



SETBACK™ **SURVIVAL PACK**

**SIX STEPS
FOR COPING LIKE A PRO**

GUIDEBOOK

JIM HJORT

Sometimes setbacks are unexpected and, in fact, seem to arrive at the worst possible times. Just when everything is going smoothly, the layoffs are announced, a loved one is diagnosed with an illness, or you're seriously injured.

Well, alright, let's face it: there's never a good time for events like that.

Other times, there are changes that you see coming from a long way off, like your kids leaving the nest, or your own retirement. But just because they aren't surprises doesn't mean that they can't feel like setbacks, too. Not because they're negative, necessarily, but because they cause you to confront the unknown. Your brain tends to view the unknown as threatening by default, and allocate attention to it, so the potential threat can be dealt with.

It's a holdover from our forebears, who might have encountered a saber-toothed tiger when they walked into that dark cave. Nevermind that, in your case, there might not be anything **actually** dangerous looming; your setback is likely to get the . . . lion's share (sorry!) . . . of your brain's bandwidth anyway.

So, you've probably been preoccupied with it, how it might affect your security or identity, and what might happen next. Have you begun questioning decisions you've made in the past, or the direction you're headed? Maybe you've been tossing and turning all night, with thoughts racing through your head, or staying up late on purpose, trying to figure out a path forward.

With nights like those, the fatigue, obsession, and anxiety is right there waiting for you when you wake up, making it hard to stop obsessing, let alone have a positive outlook. That's when you're at the greatest risk of doing things that actually make matters **worse**.

I created the Setback Survival Pack to help you get some relief, avoid a downward spiral, and be strong and ready to make good decisions about your next steps. I'm glad you found it, and I'm glad to be here with you.

My name is Jim Hjort, and I'm sort of an expert in handling setbacks. When I was a kid, I didn't really know how my life would play out, but I had high hopes for it, and I was pretty happy. But then mental illness reared its head in my family. So did addiction. A series of

events transpired that led to my family becoming homeless, and me spending fifth grade living in the back seat of a Buick Le Sabre.

At one point, enough setbacks had piled up on me that the future looked pretty bleak, and I attempted to take my own life. And these are just the “highlights” from the years before I turned 18!

But, like you, when it comes down to it, I’m a survivor. (How can I say “like you,” when I haven’t met you? Because you’re here, for one thing, and for another, the fact that you downloaded and are reading this Survival Pack means your survival instincts are alive and well.)



I went on to hone those survival skills a bit. In fact, I took the coping-with-setback process quite a bit further than you may be contemplating right now. I spent 15 years learning how to metabolize the painful events of my life, reading all the psychology, neurobiology, social psychology, and even philosophy that I could get my hands on, and then experimenting with what I learned.

Through this study, trial, and error, I gradually came to derive a great deal of meaning, identity, purpose, and happiness from those setbacks. Then I started volunteering to help others do the same thing when they were in crisis (which was even more rewarding).

Then I went even further, attending graduate school and further refining the approaches I’d developed. Nowadays, I’m a personal development trainer, mindfulness meditation teacher, hypnotherapist, and psychotherapist, and I use my experience and training to help people, **at a minimum**, limit the suffering that difficult times can bring.

Who knows where your path forward from this setback will take you?

This might be the start of an exciting new chapter of your life, or it might be just a temporary speed bump that you’ll navigate, and that’s it. That’s really a topic for another time. Right now, what’s important is to get a strategy in place for coming through this event confident, healthy, and prepared for **whatever** you decide comes next.

The Setback Survival Pack won't magically make your problems go away (nor is it a substitute for psychotherapy*), but it will help you begin to develop a new relationship to them.

The steps and tools I've assembled are here are the same simple but effective ones I've used with clients—and myself—when a setback arrives. You'll see that each step features a link to its corresponding section in the Video Guide. If you'd like to watch that private video in its entirety, [clicking here](#) will start you at the beginning.

