

After the Accident: The Survivor’s Journey to Personal Recovery

By Gordon Schwontkowski

Special thanks to Dennis Helmuth, MD, PhD, and the countless others whose experiences and contributions made this article possible. You’ve shown how the worst events can bring out the best in us.

One moment changed your life forever: an extreme weather surprise, power line strike, refueling fire, or your hardest landing. It destroyed property and caused injuries or worse yet. Insurance covered your passengers and equipment but not your bruised or crushed psyche. It rattled you to your core as a pilot, crew member, family member, or peer. It instantly split your life into before/after segments. You can’t shake it constantly replaying in your head. What comes next? Do you stay in or get out of ballooning? And how can you possibly recover from something like this?

Sometimes the hardest part isn’t what happened but how you absorb and cope with your experience of it. Despite the feeling, you’re not alone. At some point every balloonist will struggle with accident aftermath, and we haven’t outlined the recovery process until now. Here are the bottom lines. Nothing can erase what happened. Others have survived the worst emotional traumas and thrived afterwards. An accident will either define or refine you – ultimately you choose whether you merely survive or truly thrive. Your darkest hour can become your finest as well. Recovery has distinct steps and fuzzy timelines. Steps forward with slips backward are normal and OK. All that matters is you commit to working through the process with faith.

Balloonists of all ranks who’ve survived the worst accidents have shared their experience and counsel to help anyone via this article. Let us share with you what we know about this process, what you can expect, and actionable steps you can take on your path to recovery. Congratulations on taking the first and most difficult step in healing.

GOING TO YOUR HEAD – AND BODY

It’s normal to have stress reactions after a traumatic event. Whether you walked away unscratched or were critically injured, be prepared for physical symptoms, emotions, and behavioral changes that may be upsetting for you and those closest to you. They range from mild to severe, temporary to chronic; the most common are listed below:

Physical Symptoms	Behavioral Changes	Mood Swings
Nightmares/insomnia	Partial/total memory loss	Depression
Flashbacks	Difficulty controlling emotion	Helplessness
Anxiety/panic attacks	Agitation/irritability	Guilt
Physical outbursts	Hypervigilance/”keyed up”	Shame
Loss of appetite	Isolation/withdrawal	Loneliness
Need to constantly move	Self-destructive acts/thoughts	Fear

Jittery, easily startled

Avoids people/places/media

Emotional detachment

Highly sensitive to stimuli

Mistrust

Loss of interest in pleasure

Mood swings and roller-coaster waves of shock and anger are normal and will disappear with time. What's most important is working your way forward with help from others. Symptom variety, onset, and severity will vary from person to person, may not happen until weeks or months later, and may come and go over a few years. Men may internalize stress reactions as their independent streak becomes isolating while women find sharing with others easier and more natural. Monitor yourself closely. Dismissing these only complicates and prolongs recovery. Disrupted home or work life or distress months after the accident may mean post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). If you constantly relive the mishap, seek a qualified counselor or medical doctor to help manage this.

GOOD GRIEF!

A fatal or disabling accident will bring grief, but destroying an aircraft or your perfect safety record may also create a sense of loss. Loss lasts forever, but grief doesn't – and shouldn't. Current research suggests we all won't go through the "5 stages of grief" (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) in order or even at all. Those who display the greatest emotion and anger seem to have the hardest time adjusting to loss. There's no fast-tracking grief but for most, the worst grief seems to last about 6 months before relatively normal functioning returns. Every person handles grief their own way, but that doesn't you must face it alone. Shared grief weighs less, and the small minority who have the hardest time coping benefit the most from counseling. A clergy member or counselor is trained to listen and guide you in ways that friends simply can't.

That said, feelings afterwards can flit anywhere in the denial-acceptance range from minute to minute. A pilot can deny he made a bad weather call, accept the reality of injuring a passenger, lash out at Flight Service, and bargain with God for a quick recovery/settlement if he's more cautious in the future – all in the hours after the flight. You know you're still tender when an innocent comment months later disproportionately rattles or triggers you in some way. Memorial flights or accident anniversaries are natural milestones which prompt reviewing how far you've come since that day. Wounds heal and skin thickens; painful feelings are part of the normal recovery process but diminish with time.

"Survivor's guilt" – feeling you didn't do enough, should've taken the hit yourself, or did something wrong simply by surviving – can also plague pilots and crew members. Second-guessing what you did, didn't do, or could've done becomes an endless loop of speculation, unanswerable questions, and mental torture. This is accountability, personal responsibility, and ownership going beyond healthy boundaries. You'll always have questions about that flight; you just can't let them interfere with recovering. Sure, that's easier said than done, but "done" is not only possible but necessary.

