

# IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED...

## TIMELY ADVICE FOR BOUNCING BACK FROM EXAM SETBACKS

By Karin Kirk

- Bill failed his Level III alpine exam 15 times.
- When Donny attempted his Level II skiing exam, he felt more confident as the assessment progressed, only to learn that his performance actually declined with each segment.
- Alicia found her aspirations of taking the Level I exam were derailed by a life-altering disability.
- Kevin's exam plans dissolved right along with the prematurely melting snow, forcing him to wait a whole season before going back for his Level II snowboard exam.
- Kathy felt like she had repeated her exam so many times that all the examiners in her division knew her.
- As he attempted to rebound from failing the skiing portion of his Level II alpine exam, Scott found that some members of his ski school were not supportive of his ambitions.

Remarkable stories indeed. But the most impressive thing, by far, is how all these instructors stayed focused, motivated, and determined to continue their pathways. In their own ways, they reconciled their losses and recharged their drive to continue. "This is *my* journey," stated Scott defiantly. "And I own it."

Our profession is filled with potential pitfalls, from missing the crux move on a big line, to failing an exam, to being passed over for a prized role in the snowsports school. While setbacks are inevitable, the ways we respond to them vary widely. What factors influence how people respond to failure? Are there strategies you can use to help unravel bad results? What insights can you use to help learn from obstacles and recover from negative outcomes?

Here's the good news: You're not in this alone. Sports psychologists, counselors, and educational specialists have done valuable work to help people rebound from the dark times. Moreover, as illustrated by the six instructors above, you are likely surrounded by peers who have weathered their fair share of obstacles. There's a lot of wisdom you can borrow to help out when you need it most.

### UNRAVELING THE CAUSES

After a negative event, most of us will have a natural urge to try to sort out what went wrong, why, and what that means for us as we move forward. This process of digesting events and trying to understand the causes is called "attribution." What factors do we attribute success or failure to? Accurate

attributions lead to quicker rebound and help us map a productive and realistic strategy for future development. Inaccurate attributions can set the stage for blaming others, spiraling into self-doubt, or perhaps even giving up on an important goal.

To begin to analyze attributions, reflect on a recent setback and list the reasons that contributed to the undesirable outcome. Let's use an example of a failed exam. Reasons could be things like:

- I didn't understand the exam process.
- Nobody told me what to expect.
- My area does not have expert terrain to practice on.
- I'm not athletic.
- My skis were too fat for carved turns.
- I didn't practice my demos enough.
- Riding in front of an examiner was intimidating.

Now take a closer look at what's behind those reasons. You can organize them using "attribution theory," which was developed by psychologist Bernard Weiner in the 1980s.

### INTERNAL FACTORS VS. EXTERNAL FACTORS

Internal factors are part of who you are. They may or may not be changeable over



GEORGIA BAKER  
The author experiences a moment of frustration after taking a wrong turn while guiding. "At the moment, I was so mad at myself," she said, "but I gained valuable insight that can apply on so many levels. Things don't always go perfectly out on the snow, but it's how you react that matters most."

time, but they are part of what you bring to the process. For example, if you don't ride well under pressure, that is an internal factor. If the exam environment is high pressure, that's an external factor.

### WITHIN YOUR CONTROL VS. OUT OF YOUR CONTROL

Some factors are truly out of your control: the snow conditions, the other members of your exam group, and the random

card you draw for a teaching assignment. Others, like how much sleep you got the night before, are up to you.

### PERMANENT VS. CHANGEABLE

Some things you cannot change, but others are fixable. You cannot change the degree of pitch of a given trail or the format of your exam, for example. Furthermore, some things *seem* permanent but they really aren't. You may hear exasperated instructors lament, "I'm not athletic." Is that a permanent state, or can it be changed? It depends on several factors, not the least of which is one's outlook. Strength and agility can be improved with training. But body type and personality are more permanent factors.

Now revisit the list above and see how the various reasons fit into this matrix.

So, as you embark on a journey to recover from a setback, a first step is to sort out what you can fix and what you can't. There's not much sense in dwelling on the exam format, how tall you are, or unpredictable weather events. These factors are out of your control. Instead, hone in on the factors that you can work on.