Also, since you joined my email list, I'll be in touch with additional support in the days, weeks, and months ahead, including personal development guidance that you'll find useful even after the event you're facing right now is just a speck in the rearview mirror.

Please enjoy the resources in the Setback Survival Pack. I'd love it if you'd drop me a line to let me know if you found it helpful! You can reach me at jim@jimhjort.com.

Warmest regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Jim'.

* If you've experienced a threat to your life or safety, are having trouble fulfilling your day-to-day obligations, are having thoughts of harming yourself or someone else, or otherwise feel that you could benefit from a supportive therapeutic relationship, then I strongly suggest you contact a psychotherapist near you to see whether therapy is right for you.

OFFLOAD NEGATIVITY

Sleep is very important, and that's why I started these tools with the nighttime instead of the daytime. Also, because people often don't realize how much stress and anxiety they're carrying around until they try to quiet down and hit the hay.

Fears and worries, and the thoughts that accompany them, can get stuck on a sort of loop in our minds. The more worked up your mind becomes about something it's facing, the more it returns to it, getting even more worked up, etc.

Trying to force the thoughts out of your mind is pretty futile, like if I tell you **not** to think of a pink elephant. (Gotcha, right?) Besides, your brain is well-intentioned. It's not **trying** to drive you crazy—it senses that you're facing a threat, and is trying to figure out what to do about it. So, it's not an instinct that you want to crush.

That's where the **Point/Counterpoint exercise** comes in. Rather than ignoring or avoiding your worries, you're going to formally acknowledge the points your mind is making in the worksheet. It may seem counterintuitive to you, but stick with me. We want your mind to know it's been heard, so it'll have an easier time resting.

In the Points blanks, list the fearful, worrisome, or otherwise distressing thoughts you're having about yourself or your future. If you think you're just **feeling** stressed or anxious, but not **thinking**, then give yourself some time to pay closer attention to your mental activity. You might only get bits and pieces of thoughts, but try to arrive at the statements that your mind is making.

Here are some examples of Points; yours will probably be different, of course:

I'm never going to find another job.

Why did I retire? I'll be bored stiff.

Without the kids around, our marriage is going to be more difficult.

With this diagnosis, I won't be able to work, and I'll lose the house.

He's breaking up with me? I'm going to die alone.

You can fill the blanks in on your computer or tablet, or you can print as many sheets out as you need, and complete them by hand. (If you're doing this at nighttime and you'd like to get to sleep, I recommend completing them on paper, because the light from your electronic devices can trick your brain into thinking it's daytime.)

Hold off on the Counterpoints, at least for this first go-round. Although it's possible to complete the Points and Counterpoints in the same sitting, the Survival Pack was designed for you to offload your distressing thoughts first, then get some rest, and then return to this exercise the following day with a fresh mind. We'll cover Counterpoints in Step 1 tomorrow.

After you've gotten all of your Points down, try telling yourself the following, **out loud** (you can substitute your own words expressing similar ideas, if you'd like):

"Okay, I get it. You're having a difficult time and you're worried. Thank you for looking out for me; I took notes. We'll come back to it in the morning, but know that we're going to get through this, just like we've gotten through so much in our life. Let's go to sleep now."

Then, proceed to Step 2.

POINT/COUNTERPOINT

Points are your mind's negative statements about you or your future.

Counterpoints are true statements that refute the Points.

Point: _____

Counterpoint:

[CLICK TO JUMP TO THIS SECTION IN VIDEO GUIDE](#)

BELLY BREATHE

Now that you've discharged some of your mental energy and worry, it's time to soothe yourself with some diaphragmatic breathing, also known as **belly breathing**.

The diaphragm is a large muscle below our lungs that can draw them downward and cause them to fill with air. When this happens, it looks like your stomach is inflating. It's natural for us to breathe this way, as you can see if you watch an infant breathe. As adults, we tend to get away from the practice (although professional singers know all about it), and take shallower breaths, with our chest doing most of the work.

