

# Learning to Lose: The Psychology and Biology of Losing



What happens when we lose just about anything? We experience a certain type of stress response. The exact nature varies a bit based on context, but to simplify, when we win testosterone tends to go up. We feel more confident, take more risks, and are actually primed to play better the next game.

When we lose testosterone goes down and cortisol goes up. We shrink towards submission, anxiety, and being a bit more fearful to take on the next challenge. And according to the research, we tend to perform worse the next go-round.

This effect was first seen in animals competing for mates and food. An animal that wins in battle has greater resources and rises in rank. The losing animal suffers the opposite consequence, moving down the hierarchy. In animals, this effect is so powerful that it influences who wins the next battle. Winners keep on winning. Losers, well, you know... they keep losing.

While there's more nuance in humans, the same psychology and biology hold true. With each loss, we experience a rise in cortisol, leaving us apprehensive, anxious, and more likely to avoid instead of approaching the problem. Losses sting, and the effect can be prolonged. And we don't just share the hormonal milieu with our animal brethren, but also the psychological burden. Animals who lose drop in the hierarchy. Humans who lose drop in status.

A loss, especially a public one, attacks our basic sense of who we are. We have a deep need to feel like we are competent, that we are pursuing a worthy goal, and have the capability to achieve it. In *The Status Game*, author Will Storr writes that we gain status in three areas: dominance, success, and virtue. Losing attacks two out of three. It knocks us down a peg, leaving us looking up at our former position.

When our status is under threat in the public domain, we do whatever we can to protect it. If we don't fall into an almost involuntary submissive state, we may try to justify or blame others to protect ourselves from the deleterious attack. It's why we tend to blame the referees when the game doesn't go our way. Or why a college football coach blames the players for lack of effort. Anything that puts space between the loss and your sense of self makes the bitter pill easier to swallow.

In other words, after a loss we often delude ourselves to protect ourselves. And the bigger the game, the more importance assigned to it and the deeper intertwined your sense of self and the outcome is, the more likely you are to experience a surge of cortisol and to default to protection, posturing, and deflection following a loss.

## How to Lose Well

We need to learn how to lose well. If we don't, our high cortisol lingers and is even amplified by the constant rumination. Our drop in status pushes us towards either submission or makes us desperate to climb back up in rank. If we copy Urban Meyer and let it stew, making us feel like we can't eat, we give more power to the thing. Our brain receives the message that this terrible state is something we should fear and that we need to avoid. Some might argue that avoidance drives some towards success. But I'd argue that it's ingraining a much more fragile motivation, and the wrong kind, one that is both primed to push us towards throwing in the towel when things get really tough and creates a fragile sense of self.

So, then, how do you lose well? It's a two-step process.

## 1) Get Out of Stress and Protect Mode

After a tough loss the loser is already stressed, with cortisol streaming through their blood. If you are the coach or teacher or parent don't beat them down. If you are in conversation with yourself, stop beating yourself up. Research on professional rugby players found that watching what they did wrong after a game led to elevated cortisol and worse performance the next game. Watching what they did well had the opposite effect, a bump in testosterone and better performance.

Your primary goal, then, is to move out of stress and protect mode and get back to a more normal baseline. Resilience is tied to an efficient termination of our stress response. The same holds true for dealing with losses. How do we get out of stress mode?

One of the best ways to move from high cortisol to normal is to debrief among friends. Social recovery flips us into a positive hormonal and mood state. Whether it's a post-game meal or happy hour with friends after a tough loss, friends help get us back down to normal. This helps in two ways. Having social support dampens cortisol and pushes us towards affiliative instead of avoidance behaviors. It also gives us time to work through our losing experience with people who are supportive and not threatening. This decompression and debriefing combination is vital.

Then, once out of stress and protect mode, if you need to, you can go over what went wrong in the performance. Social support isn't the only tactic to switch states. Here at the Growth Equation, we've long suggested using the 24-hour rule, which sets a hard deadline for the time period in which you can either wallow in defeat or celebrate victory. Having a hard and fast rule serves as a reminder that moving on is the best medicine, whether you won or lost.

## 2. Diversify Your Meaning

Losing attacks your status and sense of self. Especially if your lose at something that is deeply intertwined with your being.

We tend to think we need to be all-in to accomplish anything. But the reality is, going all-in all the time makes us fragile. A single failure or a poor season breaks us. We are far better off if we diversify our sense of self and from where we derive our meaning. It's not to say the game, project, or whatever it is we are competing in isn't important. It's just to say it's not the *only* thing that is important.

When we put all our eggs in one basket it pushes us towards fear of failure, which is a much more vulnerable state of mind and one that often pushes us towards desperation. We're much better off striving for success while knowing that even if we lose, we'll still have our role as father or mother, teacher or mentor, and so on.

We all play multiple different roles in our lives. After a hard failure, it's time to put another hat on. Lean into your role as a mother instead of as an executive. You get the point.

Getting out of stressed and depressed mode after losing allows us to bounce back to a state of mind where we can not only move on, but also see clearly what we can learn from the failure, and see how we can grow. Creating space between who you are and what you do and having multiple sources of meaning allows you to occupy a place where of course you want to get better, but it's not the end of the world if you suffer defeat. You can more easily get back to normal, and then evaluate what went wrong with a clear mind. We do our best when we are challenged, but not threatened. Let's stop setting up ourselves (and others we lead) to live in a world of threat.

*Steve Magness*