Self-regulation · About 4 minutes

When You're Upset About Being Upset

Giving a feeling room without making it a verdict on you

"It was pathetic to get my hopes up." Priya hears this almost as soon as she reads the rejection.

Priya has just learned that she did not get the job. In this fictional example, disappointment barely has time to register before she starts criticizing herself for wanting the opportunity. The hours spent preparing now seem embarrassing. She feels rejected by the employer and begins treating her own hope as a mistake.

This second layer can be harder to notice than the disappointment itself. We may think we are examining a feeling when we are really deciding whether we had any right to feel it.

The job mattered to Priya. She imagined work she wanted to do and prepared for a chance to do it. Being turned down hurts. None of that tells us whether the employer's decision was fair or whether applying again would be wise. Those questions remain worth considering. But she is unlikely to examine them clearly while occupied with proving she was foolish to care.

"I wanted this, and I didn't get it" gives her a more accurate starting place. She may feel sad or angry. She may want to talk to someone who knows how much effort she put in. She may want to leave the application alone for a day. She does not need to call the rejection a gift.

Ford and colleagues studied the habit of accepting thoughts and emotions without judging them. They found associations with better psychological health and less negative emotion during stress.[1] Their work distinguishes accepting internal experience from accepting an external situation. It offers no promise that naming disappointment will immediately make it easier.

That distinction matters in ordinary life. You can acknowledge fear and leave a threatening encounter. You can admit that you are angry and address an unfair arrangement. Allowing yourself to be affected leaves the question of what to do open for consideration.

Compare Priya's two sentences:

"I'm disappointed that I didn't get the job."

"It was pathetic to hope for it."

The first names her experience. The second turns wanting into a defect. If you recognize this pattern, try staying with the description before deciding what it says about you. You can use Priya's example rather than a personal one.

Sometimes self-criticism does point toward conduct that needs attention. "I spoke harshly" may be accurate. Acknowledging that can lead to an apology or a different response next time. Calling yourself a terrible person adds little to the work of repair. Likewise, kinder wording should not erase financial pressure, discrimination or the consequences of a lost opportunity.

Gratz and Roemer's account of regulation includes understanding and accepting emotion while retaining the ability to act in ways that matter to you.[2] There may be a next step before you feel better, and there may be a period when rest or company is more useful than a plan.

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For Priya, the first task may be quite small: to let the opportunity have mattered. She can consider what comes next without first disowning the person who wanted it.

Priya brings that question one step closer: can disappointment have a place before she decides what to do?

I would want to linger a little with the sentence Priya can barely say: “I wanted that job.” There is a disappointment there worth keeping company with.

Companion reading · You Don’t Have to Be Calm to Have a Choice

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Self-regulation (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Ford, B. Q., Lam, P., John, O. P., & Mauss, I. B. (2018). The psychological health benefits of accepting negative emotions and thoughts: Laboratory, diary, and longitudinal evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 115*(6), 1075–1092. Source.

[2] Gratz, K. L., & Roemer, L. (2004). Multidimensional assessment of emotion regulation and dysregulation: Development, factor structure, and initial validation of the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment, 26*(1), 41–54. Source.

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