### Train to Diminish the Intimidation

As you delve into this, you may find that your interpretation of what is in your control may change depending on how you view things. For example, "riding in front of an examiner was intimidating" is an external factor that is outside your control and is permanent. Seems dire, right? But with further thought, how you respond to an intimidating environment is up to you. There are specific ways to train that can help you gain a foothold in competitive situations. As you practice, you may find that this roadblock is not so permanent after all.

Internal, permanent factors can also lead to a hopeless feeling. While working toward his Level II alpine certification, Scott's confidence sometimes wavered. "Maybe I'm not cut out for this," he said. "Maybe this is the end of the line for me." Sports psychologists warn that we should avoid generalizing outcomes to the point where they define our whole being. If you failed bump riding, it doesn't mean you are unathletic or old, it means you need to work on your bump tactics, skills, or ability to make dynamic movements.

Bill sums this up perfectly: "Not passing my exam is not a failure. It's a means of getting better."

### Face Your 'Faults' Head-On

Interestingly, an explanation can lie on opposite sides of the spectrum depending on how you look at it. While it may feel comforting to pinpoint blame on external factors, don't shortchange your ability to address them head-on. For example, "Nobody told me what to expect" is another way of saying, "I didn't understand the exam process." Expecting someone to tell you everything you need to know is an external factor and is out of your hands. But improving your own understanding is something you can change; it's an internal factor. Similarly, the reasoning that "my area does not have expert terrain to practice on" is external and permanent. But you can alter your training plan to include travel to a different resort. In that regard, this factor *is* within your control.

This approach can lead you to a more productive and empowering path to preparation.

In nearly all cases, one's outlook evolves

## RECOGNIZE FACTORS WITHIN AND BEYOND YOUR CONTROL

In some cases, a particular reason could fall in a different column, depending on your interpretation. It's a personal process. How would you categorize these factors?

INTERNAL	EXTERNAL	WITHIN YOUR CONTROL	OUTSIDE YOUR CONTROL	CHANGEABLE	PERMANENT
I didn't understand the exam process		I didn't understand the exam process		I didn't understand the exam process	
	Nobody told me what to expect		Nobody told me what to expect		Nobody told me what to expect
	My area does not have expert terrain to practice on		My area does not have expert terrain to practice on		My area does not have expert terrain to practice on
I don't like riding in bumps		I don't like riding in bumps		I don't like riding in bumps	
	My skis were too fat for carved turns	My skis were too fat for carved turns		My skis were too fat for carved turns	
I didn't practice my demos enough		I didn't practice my demos enough		I didn't practice my demos enough	
	Riding in front of an examiner was intimidating		Riding in front of an examiner was intimidating		Riding in front of an examiner was intimidating

Sports psychologists advise us to work toward explanations that are internal, within your control, and changeable. After all, these are the things that you can fix. On the other hand, factors that are external, out of your control, and permanent can stack up and make things seem overwhelming or unfair.

AVOID...	TRY TO...
<p><b>Outsourcing your failure</b> The snow was bad, the examiner was mean, and nobody told you that you should give people feedback during your teaching segment.</p>	<p><b>Reconcile your own role in the results</b> Think about how your preparation, skills, and strategy were related to the outcome. Most important, consider how you can adjust for the future.</p>
<p><b>Viewing a negative result as the last word</b> You failed the teaching segment. That means you are a terrible teacher, after all.</p>	<p><b>Understand that skill development is ongoing</b> A failed teaching segment could mean a lack of understanding about the exam format, not enough practice, or deficiencies in communication skills. All of these things are fixable, and will strengthen your teaching across the board.</p>
<p><b>Catastrophizing</b> “I failed and therefore I’m a failure. My ex-girlfriend was right, I will never amount to anything. Why did I ever think I could pass the exam in the first place? I’m hopeless.”</p>	<p><b>Keep bad news in perspective</b> Falling while riding switch does not mean you have a character deficit or you aren’t a hard worker. Keep negative feedback inside the category it belongs and work more on riding switch!</p>
<p><b>Dwelling on the negative</b> Negative feedback can fill your entire headspace, sometimes making it feel like everything you do is wrong.</p>	<p><b>Acknowledge successes</b> Every exam scorecard includes some good news. Remember that you’ve earned some success, and give yourself a pat on the back for the parts of the process you’ve already mastered. Use these strengths to build on as you move forward.</p>
<p><b>Glossing over the loss</b> Even though taking a hard look at a negative outcome is not fun, don’t skip the opportunity to gain insights from the process.</p>	<p><b>Allow yourself to be bummed, mad, or hurt</b> The more important the goal is to you, the harder it is to reconcile missing the mark. It’s OK to have a natural, human reaction to the bad news. In time, move on to a more constructive outlook.</p>

## While it’s natural to worry about the things we can’t control, focus your training on the many factors that are in your court.

over time. “What I thought changed in an instant when I saw my scorecard,” recalled Donny. “I was let down at first but then realized, it *was* true. It *was* me. I saw the consistency in my results.” Scott shared similar thoughts. “I was bummed out. Very, very bummed out. I thought I’d skied as well as everybody else,” he said. “Eventually I got encouragement from an examiner, and that got me back on track.”

