of *Emotional First Aid: Healing – Rejection, Guilt, Failure, and Other Everyday Hurts*. Today we suffer more such jabs than ever, Dr Winch adds. "It used to be that rejection was usually face to face. With social media, we can feel that way constantly. We hit 'Like' on a friend's holiday pictures, but they don't 'Like' ours back. It doesn't matter whether it's a big or small rejection: it all smarts."

WHY IT HURTS SO BADLY

Scientists are finding out why being excluded – whether the rebuff is major or minor – feels so terrible. "The emotional pain of rejection activates sensory brain regions that are also activated during physical pain," says psychology professor Dr Ethan Kross. In one study, he and his colleagues asked still-heartbroken subjects to gaze at a photo of the long-term partner who had recently rejected them and relive the moment of saying goodbye in their minds. There was overlap with the brain regions that lit up when a heated probe was applied to their skin. (Ouch all around!)

And, yes, minor disses trigger this system, too: In a different study, when subjects played a computer game in which anonymous participants refused to include them when tossing a ball, their brains' pain centres were also activated.

Researchers theorise that having bad feelings caused by rejection was a matter of life and death for our ancestors. "Being connected to others was crucial for protection and sharing resources," says psychological science professor Dr Kipling Williams. "The pain we feel when we're excluded is a warning that we're in danger of losing lifesaving bonds."



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Rejection's sting may have saved our skins long ago, but that hurt can have a negative impact on our health. Research has shown that being primed to feel rejected by others could boost markers of inflammation in the blood (bad news, as higher inflammation is linked to a host of medical maladies). And we often react to life's brush-offs in unhealthy ways, lashing out angrily, spiralling into anxiety, or drowning our sorrows in various ways. Rejection can make you beat a hasty retreat from life: Why make yourself vulnerable if you're just going to get hurt again?

YOUR REJECTION recovery kit

The welcome news is there are research-backed ways to help you bounce back more quickly from life's inevitable slammed doors – and find ways to flourish afterward. "Being rejected can wake you up to what's not working in your life – it can be a springboard for growth," says Melody Wilding, author of *Trust Yourself*. Here are nine ways to kickstart your resilience:

Face your feelings

It's tempting to stifle your sadness with a bottle of chardonnay or a packet of biscuits. But, says Melody, "if you don't process your negative feelings, they'll just resurface later. You need to emotionally metabolise them." Take time to sit with your emotions and try to pinpoint what you're feeling. Instead of just thinking, 'I feel soooo bad,' ask yourself, 'Do I feel hurt? Am I disappointed? Am I angry?' Scientists call this "emotional granularity". The ability to parse your feelings can make them feel less overwhelming.

Go easy on yourself

Try to observe your feelings without self-criticism. Aim for a gentle, detached perspective, a cornerstone of mindfulness, says psychotherapist Allison Abrams. In one study, people were put through a laboratory-staged rejection; those who rated themselves higher in mindfulness showed less activation in brain areas associated with pain and reported lower levels of emotional distress.

For Laine, exercise helped her work through intense emotions. "Running saved me," she says. "I put on music and I cried and I ran. In my mind, I asked him the questions I couldn't in real life." ►

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Write yourself a valentine

One antidote is to write about your best qualities. A growing number of studies has found that this kind of self-affirmation has the power to shore up self-worth in the face of life's setbacks. Has a longtime pal given you the rebuff? "Make a list of what makes you a good friend – I am a good listener. I am loyal. My blueberry muffins are unparalleled," advises Dr Winch. "Choose one of these attributes and write a paragraph reflecting on it. Doing this is a powerful reminder to yourself about how much you have to offer others."

Looking scared

Women who feel pressure to look attractive are more fearful of being rejected because of their appearance than their peers.

SOURCE: UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO AND THE UNIVERSITY OF KENT

Don't pile on

"If you get a cut on your arm, you don't think, 'Let me just take a knife and make it deeper.' But we do this all the time with rejection," explains Dr Winch.

The stories we tell ourselves about what happened, says Allison, are usually the cause of the real agony. In one US study, when people attributed their break-ups to neutral circumstances many of us face (sometimes the timing just isn't right), they got over them more quickly and experienced less pain compared with those who blamed some inherent deficiency in themselves (I am too clingy). "If you feel that rejection unearthed a flaw in you, you feel worse about yourself," notes lead researcher Dr Lauren Howe. "Instead, think about the situational factors that led to that outcome."

LEAN ON BESTIES

"Being excluded threatens our sense of belonging – a powerful human need," says Dr Williams. Experts agree that one of the most important ways to feel better fast is to gather your pack. "Nurture bonds with people who care about you," he advises.

Loved ones can emphasise your good qualities and normalise your experience. In the weeks after Laine's husband moved out, "I had awesome girlfriends who watched over me," she says. "They brought meals to my doorstep. They made me coffee. They listened to me vent and kept telling me, 'You are good – this is nothing to be ashamed of' until I finally believed them."

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Take action

Being rejected can make you feel powerless – the word 'reject' actually comes from the Latin 'to throw back'. "Regaining a sense of control is one of the quickest ways to overcome the experience," says Melody. Instead of starting a prolonged retreat under the covers, take a first small step toward a goal. "Maybe you want to feel calmer. Ask yourself, 'What is one thing I can do to help me get there?' How about finally signing up for that yoga class you've been wanting to try?" Heard crickets after your last five job applications? Send out five more.

Get some distance

Every time you relive, say, a chilling email in your mind, you revive the pain. To break the cycle of endless rumination, adopt a more distanced perspective, says Dr Kross. His research suggests trying a surprisingly simple step: changing your choice of pronoun. Instead of talking to yourself in the first person (I really blew that interview!), do it in the second person (You didn't get this job. You win some, you lose some). Used in this way, 'you' makes the experience seem more universal. "This simple mental shift can help you make peace with it," Dr Kross adds.

Practise failing

How do you grow a thicker skin? "The best way to rejection-proof yourself in the first place is to fail more often," says Melody. "It's a form of exposure therapy. You live through it, and you realise you survived, so it loses its power over you." Start by taking small risks – say, inviting a new acquaintance to have coffee – and build from there. She may blow you off, but you'll survive, of course. Keep in mind that doing anything worthwhile, from sending out that novel in your drawer to finding lifelong love, often involves leaving a trail of rejection along the way. "If you're not taking risks, you're not growing," Allison says.

SIFT FOR THE MESSAGE

When the initial shock has worn off, try to reflect – kindly – on what you can learn from a rejection. Maybe you didn't prepare well enough for that interview, or perhaps you need to work on being more reliable. That's good to know for the future. In the end, Laine discovered her own resilience, too. "I often used to go hiking with my husband, but I'm afraid of heights and would cling to his shoulder," she recalls. "The summer after he left, I went hiking in a national park alone. I bought a walking stick to steady myself as I climbed. One night in my campground, I looked up at a gazillion stars and I thought, 'You know what? I'm going to be okay.'" P



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