

# Recovering from mistakes

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## Abstract

We all make mistakes. The key is to learn from them and use the experience to make a better plan for future action. This presentation is about managing oneself through making a significant mistake to recovering one's self-confidence and the confidence of others. Participants will gain insights into mental processes that affect behavior and specific action steps that help to get back on track.

## Introduction

*"To err is human, to forgive divine."* Alexander Pope

As long as human beings and the machines, structures, and procedures created by humans are providing medical care, there will be mistakes. You can be as careful, thorough, and meticulous as humanly possible in your work, but you will inevitably make mistakes. This fact is not a justification to be less careful because error is unavoidable, on the contrary, it is reason to be more careful in order to minimize errors. Effective professionals respond to mistakes in ways that are productive for themselves, their practices, and for the clients they serve. They learn from mistakes, identify the root causes and plan for corrective actions.

## Mistakes and errors

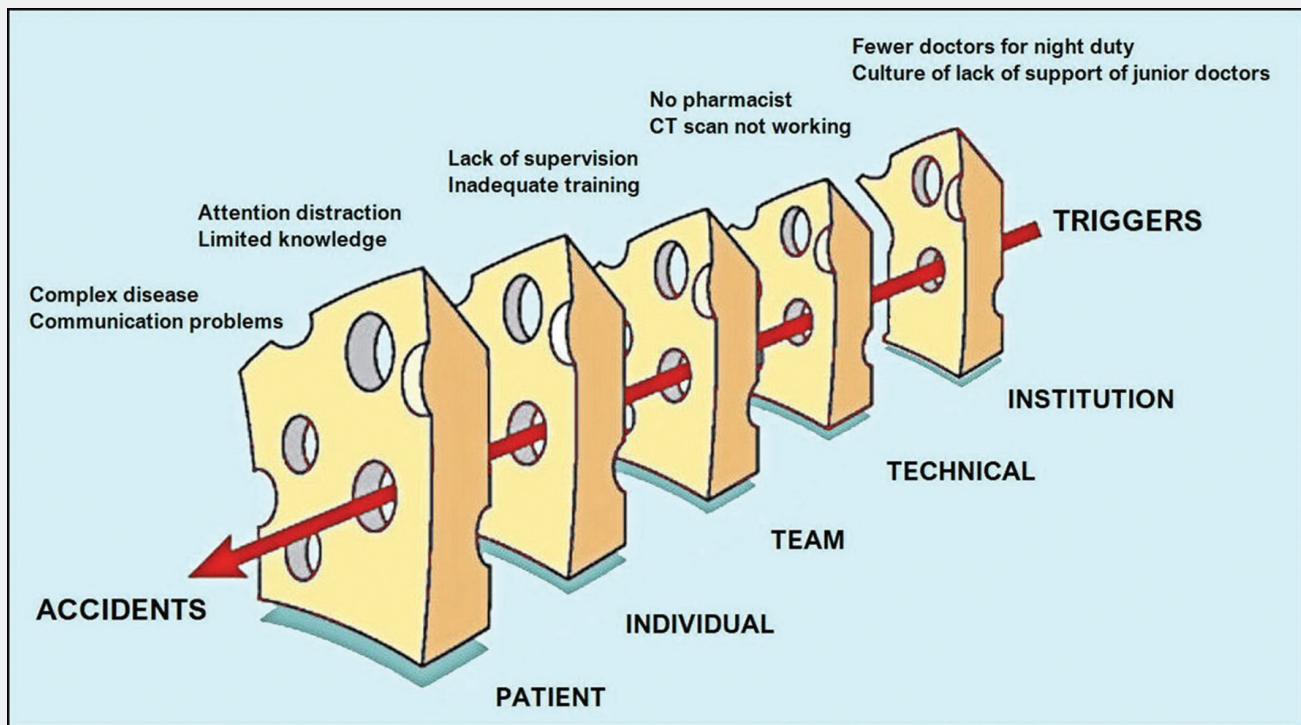
Mistakes and errors occur in an endless variety of ways, veterinary practitioners will immediately think of clinical errors where a misdiagnosis of a patient, for whatever reason, might lead to negative outcomes including death. The idea that "we all make mistakes" is not just a truism; a 2004 study of recent British veterinary graduates found that 78% self-reported that they had made a mistake that led to a potentially adverse outcome for a patient.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, 83% of the recent graduates also reported that they worked "frequently" or "always" unsupervised.

Many practitioners also have the opportunity to make mistakes with longer-term and farther-reaching implications than clinical errors, these include: poor hiring choices, ineffective leadership, poor financial choices, and mistakes managing client relationships. Another big category of mistakes, especially for younger veterinarians, is in making career choices.

## Causes of clinical errors

Too often we think of a mistake as a personal failing, as if we somehow have control of all factors involved. The field of human medicine, in recent decades, has adopted a more systematic approach to identifying and addressing the causes of clinical errors. In a 2020 paper, Gartrell and White presented the Swiss Cheese Model (Figure 1) to illustrate how a complex organization can have multiple, imperfect barriers to prevent errors but that accidents can still happen in circumstances where holes in all of the barriers align.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1:** The Swiss Cheese Model of organizational barriers to mistakes



The Swiss Cheese model helps us see that errors can occur, or be prevented at multiple levels in a complex organization. Inadequate staffing, poor support for junior doctors, lack of supervision, distraction, and communication problems at different junctures could all contribute to the problem. Sometimes these even occur as a cascade of failures together.