### START MAKING SENSE OF OUTCOMES

Forming accurate attributions is an essential part of the rebound process. Here are some checkpoints to help make sense of the outcomes, whatever they may be.

### MAP A PLAN FOR RECOVERY

As you mull over the reasons behind success and failure, you can start to build a plan for continued training.

#### ▸ **Wrap your head around your feedback.**

“I asked my examiners follow-up questions at the debriefing,” said Bill. “Over time I could play that back in my head and relate it to my skiing.” Kathy, Scott, and Donny had similar post-exam experiences, discussing their outcomes with the examiners until it made sense to them. “Don’t just go by the scorecard,” recounted Kathy. “Go up and talk to [the examiners]. They’ll tell you exactly how you need to practice. After my exam, I went right back out and worked on my demos, and now I can do a wedge christie perfectly.”

#### ▸ **Reconsider goals, strategy, and motivation.**

Setting a realistic goal is an essential part of this whole process. Work with your trainers to select a goal and then create a map of incremental steps that will build the skills and experience you need. If you are successful with the individual steps, that will boost your



Kathy Ebbers used examiner feedback to map out her plan for progress.

motivation to continue. If not, readjust your overall strategy.

▸ **Focus on controllable factors.** While it’s natural to worry about the things we can’t control, focus your training on the many factors that are in your court. Do you feel self-conscious teaching in front of your peers? Start by practicing with friends



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In the hunt for Level II certification, Donny Kanovsky has learned to take stock in the feedback of evaluators and work with friends and mentors to improve.

VIEW VIDEO

DONNY KANOVSKY  
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Learn more about Donny Kanovsky's certification journey as he pursues his Level II.

worked and what didn't. Practice putting your finger on *why* things went well and why they didn't. This will help you gain better control over causes and effects, and will ultimately help you become a better athlete and instructor.

Balance your snowsports aspirations with the rest of your activities. Are you vying to clinch your Freestyle Specialist 2 in the same week that you're defending your PhD thesis? You might want to reconsider that. Are you feeling stale in your 9-to-5 desk job? Maybe some added challenge is just what you need in life.

Ideally, your snowsports goals will be in balance with the rest of your life, and vice versa. Alicia, who was grappling with a vision impairment, found herself battling depression as well. She returned to skiing, and this became an essential part of her recovery. "Being on skis and improving on skis gave me motivation to get better," she said. Alicia attributes this well-rounded approach as vital to enhancing her health *and* her skiing.

► **Adjust as necessary to maintain forward progress and motivation.** Reflect on your overall progress on a regular basis. Find a balance between focused training and relaxed free riding. Keep reminding yourself why you are working toward this goal in the first place, and work with your trainers to keep on track without burning out.

As necessary, adjust your strategy to tweak the specific skills and intensity as you hone in on your goal. Kathy recalls the feeling of knowing when she was ready to pass her exam. "Eventually I changed my attitude. I used to *hope* to pass and *hope* that I was doing it right," she said. "But after so much training, I realized it was time for me to *show* them what I can do."

who can help you relax and be yourself. Are you uneasy riding in high-pressure situations? Set yourself up for high-stakes practice, perhaps under the lift or in front of a video camera. Thankfully, most of the things we do *are* in our control!

► **Come to terms with uncontrollable factors.** Kevin thought he was on track for his Level II snowboard exam until thin snow closed his mountain and wiped out any opportunity to train. "If that wasn't bad enough, the kid I was borrowing equipment from packed up his gear and took it home!" he said. As a result Kevin was left high and dry two weeks before the event.

Exams are a subjective experience and there are human, social, and weather factors that you can't control. "Have a backup plan," advised Kevin. "Consider your training and preparation, your gear, your transportation, and your housing. Get your ducks in a row."