The benefit of returning to diaphragmatic breathing is that it naturally calms you down within minutes, by stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system. It's easy to do, and with practice you can even train yourself to do it all the time.

Here's how to start:

- 1) While lying down, place one hand on your chest, the other on your stomach, across your navel. (You can also practice this any time of day, sitting or standing, by the way.)
- 2) Attempt to make the hand on your stomach rise and fall as much as possible with each breath.
- 3) Attempt to keep the hand on your chest motionless.
- 4) Imagine that, with each inbreath, you're inflating a balloon in your stomach. When it's time to exhale, simply release and allow the balloon to deflate all by itself.
- 5) Repeat for as long as you'd like, but for at least five minutes.

Then you're ready for Step 3. Unless, of course, you fall asleep while belly breathing, in which case, see you in the morning!

[CLICK TO JUMP TO THIS SECTION IN VIDEO GUIDE](#)

USE YOUR IMAGINATION

Have you ever experienced weird changes in your perception in the moments before you drift off to sleep? For instance, hearing a noise or voice in the room even though you're alone, or having strange, surreal mental images or thoughts pop into your mind?

If so, you've experienced a hypnagogic state, which is a transitional state between wakefulness and sleep. It's perfectly normal.

The **ABCs of ZZZs** visualization exercise provides a shortcut to that state by mimicking it with disjointed thoughts and mental images. This helps you avoid falling back into the worrisome thoughts about your setback. Instead, you trick your brain into thinking it's falling asleep, and then it does.

Here's how to do it:

- 1) Pick a letter of the alphabet.
- 2) Think of a noun that begins with that letter—use the first one that comes to mind.
- 3) Bring that thing to life in your imagination, picturing it as vividly as possible. If it moves or makes a noise, you can imagine it doing those things, too.
- 4) After about 20 seconds, choose another noun that begins with your chosen letter, and repeat the process until you fall asleep.

If you find that the first word you chose is “sticking around” in the scene that you're imagining for the second word, and so on, that's fine. Your mind might begin to create a strange story out of the words you're feeding it, and it can be interesting to watch! (Plus, that's a sign that you're entering a hypnagogic state.)

There are at least a couple of variations of the ABCs of ZZZs that you can also try:

- 1) Instead of visualizing items that begin with the same letter, you can work your way from A to Z, or from Z to A.

- 2) If two people are having trouble sleeping, you can try the ABCs of ZZZs as a couple. The first person states a word out loud, and both people visualize it silently for about 20 seconds. Then, the second person states his or her word out loud. One person will fall asleep first, which you'll know because they don't take their turn! At that point, the other person just continues coming up with their own words and imagining them, silently, until they fall asleep, too.

Now, put the Survival Pack aside until morning. We have a little more work to do tomorrow, but for now, you have some well-deserved rest coming, and I hope you enjoy it!

TAKE ANOTHER LOOK

Welcome back! I hope you were able to get some good sleep!

Even if your worrisome thoughts start right back up again upon awakening, it's okay. You got some sleep, which allowed your brain to recuperate and boosted your ability to cope wisely with difficulty. Now let's take the opportunity for another look at those thoughts.

Returning to your **Point/Counterpoint Worksheet**, you see the Points your mind was making yesterday. It was doing this automatically. It's not like you were asking your brain to dwell on these things, right?

Today, you're going to balance out that automatic tendency to worry with a **conscious** effort to explore the other side of your mind's arguments. For each Point, I'd like you to consider what evidence exists to refute that statement, and record that in the Counterpoint blank.

