



I don't really like dwelling on the past, nor on much that would be considered negative. Still, you can learn from the past and stuff that did not go so well... such as a crash. Particularly, how to move on from a crash. The following is a fairly lengthy piece; I wanted to put a lot of thoughts and advice in one place for you (just in case).

Recovering From a Crash

There are two kinds of high-performance and race drivers: those who have crashed, and those who will. Okay, a third type, too: Those who are crashing right now (stop reading this and get back to driving!).

I know it doesn't take the sting out of having had one, but the very best drivers in the world also have shunts every now and then, so you're in good company. Ayrton Senna, Michael Schumacher, Lewis Hamilton... all crashed (and in Hamilton's case, will continue to crash until the day he retires). Everyone makes mistakes, is the unlucky target of others' errors, or has to deal with a car problem that leads to a crash.

Now, before I scare or depress you, think logically about this.

How many track laps have you driven in your track-driving "career"? Your number doesn't have to be super accurate, but make a good estimate. Actually, write that number down. Then estimate how many corners you've driven through fast, based on that many laps. Make note of that number, too. Now, write down how many times you've crashed. I'm guessing the number of corners you've driven is fairly large compared to the number of crashes you've had.

I suspect that when you think logically, the odds of crashing are actually quite low (probably lower than being in a crash on the road in your everyday driver).

Still, **it happens.

It's how you recover from a crash that matters most.

So, you can crash. And that can cost you money, time, and maybe even personal injury. It can also be a bummer, something not easy to get over and get back up to speed. It may create some mental challenges for you.

That's what this is all about: getting "back on the horse," back in driver's seat, back on track, and back up to the speed you were at before. As the title says, it's about recovering from a crash. I'm not going to touch the rebuilding or replacement of your car; I'll stick strictly to how you can regain and rebuild your confidence and get back up to speed.

Immediately After a Crash

Before getting into how to move on from a crash, it's important to go over what you should do *immediately* after having one.

First, stay in your car, unless it's on fire. You'll be safer staying where you are than if you try to get out of the car (where, possibly, other cars could lose control and hit you). Plus, you may not even be aware of an injury until you're out, and having the track safety crews there to help can minimize further injury.

If your car is on fire (and I'm speaking from personal experience here), get out as quickly and as safely as you can. But before you do, activate your onboard fire extinguisher, if you have one (if you're in wheel-to-wheel racing, that should be standard equipment). The number of drivers who are unclear on where the button is to activate the extinguisher, and who haven't practiced using it, is far too high (again, speaking from personal experience).

The track safety and medical personnel will check you over, but even if they've signed off on you and said you're okay, be aware. I know of too many drivers who thought they were fine (had even been told by track medical personnel that they were), only to feel sick or in pain later that day or the following day. They had concussions, or broken bones, without knowing. In the stress and panic after a crash, it is easy not to notice symptoms that you would if you weren't in shock (even a little bit).

I've also heard of far too many drivers who didn't want their spouse at home to know anything about the crash, so they don't mention it. And in a couple of the situations I know of, the driver had fairly major issues because they didn't go to a hospital so as to hide the incident from their family. If your spouse is not going to be supportive in a situation where you have a medical issue, maybe it's time to reevaluate your participation in the sport!

You're going to want to know what happened, what caused the crash. That's only natural. But don't overdo the analysis at this point. It's best to do a short debrief with one or two trusted people (and go somewhere where you're not crowded by others, most of them with the best intentions), perhaps your coach or engineer/mechanic, to simply download what's in your head right now. If you don't have these people to lean on, pick one friend and ask if you can talk it through with them. Avoid trying to come to any solid conclusions at this point. Just download the information in your head, and don't make any judgments.

This is especially important if you've been involved in contact between you and another driver. Placing blame on the other driver or yourself doesn't need consideration until all the evidence has been reviewed by you, the other driver, and unbiased people with experience in the sport. If you're racing, it's likely the officials will already be reviewing the incident, so you may need to have a visit with them to discuss it. If you're participating in an HPDE or track day event, the chief instructor, your instructor, and/or the event organizer will want to talk with you, both to find out if you're okay, but also to understand what happened and what can be learned from the incident.

Never get in arguments with race officials, event organizers, or instructors! Nothing good will come from that, and often it can lead to some really negative consequences. Be in listen mode at this time. You can plead your case – in a calm manner – when the time is right, often after there's been some kind of official report.

Often, data and video will tell the truth of what happened, but I say "often" because there are times when it's not clear from either what happened. That's when video or personal accounts from other drivers might help, along with reports from turn workers. Again, it's easy to jump to conclusions, so it's important to take time to gather all the evidence before making any judgments.

This is not something that you need to do all on your own. Usually, there are lots of people willing to help review the incident and give their opinions. That can be a good thing if they take some of the load off you, but a bad thing when you get too many cooks in the kitchen, all with their biases and opinions. Stick to your trusted circle, and the officials.

