

# ***Please Try This at Home***

## ***Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life***

### **Getting Your Worth Back from the “Butthead Line”**

We all do it sometimes. Something happens that makes us feel not so great about ourselves. Then, to make ourselves feel better, we think, “Well, I wasn’t at my best in *that* situation, but at least I’m not like *those* buttheads. I haven’t fallen *that* low.” It’s like we’ve drawn a line separating ourselves and those we respect from everyone we don’t. If we’re Type A, structured kind of people, our “butthead line” distinguishes us from those who just can’t get their act together. If we’re good at being welcoming, the line keeps us apart from those who are shy or rude. If we’ve just purchased the latest sports car, those who still have last year’s model fall below the line. If we’re begging for money, we can turn up our nose at those below the line whose methods of asking for money aren’t as clever as ours. It doesn’t matter where we are in society, ethnicity, ability, or whatever. There’s always a way to compare ourselves to others in our own minds so that we come out looking “above” them somehow.

What happens, though, when we suddenly find ourselves doing something that makes us fall below our own butthead line? Maybe we patted ourselves on the back for our independence and now we have to ask for help. Or we felt proud of our lovely abs and then pregnancy covered us in floppy skin and stretch marks. We looked down on all those with relationship or moral failings and now we’re the one having the affair. When we disappoint ourselves by falling short of our own definition of what makes us worthwhile, what happens? How do we manage to move through that yucky place to be able to look ourselves in the mirror again?

#### **What Happens Right After We Fail Ourselves**

When personal failure or circumstances beyond us control drop us below our butthead line and we lose respect for ourselves, we are dealing with a loss. We are grieving the way we used to see ourselves and what used to make us feel worthwhile. Because this is a loss, we can expect it to come with some of the emotions and behaviors associated with grief:

1. **Numbing:** At first, it’s often so painful to admit to ourselves that we’re no longer the way we thought we were that we’ll do just about anything to avoid the feeling of shame, failure, and self-loathing. In this place, we might stay super busy or distracted or drunk or (insert your favorite numbing strategy) to blunt the feeling.
2. **Striving:** When the knowledge of our failure or loss of self-respect finally catches up to us, we may pour effort into trying to minimize, reverse, or make up for the effects of it. We may be super nice to the wife we cheated on. We may work ourselves to the bone to pay off the debt we incurred as quickly as possible. We may subsist on lean meat and broccoli in hopes that our love handles recede. We’ll do anything to see if we can crawl back above our butthead line.
3. **Bitterness:** When our striving fails to restore us to where we feel we should be in our own eyes, we may experience anger at ourselves or at others who we perceive to be (or who actually are) looking down on us for our failure. We may come to see the world as a

hostile, unfair place where the “deck is stacked against us,” setting us up for inevitable failure. There can be a bit of relief here at blaming others for any part they had in our failure, letting ourselves off the hook a bit. But staying in anger can also feel pretty exhausting.

4. **Sadness:** As we tire from the more active emotion of anger, we may notice the more helpless and vulnerable feelings of sadness creeping in. We miss who we used to be and all that was attached to it. There’s no way to get parts of that back, and no amount of anger or blaming can reverse that. Negative thoughts about the world may give way to despairing thoughts about ourselves so that we may feel badly about ourselves as a whole, not just about our area of failure.

## Restoring Self-Worth the Easy, Precarious Way

Once we’ve experienced a few or all of these grief emotions and associated behaviors, there’s an easy way and a hard way to spend less and less time going back and forth between these parts of grief.

The easy way is to re-draw the butthead line by picking a different group to compare ourselves to. If we used to compare ourselves to those who’d had failures where we had not, now that we’ve failed we compare ourselves to those people who haven’t yet failed and so have not learned the deep and profound lessons of those who have experienced failure. Turns out *they* are the real buttheads. Or if we prided ourselves on our pre-pregnancy or pre-middle age body and looked down on those who were saggy and older, now that our floppy, middle-aged parent bodies leave quite a bit to be desired, we now look down on those image-focused whippersnappers who have not experienced parenthood or the wisdom of age: “Ha! Just wait a few years and we’ll see how good they look *then*.”

What’s easy about this method is that, given just a bit of transition time, there is always some other group we can feel superior to. On the downside, as long as our feelings of worth are still tied to a stereotype about “those people,” circumstances beyond our control could again drop us below our comparison-based butthead line. Our worth remains unstable. Plus, as long as we are using a group of people as our “buttheads” so that we can feel better being not like them, we are trapped in rigid, judgmental, negative thinking about that group. We *need* them to be inferior and so we can’t let ourselves notice positive things about that group or differences between group members. It makes us less effective in dealing with that group and with other people who think differently about that group.

