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Don't let the wheels fall off

By [Patrick J. Cohn, Ph.D.](#)

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How do you react when the wheels fall off your game? Do you get upset, try harder, or give up?

The frustration that a tour pro feels when he makes a bogey on a par 5 is similar to the anger you feel after three-putting your last two holes.

Both cause frustration, but it's how you react to mistakes that determines if you can shake it off and play on.

Why do some players get down on themselves and play worse when the wheels fall off? They can't let go of mistakes and forget about what happened on the last hole.

Expectations are not being met for how the game "should be" played, and negative emotions get the best of them. Frustration and anger lingers to the next hole, which causes another bogey or double bogey.

This in turn causes more frustration and a poor focus. It is a vicious cycle. In this article, I present a few techniques for controlling your emotions and helping get back on track when the wheels fall off.



Tiger Woods isn't one to hide emotions. (Allsport file)

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Don't dwell on mistakes

The frustration you carry with you to the next hole comes from dwelling on a mistake or bad hole. This is unhealthy for your self-confidence and doesn't let you enjoy golf.

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Dwelling on errors sends a message to the brain that you should continue to be upset and beat yourself up.

You make the choice to focus on that bad hole or shot ("I hate three putting!") or focus on what you

need to do to hit your present shot.

Interrupt the negative pattern by changing your focus to the present shot.

Give yourself permission to make mistakes

Some players expect that anything less than a flawless performance or a perfect round is a failure. You have to accept that you are human and you will make mistakes just like everyone else.

Sometimes it helps to give yourself permission to make mistakes. You're not perfect and even the best players in the world make mistakes.

Slow down and breathe deeply

Frustration or tension causes you to rush your behavior and become sloppy in your preparation. You may walk faster between shots, rush your shots, swing faster or speed up your pre-shot routine.

When you are upset, make an effort to slow down your behavior. Take your time walking between each shot. Slow down your pre-shot routine and be more deliberate without overanalyzing the situation. Take a few deep breaths through your abdominal region. You can breathe while walking to the next shot.

Give yourself a pep talk

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Slamming a club in the bag like Colin Montgomerie isn't the ideal way to vent frustration. (Allsport file)

Negative emotions worsen when a player's self-talk is negative and self-defeating. A player with negative self-talk says, "I'm the worst putter, I can't play this game," which increases your anger and decreases self-confidence.

First notice when your self-talk becomes negative, and then learn to be more positive in giving yourself a pep talk. Tell yourself, "I'm a good putter, I'll make the next one."

No one can be positive for you but yourself. You have to be your own coach in golf and give yourself some words of encouragement.

Performance tip:

Remember, you are in control of your emotions. Next time you get angry or frustrated on the course, practice the "three R's:"

- 1.** Recognize the negative emotion ("I feel so frustrated after three-putting the last green"). This is the start of gaining control. You are recognizing that you need to change right now and you have control over your emotions.
- 2.** Release the anger or frustration. Put it behind you symbolically (as you put a club in the bag, let go of the past and get on with the next shot). This is used as a trigger to stop thinking about previous bad shots.
- 3.** Refocus immediately on the task. To focus on the task you need to ask yourself what's important to this next shot right now. This is the goal to regaining control and playing on with composure. You must come full circle by approaching the next shot with a clear mind focused on the ingredients of execution.

Note: Parts of this article were selected from *The Mental Game of Golf: A Guide to Peak Performance* by Patrick J. Cohn.

E-mail your questions to Dr. Cohn at PGAPACK@aol.com

Editor's note: Instruction features appear every Wednesday on GolfWeb.

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