The very best drivers are okay with taking responsibility when it's clear that they've made a mistake. Again, we all make mistakes. What matters most is admitting it.

One thing I'd highly recommend you NOT do is view video of the incident over and over again. I'll talk more about this shortly, but for now you don't need to burn the negative of what happened into your mind any further. That's another reason to let others do the dirty work of reviewing video repeatedly, and from many different sources and views.

Moving On

Once you have some understanding of what happened and what caused the incident, it's time to move on.

A Speed Secret I wrote a long time ago is: *Be deliberate about the way you recover from a crash.* So, let's get deliberate.

Having an understanding of what caused the crash is important in this process. Was it a mechanical issue, a mistake you made, a mistake another driver made, or changes in track conditions?

Getting over and being confident to get back on track after a mechanical issue is different than a mistake you made. If it was caused by a mechanical issue, there are two things you need to consider:

1. What can you or your team do to minimize the chance of the same thing, or something similar, happening again?
2. What can you do to regain trust in your car, and anyone (including you) preparing the car?

The first step is going through a similar process to the one you did at the beginning of this piece, by thinking of all the miles your car has been driven on track without a mechanical failure that led to a crash. What are the odds of it happening again? If the odds are high enough, then you must make some changes, from finding a different shop or team to prepare your car to firing the individual doing the work — that might even be you!

Okay, let's assume you've figured out what happened, and you've dealt with any of the mechanical issues, and now you're back at the track... but feeling less than comfortable and confident. What to do?

Sorry, but some of what you need to do is homework *before* you ever get back to the track.

Think about this: *you do what you do because you're programmed to do so, and sometimes you don't do what you want because you don't have the right programming.* You can think of this programming as habits, but really, they're mental programs caused by the connections between synapses in your brain. They're kind of hardwired, at least the ones that are deeply ingrained — things like the way you walk, the way you talk, the way you sit, and the way you turn a steering wheel. These are all things that you no longer have to think about, you just do. They're part of your unconscious.

Your confidence, and your entire state of mind (emotions), are part of your mental programming.

Where do these mental programs come from? Experience, repetition. And this experience and repetition can come from physically doing something over and over again, but also from mentally repeating them. In other words, if you replay your crash over and over again, you're embedding what happened further into your unconscious mind; it's becoming programmed deeper into your brain.

So, when I suggested that you don't watch your crash over and over again, now you know why. It's not going to help with reprogramming your mind. In fact, it'll make it harder.

Again, these mental programs work with more than just your physical actions or skills. For example, your mental programming will impact the decisions you make, how you react to an emotional situation, and your confidence. And because your mental programming is different from mine, for example, you and I will respond differently to the same situation.

Without an approach way beyond the scope of this article and my expertise, you can't delete a mental program. You can't eliminate the memory of what happened. All you can do is overwrite that program with a new and better one, and at the same time reinforce other programming that's working for you.

How do you do that? Mental imagery, or what is typically referred to as visualization.

Before I move on from here, I have an eBook called ***Mental Imagery for Drivers*** available for the exorbitant price of \$2.99(!!!) at <https://speedsecrets.com/product/mental-imagery-guide-for-drivers/>. Much of the detail about how to use mental imagery for programming and re-programming your mind can be found there.

Again, where does your mental programming come from? Repetition of something, either physically or mentally. You've physically crashed once (or very few times), so there really is not much programming in your mind for crashing — except for any mental programming you've done of the crash. If you've run it through in your mind, you're creating programming to do it again. But still, even the number of times you've run it through in your mind is a small number compared to the number of times that you've physically and mentally run through corners without crashing. So, you do not have much of a program for crashing in your mind, if any. And you have a lot of mental programming for *not* crashing. Don't forget that.

Mentally running laps in your mind, correcting for and catching a slide or lock-up, and carrying on... you're creating programming for being even better at *recovering* from a "moment," and you've reduced the chances of crashing again. Doing mental imagery of driving at your favorite track, and everywhere else, is critical.

Driving a simulator can also be very helpful because it builds programming, too (unless you practice crashing by overdriving the sim). But imagining it is even better. Or, do both. Drive laps on the sim, and then in your mind. Remember to use your kinesthetic and auditory senses when imagining driving the track: imagine using the steering wheel, the pedals, hear the wind rushing by or traffic around you, etc.

Go back and look at those numbers. Compare the number of times that you were in a situation that could have turned into a crash (every single corner you've ever driven on a track!) with the number of crashes you've actually had.