► **Be accountable.** "Have your friends watch you," advised Donny. Use peers, mentors, and trainers to help gauge progress and make sure you are following through with the plans you set for yourself.

If you said you'd practice your demos but are spending all your free time in the park, then you need a reality check.

► **Create opportunities for success.** We learn best from successful experiences, not from banging our heads against the wall with overly difficult tasks. While you are focused on improving your skills and pushing yourself, be sure to do it in a manner that will allow regular successes along the way. "I skied the same bump run all day long, all by myself," recounted Scott. "I fell a few times, but I got there."

► **Plan for setbacks.** If you expect occasional missteps, you'll be ready for them when they inevitably arise. Psychology professor Gabriele Oettingen suggests creating a plan that anticipates obstacles and includes strategies for what you'll do when they occur. Kathy watched fellow instructors return from exams devastated by failing. "I had to ask myself, 'How would I feel if I failed?' I went in prepared for that," she said. "In the end, I had a wonderful experience even though I didn't pass."

► **Practice accurate attributions.** Every day offers opportunities to reflect on what

## SUCCESS AFTER SETBACKS... IT CAN HAPPEN

Meanwhile, Scott passed his Level II skiing exam, despite feeling like the odds were initially against him. Donny can barely contain his excitement to continue working



toward his goals. Kevin is pondering the timing of his next exam, and he won't leave it to the chance of a late-season snowpack. After passing her Level II alpine on the fifth try, Kathy wondered, "If I did that, hey, what else can I do?"

Alicia has used her love of skiing to rebound from her disability. "I skied myself out of my depression. First I did a 180 in life, and now I can do a 180 on skis," she said. And Bill soldiers on with unfailing persistence and enthusiasm. "Just being in the game puts you head and shoulders above most other skiers," he observed. "Even though I haven't passed my exam yet, I know I'm a better skier for it." ❧

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How you prepare and participate during the exam itself, and what you do with your feedback afterwards determines your long-term success.

## HOW TRAINERS AND EXAMINERS CAN HELP INSTRUCTORS BOUNCE BACK

If you're a trainer or examiner, you obviously play a huge role in the examination process; trainers in the lead-up to the exam and examiners during actual assessment of the candidate's skills. But you can also be a huge factor after an unsuccessful certification bid. Here are eight things you can do to help candidates in the aftermath of an exam that doesn't go as he or she had hoped:

- ▶ A person's explanations for why a failure occurred are likely to evolve over time. Immediately following a setback, a response may be negative or emotional. **Allow instructors to have some breathing room, then work with them to understand their reality and work toward a clearer understanding of causes and effects.**
- ▶ As instructors are processing the causes for adverse events, they may "try out" different explanations. **Guide them toward accurate, productive lines of thinking.**
- ▶ Attributions may vary with audience. When a person debriefs with peers who have suffered a similar setback, the conversation may turn into a "blame game." However when talking to you, the instructor may trend toward a safe answer, such as the ubiquitous, "It's OK. It was a learning experience." **Try to suss out the most honest emotions.**
- ▶ **Pose follow-up questions and specific queries to try to get past the initial, gut-level reaction.** Note that how you phrase questions can affect the outcome. Be aware of your own biases.
- ▶ **Be alert to your own role in the person's success or failure.** It's possible that your coaching or strategy was inaccurate. This can put instructors in an awkward position when discussing outcomes with their trainers or examiners. Allow for third-party involvement so that instructors can debrief with someone other than their primary coach or trainer.
- ▶ **Observe how attributions are carried out in a person's actions.** If the agreed-upon plan was for the instructor to slow down and clean up inaccurate movements, but you see him or her charging sloppily down the hill every day, something's amiss. Does the instructor not understand the plan, disagree with it, or lack the self-awareness to stick with it?
- ▶ **Whenever possible, give feedback in terms that are controllable and changeable by that instructor.** Be as accurate and specific as you can be. Vague feedback can lead to the tendency for a person to generalize that the problem is a lack of talent or some mysterious deficit that prevents success. Point out examples of when a candidate met expectations and provide details for improvement in a way that can be acted upon. Remember to check for understanding to make sure you are both seeing things the same way.
- ▶ **Be encouraging.** Every instructor interviewed here mentioned the impact of encouragement from trainers and examiners. Your voice carries a lot of weight, so use it to help people regain confidence and motivation.

— KK