

AFTERSHOCKS

They say that time heals all wrongs. But how much time?

Just when you think you are getting better, some new trigger can send you tumbling back into the abyss. It can take days or weeks to climb out again.

I call these aftershocks, and they have a variety of triggers. Reminders of your failed dream can make you stagger. You feel physically ill when you find an old business card or startup t-shirt. Photos of your happy days as a couple plunge you into loneliness and misery. Your chest tightens when you look at your tennis racket, guitar, or baseball mitt. Any time your industry or university appears in the news, you panic.

Minor setbacks in other areas of your life, which have nothing to do with your failure, can also devastate you. You are still weakened, hurting, and raw. You see yourself through a lens of deficiency and shame.

Your advisor has harsh feedback on your latest chapter? You are an impostor and an embarrassment who never should have been accepted into this graduate program. Your husband snaps at you for being late to pick up the kids? You are a disgrace of a mother who will never get her shit together. You unwittingly offend a subordinate at work? You were never suited for a managerial role and the company made a dreadful mistake by promoting you.

The success of others can be a powerful trigger, especially in a social media age that forces us to compare our messy, problematic, real lives against the curated projections of everybody else. You just endured the trial of your life, but there is Amanda with her perfectly tanned legs extended on a beach in Cozumel, mojito in hand. Jake and Rachel are in a photo booth, wearing stupid hats and oversized sunglasses, looking as happy as teenage lovebirds. Enrique just finished his third marathon. Nandita just published a book. Nathan is “humbled” to announce his promotion to regional manager. Chris is speaking at a high-profile software development conference. And so it goes.

You scroll on and on, unable to stop, your brain hooked on a cocktail of both dopamine hits and flight-or-fight triggers. You want to be happy for your friends, but you feel alone, inadequate, and miserable. *What am I doing with MY life?* you wonder, as this carefully staged presentation of life’s finest moments rolls endlessly by. Bad chemicals flood your brain. A chain reaction spreads. Nuclear meltdown ensues.

The force of these aftershocks can be considerable.

During my final Christmas break from Stanford, I received my autumn grades and discovered that my advisor had assigned an “N” for my dissertation credits. I was horrified; he was so dissatisfied with my progress that he awarded me “no credit.” This was only a couple weeks after the meeting in which he had reviewed all my work and found it sorely deficient. Without those credits, I would not graduate on time.

I was home with my parents at their beautiful lakeside house, where I should have been drinking steaming cups of apple cider, watching sunsets with my wife over the lake, and decorating Christmas cookies with my children.

Instead, my world crumbled. I staggered around the house in a

daze. Exercise did not help. I sank lower and lower, heart rate spiking, emotions darkening. I ended the evening wrapped in multiple blankets, shivering, teeth chattering, so lost in my inner darkness that I couldn't do anything except sit and manage my physical symptoms.

In the morning my senses returned. It occurred to me to log on onto Stanford's registrar webpage and actually review the grading system. Much to my chagrin, I discovered that a grade of "N" did not indicate "no credit"; it indicated "satisfactory progress in a course that has not yet reached completion."

The shattered ruins of my universe reassembled themselves, like a film played in rewind.

This whole episode is highly embarrassing, but it was real. That is what aftershocks can do.

Understanding this dynamic is half the battle.

If you know aftershocks are a normal part of the healing process, you can anticipate them and recognize them when they strike. You are not broken, but you *are* wounded and healing. Understanding that gives you permission to extend a little grace to yourself.

You learn to recognize and avoid your personal land mines.

Sometimes this means avoiding particular places or people. Twice since graduating from Stanford, I have visited the meeting room where Political Science students present their work to assembled faculty and students. I always found these presentations ruthless and unsparing, even if that was not the intent. When I returned to that empty room after graduating, I felt powerful physical symptoms: racing heart, tightness in the chest, nausea, and cold sweats. Now that I recognize what that place does to me, I have no plans to ever return.

You might need to regulate your online browsing habits. Maybe

you even need to go cold turkey with social media, because feeds of bedazzling success are a surefire ticket into your inner darkness.

With experience, you learn to endure aftershocks when they do come. You know that reasoning through them is impossible, because your emotions swamp your intellect. You abstractly know that you are comparing the worst in yourself to the best in others, and that they probably feel just as shitty and envious as you do. In the moment, none of that matters. All you can do is cling to the knowledge that this, too, shall pass.

Time might not heal all wrongs, but it does help. Maybe the trauma associated with failure loses its grip on you as the months turn to years, or maybe you simply get better at managing yourself.

On your better days, you accept these aftershocks as gifts. An aftershock is a warning from deep within your subconscious. An inner circuit breaker is tripping again, protecting you from further injury. *You have been here before*, your body says. *You never want to be here again*. This is a generous and good act on the body's part to help us avoid pain and live healthy lives.

One type of therapy teaches individuals to be gentle and patient with these reactions. We can recognize that the danger has passed, unclench our teeth, and take a deep breath. We can gently thank the body for its intervention to protect us. But we can also acknowledge that our lives are different now, and it is okay to feel safe.

EATING GLASS



*The Inner Journey
Through Failure and Renewal*

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CONTINUAL ASCENT

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