



Episode 3

## Back to the drawing board

Hello and welcome to Episode 3 of Soundbites powered by the AbbVie Care program, bringing you the most up-to-date health and lifestyle advice.

I'm your host, **Aaron Sihota**, a pharmacist from Vancouver, BC, and I work very closely with specialists in the rheumatology and dermatology community as well as being Clinical Faculty at the University of British Columbia. Soundbites is inspired by 15 years of learning from thousands of AbbVie Care program members and is one of a kind in the Canadian space.

Michael Jordan famously said, "I've failed over and over and over in my life and that is why I succeed."

In today's podcast, we'll be talking about progress; a process that involves trying something new, making mistakes, going back to the drawing board and learning from those mistakes until eventually we start achieving the goals that we've set for ourselves. Often we think of champions like Michael Jordan and we innocently assume that they were just born that way. Nobody is born a champion, in fact, to get to that level requires so many failed attempts that it could even be said that Michael Jordan is a bigger failure than almost anyone we know.

For starters, nobody, no matter who they are, is perfect. Imperfection is human nature and perhaps the reason we are so prone to making mistakes is that mistakes are such valuable tools for helping us learn about ourselves and our surroundings. The only reason we know we shouldn't touch a hot oven with our bare hand is because either we learned the hard way by getting burned or someone else did. But now we know, and that knowledge protects us and it teaches us about the way the world works. Everything in life can be your teacher if you choose to learn from mistakes instead of feeling discouraged by them.

A "slip" doesn't have to be a disaster, though. Actually, a slip can even be a very good thing. It can be good because you now have more experience and more information. And with more information you are empowered. You learned what wasn't working and by incorporating what you learned, you will be better prepared for the next time.

Some days when we feel especially energetic and happy it can lead us to thinking, subconsciously, that we're invincible. We decide we're going to eat junk food and watch movies all night. Sure maybe it was fun, but the next day we learn how our bodies react to being treated like that. There is no harm in that as long as you've learned something for the

next time. If you have to get up early for work the next day, you may want to get some rest the night before and if you're trying to be healthy and sharp, eating well can make all the difference. If you notice, the expression "trial and error" talks about learning through failed attempts and misses. Nobody ever talks about a process of "trials and successes" that just isn't the way it works.

The problem is that sometimes, when someone starts to slip off course, they throw their hands up in the air and declare the entire thing is a failure. What usually leads to this is that we allow discouraging thoughts – the talk we have inside our head – to flood our mind. Unhelpful responses include this kind of all or nothing thinking such as "Now I've failed" or "I blew it!"

Maybe you've had these feelings in response to a change you've tried to make. You've enjoyed a healthy streak where you've been exercising every day, sticking to your eating plan and taking your medication as prescribed. But then you skip a couple of days of exercise, eat an entire cake or forget your medication and all of a sudden those good routines you worked so hard for, have been completely undone. In response to this, it's normal that we may feel disappointed in ourselves.

You can think about it this way. Pretend that when you walked into your kitchen from the hallway you encountered a bump in the floor that you stubbed your toe on. Step step step. Bump. "Ow!" you could say to yourself. It would happen one or two times and after that you would take a few steps back. You would crouch down to look at the floor to find out what is causing this? You investigate.

This process is what we can use in any situation when we are struggling with staying on track. There are four questions we can ask ourselves as we review the situation: ***What's up? What's new? What's needed? What if?***

Let's go through those one by one.  
First, ask yourself, "What's up?"

This process of looking back to see what happened and describing what happened in factual terms is what you can do when you find you are getting off track with a behaviour change you are trying to stick with. What was the starting point when something started to shift? What did you actually do? What was going on just before this happened? Where were you or what were you doing? What were you thinking or feeling at the time? Who was with you?

Another important question to ask yourself is, what have you been thinking and telling yourself about the situation since?