For example, a White supremacist who feels better about himself by keeping people of color on the other side of his butthead line may miss out on hiring skilled workers, making friends, getting support from a community, learning important information, getting promoted, or tons of other things just because they happen to involve working with or learning from people of color. A social worker or therapist who feels better than people of faith, believing them all to be narrow-minded, easily-duped people, is likely to be blind to ways that personal faith and faith-based communities might provide healthy support for certain clients. Needing to feel “better than,” she limits the range of her effectiveness.

## Fortifying Worth the Hard, Lasting Way

So what's the alternative? The more stable way of regaining self-worth? Here are some things to try:

**Diversify Our Portfolio:** Just as good investors counsel against putting all our money in one company or fund, so we shouldn't get all our worth from one aspect of our lives, whether it's our looks, intelligence, the number of Facebook friends we've got, how many things we can accomplish each day, the success of our kids, the amount of money in our bank, or the number of trophies in our cabinet. To tell whether there is one area that has undue influence on our worth, we can ask ourselves this question: "What is it in your life that, when you succeed at it can make you feel ecstatic, like things will never be bad again; or when you fail at it, can make you feel so low that it feels like life might never be okay again?" That's probably the area we're hanging our worth on.

The second step is to make a practice of reminding ourselves about other strengths in our lives so that we re-train our brains to develop a wider definition of who we are. For example, if losing weight makes us ecstatic and gaining it drives us to despair, we may need to practice thinking: "Whether I am heavier or lighter, I still get to be a good friend, a determined worker, a role model for my kids, a skilled cyclist, etc." Once we practice reminding ourselves of our diverse worth and success, of course failures in the area of worth we are tempted to emphasize will cause us excitement or disappointment, but we'll be able to bounce back faster from the disappointment.

**Focus on What's Good without Comparing:** We can also make a practice of noticing all that is good and beautiful around us. I'm not saying we should pretend the bad isn't there. But our brains are wired to seek out and destroy danger to keep us safe and so they typically tell us about the bad without our having to concentrate on it. It takes effort to pay as much attention to what is going right with our health, our circumstances, and our relationships as we do to what's off there. When we develop habits of finding things in life to be grateful for—say, three different things per day that cannot be the same as what we thought of the day before\*--we actually get our brains to dedicate more neuron "space" and more of our focus on what's good. With these habits in place, when something happens that drops us below our butthead line, our brain is already skilled at noticing the good. It has the power to answer back, "Yes, you lost something big there, but look at ALL that is left that is good and beautiful. There's still so much good to live for and pursue." Again, we might dip with the disappointment, but we bounce back faster when we are aware of *all* the good.

**Recall Transcendent Sources of Worth:** Most of us have given some consideration to what we believe about the big questions like: What's meaningful about life? What happens after death? Are we alone in the universe, or is Someone watching out for us? Are circumstances random or carefully planned and moving toward a good conclusion? Some of us have emerged from consideration of these questions with profoundly encouraging conclusions like: I am not alone. I am deeply valuable despite my performance. What I do in life matters. This life is not all there is, something better is coming. I am part of something greater than myself.

Sometimes we miss out on the deep comfort our beliefs and communities can provide because, once we've come to these conclusions after a period of searching, we put them on our mental "shelf" and then mostly focus on our day to day tasks and circumstances. Setting aside at least

a little time on a daily or at least weekly basis to remember the comforting truths that we believe or engage with others who share those beliefs can go a long way to restoring our feelings of worth after we've been shaken. Using regular times to focus on sources of worth that go beyond death or our seasons of shortcoming can put our disappointments into perspective, giving us hope and resilience even after huge circumstantial losses. But again, it doesn't work very well without practice.

**Examine the Silver Lining:** Isn't it annoying when we go through a hard times and people say, "Every cloud has a silver lining" or "At least you are building character"? Totally annoying when we are in the middle of the yuck! But, heck, if we're gonna go through a hard time, we might as well see if there is anything we can get out of it. If we listen to some of the most successful people talk about their failures, we hear them say things like, "It was awful, but I learned \_\_\_\_\_, which really helped me succeed at \_\_\_\_\_ later on." Or, "If I hadn't had that horrible thing happen, I wouldn't have met my wife, discovered snowboarding, returned to that passion I'd left behind, etc."

So one of the ways we can regain worth after a fall is to closely examine our let down for ways that it 1) taught us useful things, 2) directed us to a path in which we encountered something good, 3) provided us with empathy or skills for helping others in similar circumstances, or even 4) showed us we are tougher or more resilient than we thought, so that it would take a lot more to throw us the next time. Finding what's good even in our deep disappointments helps us rediscover our worth more quickly, rather than simply feeling helpless in the face of our loss.

This is hard stuff, but it's worth it and I encourage you to keep trying to build these skills! If you or someone you know is reeling from a disappointment or failure, call me at 303-931-4284 or email [info@jenniferdiebel.com](mailto:info@jenniferdiebel.com) for a free 20 minute consultation to see if I'd be a good fit for helping the recovery process.

Thanks for reading!

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