

The What-the-Heck Effect

What Is It?

The "what-the-heck" effect is a psychological phenomenon where a minor lapse is perceived as a sense of failure. This, in turn, leads to feelings of guilt and continued relapse.

Example: You are trying to stay away from sweets, but then you have one cookie and think, "Well, what the heck, I've already slipped up," and then end up overeating on sweets for a day (or two or three).

What Causes It?

All-or-Nothing Mindset: Viewing goals in absolute terms can make any deviation feel like total failure, and diminishes motivation to continue working towards your goals.

Guilt and Self-Criticism: After a lapse, intense feelings of guilt can lead to self-criticism, which may result in further indulgence as a coping mechanism.

Unrealistic Expectations: Setting overly ambitious goals without room for flexibility can make minor setbacks seem more significant, triggering the effect.

How Can I Manage It?

- **Set Realistic Goals:** If you set unrealistic goals, you are more likely to have a perceived lapse.
- **Allow for a course change:** Stay flexible and revise your goals when needed. Otherwise, you will keep experiencing the same sense of failure in response to lapses and lose motivation.
- **Plan Ahead:** Develop strategies for handling lapses. This might include having a backup plan or strategies to coach yourself through the moment.
- **Embrace Imperfection:** Recognize that slip-ups are a normal part of any change process. One small mistake doesn't mean you've failed entirely. Remind yourself of what you are doing well.
- **Find Perspective:** After a perceived lapse, ask yourself "How big of a deal is this? Is this really as bad as I think it is?"
- **Be Mindful:** When tempted to indulge further after a lapse, pause and reflect. What are you feeling? What do you need? A moment of mindfulness can help you make choices that better meet your needs.
- **Practice Self-Compassion:** This can make the difference between having a small lapse and an all-out relapse. Research tells us that those who can treat themselves kindly after a slip-up are more likely to recover quickly and avoid a continued relapse.