As you reflect on this, you might notice that the thoughts you have had since the slip – something we call "self-talk" – was not so helpful at getting you back on track. This is because it's easy for our mind to decide there are only two outcomes: perfection or disaster.

As a result, people can overgeneralize or catastrophize. You might feel shame, which is easily recognizable. Listen for when you tell yourself something like “I’m so disappointed in myself” or “it’s all my fault”. Or some of us have become masters of the all-or-nothing approach: “I’ve blown it” or “now I’ve failed”. Another common reaction is hopelessness: “I just can’t do it” or “What’s the point in trying”. Maybe we’re guilty of exaggeration and we tell ourselves things like, “I always screw up!” or even calling ourselves names.

Yet making ourselves feel bad doesn’t make things any better. Shame tends to put us in a place where it becomes even harder to get back on track with the changes we want to make. It tends to make us feel less confident about our abilities and focus on our weaknesses rather than our strengths.

What we can do instead is change our self-talk by using instead something we call “comeback” statements. These statements are our own replies to discouraging thoughts. You can replace discouraging self-talk with comeback statements such as “wait a minute... I’ve been doing well for a pretty long time now. I just need to get back on track” or “Okay, so what if there was a slip-up, that doesn’t mean there is anything wrong with me”. In fact, if we adopt this positive opinion of ourselves, we will succeed in reaching our goals.

Try to listen in on your thoughts and identify what patterns you have. The first step is identifying the negative self-talk because once we spot it we can stop it in its tracks and decide with intention that we aren’t going to go down that road. Instead, we can choose to turn those patterns around.

Then come up with a new and true “comeback” statement. Something like: “I know better than this because I’m smart and capable. Nobody is perfect”.

## The next question is, “What’s new?”

Sometimes we get off track because of a new routine that threw us off or something unexpected that came up and derailed things. Be it a new relationship, a new job, a new schedule, it’s important to identify these changes as they happen and prepare accordingly so we don’t get off track. Sometimes it is being in new places – on vacation, on a work trip or at a family gathering. It could be different ways we are feeling – inspired or tired, energetic or relaxed, happy or sad, content or angry.

Think about whether there was a pattern. If you’re thinking about the fact that you missed some doses of your medication, it can be helpful to consider whether there are patterns to the day of the week or some other disruption in your routine.

## The next question is crucial. Ask yourself now, “What’s needed?”

You probably have good reasons for getting back on track, so how do you get back on track to go in the direction you want to go? What can you do to get back on track? What would be a good first step? Think of some of the things that made you slip and write down how you could prevent them from happening again. Or think of how you could reach your goal in a different way, because maybe the way you were going about it wasn’t working for you anymore. If you are finding getting back on track challenging, ask a friend or loved one what they think would be a good approach.

## And finally, we can help to set ourselves up for success by thinking ahead to “What if?”

You probably hope that you will stay on track this time, full steam ahead and never look back. And you very well might do that! It can be helpful, though, to spend a little time thinking about other obstacles that might be on the track ahead of you so you can prepare well in advance. Nobody is invincible, so the best you can be is prepared and resilient. It’s a bit like having a fire escape plan, even though you don’t expect a fire. Know where the exits are, and how to get to them. Naming them may help you see them coming, avoid them, or at least be extra careful. Knowing what you know about yourself, think about possible obstacles that you might encounter up ahead and then map out your escape plan.

You have the power to get back on track. Treat the event as information. Focus on what it can teach you as an opportunity for learning.

So, to recap. Be aware of your self-talk. Identify the negative self-talk and replace it with positive self-talk. Then go through the questions, What’s up? What’s new? What’s needed? What if? And, lastly, remember to treat yourself the way you would a dear friend. Sometimes we say things to ourselves that we would never dream of saying to anyone else so try to be your own best friend and you may surprise yourself with how capable you truly are of accomplishing anything you set your mind to. Lastly, don’t forget that getting off track is just part of the process and that’s what’s going to make you stronger and more resilient so don’t get discouraged – dust yourself off and try again.

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