Here are some examples of Counterpoints, using my previous Points examples:

Point: *I'm never going to find another job.*

Counterpoint: *I've found jobs before, and I can do it again. It might take some time, but I haven't even started looking yet.*

Point: *Why did I retire? I'll be bored stiff.*

Counterpoint: *I've worked hard for a long time, and now I'm ready to give myself time to pursue my hobbies and explore new interests. Retirement will be an adjustment, and it's an exciting new chapter of my life.*

Point: *Without the kids around, our marriage is going to be more difficult.*

Counterpoint: *My spouse and I will be able to devote more time to each other and work on any problems we have. That'll help us build a stronger and more intimate relationship.*

Point: With this diagnosis, I won't be able to work, and I'll lose the house.

Counterpoint: I can't predict the progression of this illness. I will avail myself of the treatment, support, and resources available to me. Those things are within my control, and will help me make the best of the things that aren't.

Point: He's breaking up with me? I'm going to die alone.

Counterpoint: If a relationship isn't a good fit for both people, the sooner it ends, the better. This wasn't my first relationship, and it doesn't need to be my last. I can learn from this experience and seek a new relationship that's a better fit, if I choose to.

Note that this exercise isn't necessarily about proving one argument or the other wrong. **What's important is that both arguments see the light of day**, not just one (and especially not the one that produces negative feelings about yourself or your future).

So, when your mind raises a Point anytime today, respond with the Counterpoint. State the Counterpoint out loud, if you can, because it's helpful if you can hear yourself saying the words with your ears, not just with your internal voice.

Until your Counterpoints roll automatically off your tongue, it might be helpful to print the completed Point/Counterpoint worksheet out, and carry it with you for reference. Of course, you'll want to update it if new Points crop up, also.

VERIFY YOUR BALANCE

Our lives essentially play out on four domains: the physical, psychological, social, and vocational. (Vocational any kind of active engagement in the world—including paid work, volunteer work, and hobbies.) When our needs are being met in each of these, and we're feeling positive about them, we're healthy and resilient.

When a setback arrives in one of them—for example, a layoff (vocational), a diagnosis of disease (physical), bereavement (social), or a mental health problem (psychological)—and you become fixated on it, it robs bandwidth from the other domains.

This can set in motion a downward spiral, in which you spend more and more of your attention, time, and energy on the part of your life that feels the worst, causing even more tunnel vision and imbalance, etc.

At this point in the Setback Survival Pack, you've laid the groundwork for your mind being able to settle down and face your setback in a more balanced and less obsessive way. Now it's time to make sure you're actively taking into account your balance across all four domains.

Use the **Self-Care Tracker** to make sure that, every day, you're doing at least one thing in each domain that is aligned with the long-term goal of making it through this setback feeling strong, confident, and healthy in body and mind. Simply make a hash mark ("|") in the appropriate box when you do, and you'll begin to see if some domains are getting more attention than others, and whether some adjustment might be in order.

Of course, doing one self-care activity per day in each domain is the minimum—the more the better! Also, just because your setback might be occurring in one domain doesn't mean that you can't also do something good for yourself in that domain, too.

For instance, if you've been laid off, perhaps you aren't able to engage in paid work today, but you can carve out some time to do a craft or hobby you enjoy. That way, you're not just staying busy, but you're giving yourself evidence that you have more ability—more to offer the world—than just your former job.

Below are a few ideas for self-care in each domain, but be creative and come up with ones that are gratifying for you. Just make a hash mark on the Self-Care Tracker to keep track of your progress.

Physical: Go for a walk; work out; soak in a hot tub; get a massage

Psychological: Meditate (I have some guided mindfulness meditations [here](#) that you can try); pray; go to see a therapist

Social: Have a conversation with a friend; attend a support group; host a get-together

Vocational: Spend time doing a hobby; volunteer for an organization you believe in; teach something you know to someone else

FEATHER YOUR NEST

I mentioned at the outset that I began this Survival Pack with sleepless nights because sleep is crucial to our well-being in general, and especially when we're facing a setback.

