Feeling Foolish

HIV positive, humiliated and embarrassed

December 5, 2016 By Kate Ferguson

When word spread that Trevor had contracted HIV, a lot of folks he considered true friends shunned him. Some relatives stopped calling, and a few old girlfriends posted mean messages on his Facebook page. But the humiliation didn't end there. Someone phoned Trevor's job anonymously to report his status.

Shame dogged Trevor. Besides losing his self-esteem, he was embarrassed. He'd made a huge relationship blunder and trusted someone too soon. He was an HIV/AIDS educator and activist who spoke on panels encouraging everyone to practice safer sex, but he'd ignored his own advice.

Eventually, Trevor came to understand that everyone makes mistakes. But when painful, ego-bruising, spirit-crushing moments occur, how can we recover our self-esteem?

Robert J. Sternberg, PhD, a professor of human development at Cornell University, shared in an online article that he'd suffered numerous career challenges and "three serious crises" that so humiliated him that he was ready to "jump down a rabbit hole."

After a time, just like Trevor, Sternberg recovered. Both men used the following tips to bounce back: Don't think you alone make mistakes; learn from your crises; don't take rejection or failure personally; cultivate resiliency to bounce back fast; find a support network; treat yourself well; if you feel wronged, don't seek revenge; use setbacks as opportunities to do better; don't withdraw and hide; and skip obsessing and move on.

Now, when he speaks at events, Trevor shares his story without shame, embarrassment or regret.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.