

# How to Survive a Confidence Crash

**Olivia\*, 25, has been laid off from three jobs in three years and is officially freaking out.** “The first time I was laid off was in 2008. I thought, Okay, this sucks, but I can handle this. But then it happened again...and again. I feel so ashamed and don’t even know why I’m trying,” she says. Thanks to the still crappy economic climate, this feeling of “What the %&# am I doing with my life?” is being echoed around the country by young women who are struggling to find work. And experts say a stalled career is only one of the reasons so many members of the Millennial generation—usually defined as people born after 1980—are especially vulnerable to feeling lost when their lives don’t work out as planned. A breakup, a bad relationship with a boss, or even a fallout with a friend can spur a crushing confidence crash.

“A lot of Millennials experience what I call an expectation hangover anytime life throws them a curveball,” explains life coach Christine Hassler, author of *20 Something, 20 Everything*. And it feels just as painful as a real one, complete with headaches, remorse, and rolling waves of nausea—only it can last for months. Experts believe this exaggerated sense of disappointment is due in part to the unwaveringly positive feedback 20- and 30-somethings have been given. “In the 1970s, only 17 percent of students got A averages in college. In 2008, 33 percent did,” explains Jean Twenge, PhD, professor of psychology at San

Your 20s and early 30s are supposed to be packed with fun relationships, exciting experiences, and once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. And for the most part, they will be. But new job pressures and the negative effects of social media can send your self-esteem plummeting. Find out how waves of self-doubt start and the secret to bouncing back with even more mojo.

By Anna Davies



Diego State University and author of *The Narcissism Epidemic*. Since the population couldn’t have become that much more brilliant in 30 years, we can conclude that there is a whole lot of grade inflation going on—indicative of a shift in society where praise has become paramount regardless of performance, Twenge says.

In the real world, neither bosses nor first dates are likely to go as easy on you as your freshman-year English teacher did, which can cause serious ego deflation. “So many young women come into my office and assume it’s cheer camp,” says Kelly Cutrone, president of People’s Revolution PR and author of *Normal Gets You Nowhere*. “When I don’t praise them for every little thing, they get upset.” And as we know from having watched Cutrone’s employees react to criticism on her reality show *Kell on Earth*, by “get upset,” she means cry hysterically for days.

\*Names have been changed.



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While these crashes are—deep breath—perfectly normal, you're in no way helpless. Being aware of the contributing factors (beyond the horrible economy) can help make it easier to navigate through the disappointment. Believe it or not, you can actually come out on the other side feeling stronger, smarter, and less likely to crash again.

## COUNTERACT THE FACEBOOK EFFECT

Not only are Millennials experiencing the problematic side effects of too much praise, they're also the first generation to feel pressure to present a flawless, idealized image of themselves via blogs, Facebook, and Twitter feeds. All these can trigger the confidence crash when there's nothing good to report or, worse, a humiliating photo or less-than-flattering piece of news about your job or relationship status goes public.

On top of that, comparing yourself to others—one of the main hobbies of Facebook users everywhere—magnifies mild feelings of inadequacy into raging self-doubt. For example, Ruby, 26, is a fashion editor who feels her confidence tank whenever she logs on. "Seeing friends clinch an amazing new title makes me fume, and it's hard to feel excited about where I am in my own career," she says.

Also contributing to the confusion is the fact that today's young women are so busy trying to figure out what would impress their FB friends and Twitter followers, they have a harder time pinpointing their own true desires. "So many women treat life as a constant status update," says Jane Buckingham, founder of the Millennial-focused research firm Trendera. "They're thinking about how their lives look instead of how their lives feel."

Take Kathryn, 29, a social-media strategist. "After more than a few out-of-control nights, I knew the healthiest

thing for me to do was give myself a break from partying," she says. "But I felt like Facebook was an obstacle. All my posts and pictures were of going out. I felt like if I stopped, everyone would wonder why or think I wasn't fun anymore. It seemed easier to keep doing what I was doing."

**"So many young women treat life as a constant status update. It's as if they're more concerned with how their lives look than how their lives feel."**

To combat the pressure to perform, Buckingham suggests taking a hiatus from status updates so you'll be able to distinguish what you're doing for yourself from what you're doing for your friends. Second, when you do return to sharing, commit to keeping certain things (like your dating life) offline, and tweak your feed so you don't have to see posts from frenemies or anyone else whose updates make you feel bad. Finally, divide your social networking: Use LinkedIn to keep in touch with old coworkers, a Google+ Circle to stay connected with your friends, and a photo-sharing site to upload pics.

## THE REAL SECRETS TO HAPPINESS

What you'd never guess from perusing news feeds? *No one* experiences a non-stop stream of feel-good events. There are lulls in everyone's life—they're just not talking about them on Facebook. "The more you get beyond the 'Everything's great!' line we've been taught to say, the more you realize that everyone struggles occasionally," says Hassler.

## You, You, You

Of course, the answer isn't to sit around and dwell on the fact that things suck for everyone some of the time. "The question to ask yourself is how can you learn from your current situation and change it for the better?" says Hassler. If you hate that the boss at your big company barely knows your name, take it as a cue to focus on smaller companies during your next job search. If your friend was a stage-five clinger only to dump you when you were dealing with your own drama, be sure to choose new friends who have loyalty as one of their top qualities. By figuring out what didn't work, you'll be much less likely to fall into a similar situation down the line.

Another must-do: Instead of comparing yourself to your peers who seem to have it all, try to learn from them. The chick who has a kick-ass career? Pick her brain over coffee. Or gather a group of friends for monthly brunch and life-strategy brainstorming sessions. "By talking it out rather than competing, you'll be able to identify more solutions," says Hassler.

Finally, get distracted. Sounds counterintuitive, but experts swear taking a break from obsessing about your situation is key to moving on. After Carrie, 27, was dumped by her long-term boyfriend when she expected to get engaged, she found her renewed passion in an unlikely source. "At first, all I could think about was how to get back together. But then I began taking a dance class. I made a ton of new friends, found a hobby, and began dating again." Carrie's MO was good because she wasn't focusing on relationships—just something she liked and excelled at.

In between jobs? Train for a 5K run. Getting out of a long-term relationship? Go on a solo vacay. "What you're doing is breaking the obsessive self-reflection," says Barry Schwartz, PhD, author of *The Paradox of Choice*. Giving your mind a break from the same cycle of thoughts not only keeps you sane but may also give you the drive you need to overcome a setback by reminding you of all the things in your life you can and do kick ass at. ■

## Comebacks to Confidence-Sinking Questions

**What do you say when somebody asks about the one area of your life that sucks? Amy Alkon, author of *I See Rude People*, explains.**

**1. Be direct.** Lying ("I got a great job offer; just waiting on details") can backfire, so consider hitting them with the truth ("Actually, I'm having a tough time with my job search"). "When you tell people what's really going on, you trigger their sympathetic reflex," says Alkon. Even your bitchtastic frenemy

might do you a favor and pass your résumé on to her uncle's recruiting firm.

**2. Focus on them.** Don't want a random person knowing your biz? Deflect with a Q of your own ("I was about to ask you the same thing!"). Odds are, he wasn't meaning to pry. "A nosy question often isn't intended to

be rude; it's just meant to create conversation," says Alkon. Once he starts babbling, he'll likely forget you never gave an answer.

**3. Laugh it off.** Cracking a joke shows you realize that this isn't the end of the world. If a coworker asks about your (involuntary) breakup, tell her it's okay, you've been looking for an excuse to listen to Adele's "Someone Like You" on infinite repeat.

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