In veterinary medicine, these multiple barriers to mistakes often do not exist. Early career practitioners do not have extended periods of close supervision like medical residents, support teams may have only limited skills, and diagnostic equipment may be limited. We know that veterinary workloads are often very high, likely leading to more distraction, stress and exhaustion among practitioners – all a recipe for mistakes.

## Responding to a mistake

Knowing that everyone makes mistakes is a simple, but important, first step in dealing with the situation. You are certainly not alone but that only goes so far in making a person feel better about it. With a serious mistake people often experience a cascade of emotions. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross researched the emotional reactions of people suffering from grief at the loss of a loved one. She developed a multiple-stage grief model that starts with shock and denial upon first learning of the loss, proceeds to anger, then depression and detachment at the lowest emotional depths. Recovery begins in the Kubler-Ross grief cycle with dialogue and bargaining as the grieving person makes sense of their situation, followed by acceptance, and a return to meaningful life. It is notable in the Kubler-Ross model that a person can get “stuck” at any stage and unable to progress fully back to meaningful life. This grief model has been applied to many other loss situations and can also be applied to experiencing a serious mistake or setback.

A technique that performance coaches often use to help clients recover from a serious career setback is “reframing”. A person experiencing destructive, emotionally-charged thought patterns might be having ideas like: “I’m not smart enough to do this job.” Or they could be having unhelpful thoughts in another direction such as: “It’s not my fault!” Reframing involves looking at these thought patterns using a critical and more objective lens. So, the veterinarian struggling with self-doubt thinking “I’m not smart enough,” is confronted with a different set of facts. The veterinarian got into and through veterinary school, she successfully helped many other patients that week, and she has the support of her colleagues; these objective facts can help reframe her thinking about the mistake in a more appropriate context. She can then get beyond her reactive, emotional thinking pattern to a more productive one. “I am responsible for making this mistake and I can take steps to improve future performance. I am also fully capable of doing this job and normally perform well in most regards.”

## Handling mistakes with clients and colleagues

When you are responsible for an error, you will often need to address your relationships with others who are affected. You may have a client who lost a valuable animal or perhaps suffered herd performance losses. You may have a colleague or team member who was adversely affected by your mistake. The client or colleague may genuinely feel aggrieved or hurt by your actions. In these situations, an apology can go a long way to restoring the relationship. A good apology involves

acknowledging the mistake, taking responsibility, and expressing remorse that the incident happened. A good apology does not involve making excuses for why the mistake happened.

For mistakes that might involve significant losses for the client, practitioners should consult with partners, insurance providers, and even an attorney before fully acknowledging responsibility. This way the practitioner can have a more complete understanding of any risks and legal obligations that an apology acknowledging responsibility might entail.

## Taking charge again

Apologies without future corrective action are of limited value. Part of the mental recovery from making a mistake is to move past the feelings of blame and shame and begin to take positive actions to build a better future. Root cause analysis is a problem-solving method that helps you to look deeper than the surface symptoms of a problem and try to identify the underlying causes that created the problem. One common approach to root cause analysis is to use the 5 Why approach. For example, the surface problem is that the patient was misdiagnosed. Why? Because the doctor was rushing through the exam. Why? Because there were two emergency calls to get to this afternoon in addition to herd checks. Why? Because the practice is understaffed. Why? Because a doctor recently left. Why? Because she took an industry job that offered better work-life balance. Root cause: chaotic scheduling and overwork is preventing doctors from practicing the best medicine. This analysis brings deeper, root causes to the surface and opens the door to gathering more evidence to confirm the causes and solutions to the problem.

Once the root cause of the problem is identified, it is possible to make positive, actionable plans for the future. A positive, actionable plan is not represented by the expression: “Oh, I’ll do better next time.” That expression actually says: “I’m not really going to change anything and hopefully this won’t happen again.” This is the wrong way to rebuild confidence in you from your clients and colleagues. Instead, come up with a clear plan that acknowledges the mistakes in the past and includes reasonable steps to avoid the problem outcomes.

A simple model to use for this is the STP problem solving model: for situation, target, plan. The first step is to describe the situation with accuracy and detail. For example, the client’s invoice was delayed and inaccurate because the doctor failed to enter the services and products provided at the end of the farm visit. The second step is to identify the target condition, what is required for success. For example, all services and products accurately recorded for each farm visit and billed in the current month. The last step is to analyze the gap between the current situation and the desired performance target, and make a plan to close the gap. Going forward, the doctor will immediately record all services and products provided at the end of the farm visit and turn in the records for billing at the end of the day.

## Recovery mentally

A good support network is very important to help you recover from mistakes and other serious setbacks. Of course, supportive friends and family networks play an important role in everyone’s sense of self-worth and well-being, but these networks may not be as helpful in recovering from a mistake. These support groups can offer emotional support but will be less effective in helping analyze any professional behaviors that might have contributed to the mistake.

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Well-run practices have leaders in place who can offer coaching and mentoring to less-experienced veterinarians. A coach can help an early career professional learn the right lessons from experiences such as a mistake. Mentors can play a similar role and can come from inside or outside of the practice. The advantage of trusted professional coaches and mentors is that they can help a practitioner analyze their own behaviors and come up with ways to improve.

## Conclusion

Mistakes are going to happen but it is important for veterinary professionals to develop support networks and methods to help you recover. Turning a mistake into an opportunity for learning and improvement, and perhaps even into an opportunity to strengthen relationships, is the best possible outcome.

## References

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