When you're asleep, your brain consolidates your experiences from the previous day, learning from them, making sense of them, and setting you up for a healthy and grounded relationship to tomorrow's events. **You need between seven and nine hours of sleep for this to occur.**

Studies show that when we get less than seven hours—we begin to suffer a variety of physical and mental health problems. Being underslept:

- Increases the hormones that cause hunger and storage of excess calories as fat—so you're more likely to gain weight;
- Is associated with increased diabetes, hypertension, heart attack, stroke, and even arthritis;
- Impairs memory, judgment, decision-making ability, creativity, and spatial learning (which, together, can lead to increased rates of car accidents, and lower GPA among students); and
- Is associated with emotional instability, aggression, pessimism, and depression—which can make your setback feel like even more of a rollercoaster ride.

The **Sleep Hygiene Checklist** will help you make sure that your daily routine is helping you enjoy the most restorative sleep possible when you call it a night, and set you up for success tomorrow. Try to account for as many of the items as you can every day.

SLEEP HYGIENE CHECKLIST

- Daily physical exercise, the earlier and more strenuous the better (but avoid exercise right before bed)
- Napping is okay. Not too close to bedtime, and no more than 30 minutes.
- Get exposure to ample natural light during the day and darkness/dimmer lighting at night
- Maintain same sleep and wake times during week and weekends
- At least seven hours of sleep per night, no more than nine hours
- Try Sleep Cycle app ([Android](#) | [Apple](#)) for “smart” alarm clock, and to track sleep quality and variables that make a difference for you
- Activate blue light filter on electronic screens if available
- No caffeine or alcohol close to bedtime
- No electronic screens within at least one hour of bedtime
- No working in bed
- Keep bedroom temperature cool
- Read from a **paper** book or magazine before bed that is not exciting, but either soothing or dense
- For noisy environments, consider a white noise machine, an eye mask and/or earplugs

Keep Going!

The one constant we all have to face is change. No matter how things are going right now, there are going to be upturns and downturns in the future. There's no getting around that. What makes **all** the difference in our resilience, our performance as we pursue our goals and the life we want, and ultimately, our happiness, is how we relate to those inevitable changes.

Here in the Setback Survival Pack, I've given you some tools and perspectives that, I hope, have allowed you to tap into some of your innate abilities to cope with adversity. And, Rome wasn't built in a day! These abilities of yours can be strengthened with practice like any other talent.

You don't need to teach your body how to sleep; you need to set the stage for it to be able to sleep peacefully, by tending to your sleep hygiene (by doing things that are also already within your capabilities).

In the same way, your brain already has the capacity to be calm, balanced in its perspectives, and oriented toward resilience, health, and growth. You just need to do your part, by consistently making choices that support the development of those qualities. Over time, they'll become your default mode—and not just when setbacks arise.

So, rather than going through the Survival Pack once and then putting it aside, I encourage you to continue working with it for a while.

An important thing to realize right now is that you are going to survive this setback.

Even without the Setback Survival Pack, you would have. The difference is that now, hopefully you'll emerge strong, confident, and ready for your next steps.

What will those be? You'll need to figure that out. For some people, survival, and a return to pre-setback levels of satisfaction with their lives is enough. For others, setbacks open a door; they serve as a threshold to an exciting new chapter of their lives with new, unforeseen possibilities.

No matter which way you're feeling right now or in the future, I'll be here to do my part. I'll be in touch by email with more insight and tools that will support you in your process of



WHAT NOW?

maintaining your well-being or using your setback to launch yourself to all-new levels of self-knowledge, performance, and well-being.

It has been my honor to bring this Survival Pack to you! Please drop me a line at jim@jimhjort.com and let me know if you found it helpful.

Also, if you know of someone else who might benefit from it, please forward this link to them (<https://www.jimhjort.com/setback>) so they can get their edition of the Survival pack, complete with my other email guidance.

I will look forward to being in touch and being a resource for you, wherever your next steps take you!

Warmest regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Jim'.