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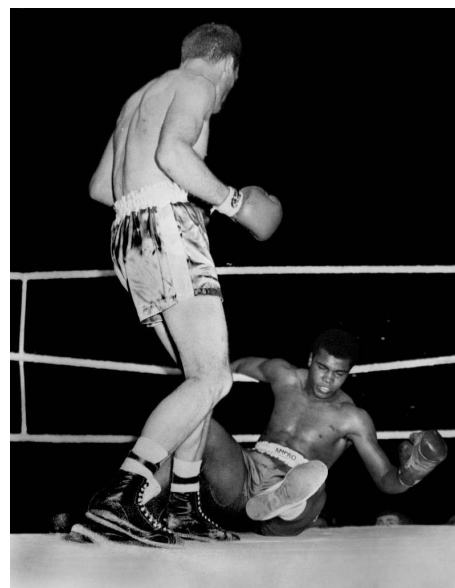


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## Saved by the Bell

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*In June 1963, a young Muhammad Ali – still known at that time as Cassius Clay – had the first of his two bouts against British heavyweight Henry Cooper. **This fight** is one of the few times an opponent knocked Ali down. Seconds before the end of the fourth round, Cooper landed a massive left hook that dropped Ali to the mat. Although dazed, Ali's instincts kicked in and he bounced straight back up as the bell sounded. However, for the next few minutes he didn't even know he was in London. Ali's trainer, Angelo Dundee, recognised this and stalled for time. He showed the referee that one of Ali's gloves was torn; and getting a replacement gave Ali enough time to recover his senses. When the next round eventually started, Ali came out and, against all odds, won the fight.*



Why does Ali's experience strike a chord with me? Well, it demonstrates how you can bounce back from adversity and how important it is to have 'someone in your corner' to look out for you and give you time and space to recover. Eight years ago, I had a mental health crisis, but I was lucky enough to have someone in my corner.

All through 2010, I was under enormous pressure – I had two grants, but both were due to expire at the end of the year. My publication output was poor and I felt myself hurtling towards a precipice. In response, I was working longer hours than ever, and this was affecting my personal life. In September of that year, my son was born – which was wonderful, but it had a downside. Essentially, I didn't sleep for the next eleven months.

Although I can joke about it now, severe lack of sleep compounded the anxiety I was feeling. My decision-making skills slipped away. I withdrew into myself. I no longer found joy in my pastimes. I verbally lashed out at those closest to me. It became a struggle just to get out of bed in the morning. I'm embarrassed to admit that I didn't realise that I had depression. With hindsight, depression has always been there in my family – just no one ever talked about it. These days, my siblings and I are much more open about our feelings and the treatments we have explored.

In my time at the University of Melbourne, I have worked under five Heads of Department, each with different strengths. However, I consider myself very lucky to have had Professor Paul Gleeson as my Head at that time. He is a good listener and he understands people. Through the performance review process, we worked out that a Teaching and Research role was not a good fit for me. I was achieving excellence in the classroom, but despite enormous commitment and effort, I just wasn't good at running a lab. Together, we came up with a plan. We

agreed that if I hadn't turned things around by the end of 2012, we would explore the opportunity of the new Teaching Specialist role. Three key members of our teaching staff were about to retire, including two who for decades had carried the load in our very large second year classes. I felt I was the right person to take on that role. In that decision, I found purpose.

I don't know what would have happened if I *did* get a grant at the end of 2012. It was possible – I published more in that year than any other in my career. October rolled around and I held my breath. When grants were announced, the relief of *not* getting one was palpable. In the new year, I successfully applied to change work categories, but it wasn't smooth sailing, yet. There were difficult conversations with my research assistant and postdoc; and there was a PhD student who still needed to be shepherded to completion. In mid-2013, I walked out of the lab for the last time. It would be great to say that 'I never looked back', but that would be lying. In that moment, the self-esteem that I had painstakingly rebuilt with the help of my psychologist, washed away like a child's sandcastle. For a long time, I wrestled with the demon of professional 'failure'. Fortunately, I had a lot of long service leave owing, so with Paul's blessing, I went part-time for a year. Rather than withdrawing into myself again, I found new hobbies and interests. Also, I didn't just become a Teaching Specialist overnight. I had prepared myself for the transition by completing the Melbourne Teaching Certificate. Bit by bit, I came to terms with the changes and developed a new self-image as 'teacher'. In 2014, we appointed another Teaching Specialist, Dr Heather Verkade. Having a like-minded colleague to bounce ideas off was a godsend. Together and separately, there have been numerous Learning and Teaching Initiative grants and education research papers. By the time you read this, our PhD student, Allen