Focus on what you want, and not on what you don't want. Because you're human, the "what I don't want" negative stuff will pop into your head every now and then — that's normal (more for some people than others). But you can control or manage this by using a **trigger** word or phrase to change your focus away from what you don't want and onto what you do want. For example, if the crash begins to pop into your memory, say to yourself, "**Eyes up — look ahead**" and *imagine yourself looking way ahead on the track, driving smooth and fast, feeling confident with the way you're driving, and with a smile on your face. You feel fantastic and love the feeling of being on track.*

Again, "Eyes up - look ahead." Use that as your trigger. The more you practice using it — even on a simulator, while driving in rush hour traffic, in a business meeting — the stronger the mental program it becomes. And the faster you get at switching from focusing on or recalling a negative thing like a crash and onto what you want — having fun looking way ahead, driving smooth and fast.

Example

Let me now use an example of a simple incident, and how you can use mental programming to help you prepare to get back behind the wheel.

To paraphrase stories I've gotten from various readers:

A couple of years ago I wrote off a low-budget endurance car. For reasons I may never know, I crashed hard at a 90-degree left-hand turn. The chassis was twisted beyond saving.

I was physically unhurt, but my pride took an enormous beating. The car was co-owned by friends and was only two races old. I felt terribly guilty about the loss of the car, the fact that they never got to race the car at that event, and that we had to cancel two other future races while we got a replacement car together. My friends never blamed me or got angry. In fact, they were supportive, but I gave myself an incredibly hard time over it. I also felt guilty about destroying a car that I'd spent over a year building, and sacrificed a lot of time with my family to do so. I couldn't prevent a negative mindset completely taking over my thoughts about it all.

Eventually we had a replacement car ready, but my mind was still a wreck. I couldn't sleep in the days leading up to and during an event, and I was nowhere near my previous driving levels. I ended up getting motion sickness while driving much slower and my confidence was completely shot. Because we only run a few races a year, I didn't have a lot of opportunities to get back in the saddle and force myself back into shape. I came very close to just abandoning the sport.

Thankfully I didn't quit, and after two good events where I seemed to get back to my previous driving levels, my confidence was healthier. And, I started to enjoy driving again.

The crash didn't actually frighten me. It was the guilt and the fact that to this day I do not know the cause of the accident. Video showed I braking early, correcting the rear a little bit – nothing out of the ordinary. I just couldn't get the car slowed enough to put steering input into the wheel.

I may be a little unique with certain character traits and maybe 99% of people who go through something like this would recover far quicker. But maybe there are others who go through the same thing?

My first reaction to this driver's story is that their mental programming around letting people down, feelings of guilt, and a strong sense of responsibility, is what needs addressing. Of course, I think we both could agree that these are also very positive traits in a person, so it's not like they – or I – want to completely change them into someone who doesn't give a you-know-what about other people. But there's a time and place for it, and a time and place to turn that programming off.

Coaching our amalgam driver, I'd have them do mental imagery of being in different situations, and acting differently. We all learn through life experience that there are times to be more dominant and aggressive and times not to be; times to be patient and times to be impatient; times to be sensitive to what others think of us and times to ignore that. We learn that adapting our behavioral actions to the situation will make us more successful.

That's what this driver should do through using mental imagery. For example, imagine being in a situation at the track where you've crashed a car, and you're feeling guilty about it. After an appropriate number of apologies (and maybe even groveling!), it's time to move on, and even tell those who matter, "I feel bad about what happened, and I'm very sorry, but we both know that me being down – and bringing you down – is not going to help. So, it's time for me to get over it. I'm now going to focus on fixing the damage, and getting back behind the wheel, regain my confidence, and help our team be successful."

Fear

Let's address the comments our driver made about fear.

There's more than one kind of fear. There's fear of injury or death, and I like to think of that as self-preservation. It's a good thing, because without it we'd over-drive and crash all the time. Think of this as those bumpers that are put in the gutters at bowling alleys for kids; they keep you in your lane and on the track.

The fear of loss can be a big factor for many drivers: loss of the car, of dollars out of the bank account, and the potential loss of relationships with friends by letting people down.

Then there are the hidden fears of embarrassment, fear of hurting our reputation, fear of losing confidence, fear of "it's time to hang up the helmet and call it quits for this sport."

While outright fear of crashing is an issue, it's often the fear of what the crash will do to one's reputation. For many folks who don't make a living from driving on race tracks (and even for some who do), part of their identity is made up of what happens at the track. For some, being known as a fast, consistent, safe driver is important, and a crash creates a crack in that image.

Probably the biggest fear for any human, other than bodily harm, is the fear of the unknown, and that's why it's helpful to be able to identify the cause of a crash. It's difficult to regain confidence in yourself when you don't know whether you caused it, whether it was the car's fault, or something else.

It's also tough to work through reprogramming your mind if you don't know what part of your programming you're trying to change. That's why I'd recommend figuring out what the real cause was, or could have been. Don't be afraid to reach out to others with all of the information and data you've collected to ask for their input. Even if you aren't able to nail the cause down one hundred percent, having a couple of very solid possibilities is something you can work with.