Espinosa, will have submitted his thesis 'Confronting misconceptions in large Biochemistry and Molecular Biology classes through active learning strategies'. Earlier this year, I received the David White Award for Teaching Excellence – our university's highest accolade for teaching in science and medicine. I'm happier, healthier and my life is more balanced.

I benefited from having a manager who could help me talk through my problems, reflect on my strengths and

weaknesses and give me an opportunity to bounce back. As my career progresses, I hope I can be that person in someone's corner.

We all need to recognise the warning signs of depression. Do a self-check on the [beyondblue](#) website. You can also talk to your GP. If you are thinking about suicide – there is help available, 24 hours a day. Call [Lifeline Australia](#) on 13 11 14 to talk to someone trained to help in a crisis.

## Life After Grant/Fellowship Rejection

**Tatiana Soares da Costa, La Trobe Institute for Molecular Science**

You have just found out after waiting for months that you didn't get the grant/fellowship you applied for. So, was it all just a waste of time? Here are some tips on how to keep motivated after a set back and make yourself more competitive for the next round!

### 1. Give yourself some time

In the days and weeks after you get a rejection, all you can think about is the amount of time you spent putting the application together, the sleepless nights, the stress and the number of people who gave up their time to read your application just to get a rejection. You need time to get over the disappointment. Why did this happen to me? Unfortunately, you are not alone and there will be plenty of people you can talk to about your frustrations.

### 2. Check your competitors

I always find it helpful checking who was successful in getting the grants/fellowships I applied for. Check what their field of research code (FoR) is to give you an idea of what areas are being funded. At this day and age, a lot of researchers have public CVs so you can check what is setting these researchers apart from others. You can also ask your Research Office for successful applications. It always makes me feel better to know that I missed out because there were simply better applicants with more impressive track records than me. If you are applying for the same scheme again, at least you will know what the bar is. Work hard in the months leading up to your next application by building your track record. It is also important to work on 'selling yourself' and highlighting your strengths. Why should you be funded to carry out this particular work?

### 3. Address the reviewers' comments

Once you have the motivation to look at your unsuccessful application again, read through the reviewers' comments thoroughly. Can you change the proposal to make your ideas clearer? Are there any experiments you can do to strengthen your hypothesis and improve feasibility? Was there a particular aim that raised a lot of concerns that should be revised? Do you have the best team to carry out the proposed

work? Why does this project need to be funded now? There is no point in resubmitting an application if you have not addressed all the issues raised. Your revised version should be a significant improvement from the rejected application. This still will not guarantee that you will be successful but at least you are putting your best foot forward. If you do not receive reviewers' comments, contact the funding agency and ask if they can provide feedback on your application.

### 4. Get mentors outside your area of expertise

Most of us have mentors in our niche areas. But I always find it useful getting feedback from researchers on slightly different fields. For most grant/fellowship applications, your application (and especially the first page) should be intelligible to a wide scientific audience. It is important to have a good understanding of the nature of the panel assessing your grant/fellowship so your ideas are pitched to the right audience. Don't just assume that the people reading your grant will be experts in your area. I would rather get harsh comments while I am drafting an application than to be rejected after months of work.

### 5. Strategise your next move

Do you want to resubmit your application in the next round? If so, you will only have a couple of months to polish it up before your institution's deadline. Would your time be better spent building your track record and collecting data? Make sure you read the guidelines for the scheme as they may change from year to year. Let your Research Office know about your plans so they can support you in the best way they can.

As a researcher, you do need to become resilient with rejections. Just think of it as a way to improve your ideas and build your track record. Good luck with your next application!

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