While you want to identify the cause of the crash, you shouldn't dwell on it. Learn from it, and use it to reprogram your mind, but avoid imprinting, or programming, it into your head.

I'm a big fan of what I call the "onion concept." To quote Shrek, "Onions have layers." Problems, including crashes, have layers. Saying, "I made a mistake," or the "car broke" are the outside layer of the onion, and you really need to peel back the layers and get to the core. It's hard to address the outer layer, so the more you can identify what was at the core of the crash, the better.

The same can be said about your feelings. It's one thing to say, "I feel nervous about getting back in the car," and truly identifying and addressing your inner feelings, your true state of mind. What are you nervous about? Knowing what's really getting in the way of getting back up to speed is critical. Is it confidence, the fear of letting others down, the impact on your bank account, the fear of embarrassment or what it's done to your reputation, or the big question marks in your mind about whether you can or should continue?

Once you've identified the real issue, then you can use mental imagery to reprogram, or overwrite, the old programming.

After you've reviewed and analyzed your crash, learn from it. The key, once you've determined what you've learned, is to move on. Okay, it's hard not to think about it. If I say, "Don't think about a pink elephant," you can't help but think about a pink elephant. The key is to have a trigger word or phrase that you can use to focus on what you want whenever an unwanted thought enters your head. For example, "Eyes up – look ahead." Any time you begin to think about the crash, you say, "Eyes up – look ahead," and instead, focus on looking farther ahead and back on the act of driving in the moment. With practice, that becomes your go-to program, and it gets easier and easier to let go of past "crap."

Programming

I'm not going to just say get over it, but there is a certain amount of that needed. How to do that will not surprise you: mental imagery. Reprogramming your mind.

For example, using your imagination, see yourself in a situation where some people might question your reputation, then play through how you'd like to respond (and how you'd like them to respond). You might want to think, "It's okay, it was only one crash compared to all the experience I have. It's not the end of the world. In fact, this crash shows that I'm still learning, something that I tell everyone else to continue to do. Hey, even the very best drivers in the world make mistakes and crash every now and then. I'm okay with it."

At the same time, picture in your mind the other drivers around you thinking, "Yeah, they crashed. It happens to the best. What really matters the most is that they're okay. And we can learn something from what happened. I bet they come back stronger than ever with their driving."

I could write an entire book here describing how to mentally reprogram every challenge you are facing or could face in coming back after a crash, but the process is the same for each and every one of them. While the above example seems simple... it really is. Of course, it's simple to read it, but it does take a committed "effort" to do mental imagery on a daily basis. Like anything, it only works if you do the work. Again, I think downloading and reading through my [Mental Imagery for Drivers](#) eBook is a good place to start, because it provides some of the details that I've only touched on, here.

Often, what you need to do is reframe your thinking, and that's what this mental programming is doing.

Welcome to the Club

If you've crashed, you've now become an even better driver. I really mean that. We learn the most from our mistakes, which is why I call them "learning-takes." The likelihood of you crashing again has actually been reduced – you're a safer driver now.

The day before the first weekend of qualifying for the 1993 Indy 500, a fuel line cracked in the Indy car I was driving, spraying methanol fuel into the cockpit while I was at 225 MPH between Turns 3 and 4 of the Speedway. I spent that weekend in Intensive Care at Methodist Hospital. While it was extremely painful (the burns, but also missing out on a goal I'd had since I was a kid, racing in the Indy 500), I learned a lot about myself, how to recover from difficult situations, and the importance of *framing* things in my mind the right way.

A week after the incident, I was walking through Gasoline Alley with my hands and neck wrapped up like a mummy when I bumped into 3-time Indy 500 winner (and another driver who had been burned in an Indy car), Johnny Rutherford. His first words to me were, "Welcome to the crispy critters club. It's good to get that out of the way so you know it'll never happen again. When are you getting back in the car?"

I got back in my Indy car one week after the fire, but with hands that were really too badly burnt. And then, because we'd suffered a couple of blown engines, I didn't qualify for the 500. But with some mental imagery, I did race two weeks later at the Milwaukee oval, and had one of the most fun races ever. I saw Johnny again that weekend and he gave me a thumbs-up; I gave him a badly-burnt thumbs-up right back.

It's all about managing your mental programming, and how you frame things in your mind.

A Coach's Life...

On account of because... I enjoy sharing my thoughts through writing (and just as important, forming my thoughts **by** writing), I have a new column, **Coach's Corners** on [Imola.MotorsportReg.com](#). My first piece was "[Unlocking maximum momentum](#)," followed by "[Why do we love race tracks?](#)" If you're interested in more of my tips and thoughts on driving, go to [Imola.MotorsportReg.com](#).

Keep learning and having fun! Ross