Here's the bottom line. You now suddenly, painfully, and forcibly find yourself in a new reality you'd never choose. The real decision is what you do next: will this define or refine you? Actively working to recover eventually allows calm acceptance into your life. Fighting or denying it may buffer the blow but

cures nothing. Today is here. You have what it takes to play a bad hand. Stay the challenging course and the path to recovery grows brighter and easier.

YOUR NEW NORMAL: THE “AFTER-LIFE”

Life must go on, and anyone who survived can heal. Depending on how bad your accident was, your “after-life” might be mostly unchanged or completely different. The most important thing in the early post-accident phase is to feel safe again. Trauma threatened your safety, and healing only occurs when you feel safe. Recovery demands rebuilding a new normal as quickly as possible and practical. That might take a few days or a few years. Stabilize your new reality and reduce stress with these self-care tips that pay off big:

- 1. Know it gets better.** This too shall pass – not from time alone but because you actively work to recover and create new memories. That was then, this is not – this is now. You WILL get through this if you choose to reclaim your life and future from the accident.
- 2. Remember it’ll always be with you.** Don’t fight or deny it; it’s a part of you but ONLY a part. It’ll pop up in your thought every day, but you’ll learn to manage much better with practice. Replace it with a new thought, focus, or activity if it keeps replaying in your head.
- 3. Acknowledge your feelings.** Express and monitor normal feelings of anger, grief, and mourning. Studies show telling or writing a self-narrative of survival, healing, and growth best offsets symptoms and promotes positive results. But be careful; discussing these one-on-one with a therapist, ballooning colleague, or loved one is very helpful while wallowing in hopelessness alone or even in a group setting feeds on itself, enlarges the trauma, and prolongs recovery.
- 4. Rebuild routines.** A structured day keeps your mind focused and calm. Predictability = stability. “Boring” might be the best thing early in your recovery. But don’t take on too much too soon. Cut back temporarily where/when you can, ask for help, and just say no if daily responsibilities demand too much from you before you’re ready to fully re-engage life.
- 5. Take care of yourself.** Stress taxes your body; regular meals, rest, and exercise promote wellness and stabilize moods. Choose high-nutrient foods and limit sugar, alcohol and caffeine; their quick highs and pleasures fade to moodiness. Sleep helps your mind process events; choose a hot bath or your favorite sleep aid (non-alcoholic!) or talk to your doctor about a prescription. Even a brisk walk can relieve stress by raising heart/breathing rates and improving your outlook.
- 6. Be patient with yourself.** It’s not a race, and there’s no official timetable for getting back to normal. Healing and adjusting take time and commitment. Focus on your recovery trend rather than dwelling on single events or setbacks.
- 7. Lean on others for support.** Time alone is OK, isolating yourself isn’t. Reaching out to loved ones, trusted friends, and the flying community might take courage, but everyone’s there for you. Social media makes this easy, but face to face is always best. Don’t post EVERYTHING electronically; use discretion or stay offline if an investigation or litigation follows.
- 8. Monitor yourself and others who were affected.** No one knows you like you do. Stay connected and aware of progress, setbacks, opportunities, and self-destructive behavior.

9. **Find joy.** Let yourself forget about your mishap long enough to smile, laugh, and enjoy good company – a healthy life outside flying will help keep your days fresh and balanced. Give yourself permission to feel good again; an accident isn't an automatic life sentence of misery.
10. **It's not all about you.** Forgetting about yourself might be best: contributing or volunteering serves the greater good and helps heal you at the same time. There's always someone who needs help or someone more in need than you, and stepping up will help you both.

Your "after-life" may involve addressing THE afterlife as well. Your worst injuries might be non-physical, and faith has helped many balloonists survive and recover. A priest, pastor, or religious leader can offer invaluable insight, support, and guidance for the here-and-now and the big LATER. If you're a little uncomfortable, that's a good sign. You've been suddenly forced to confront your beliefs about life and death, your own death, the meaning of life, and priorities. Aligning your deepest beliefs about why you're here makes choices clearer and easier. Believe it or not, you can't write faith off. Every flight is an act of faith, and your recovery is an even larger one.

Anyone can recover from an accident but exactly what that looks like, how it happens, and how long it takes will vary. Two factors can complicate or prolong recovery. The first is legal fallout. An FAA/NTSB investigation or insurance claim/denial may take 18 months or longer, and passengers in many states may wait up to 2 years to file a lawsuit. Nothing moves fast, on your terms, or on your timetable when the government is involved. Weeks or months to resolve a lesser accident would be quick; a year or more is not uncommon after a fatal accident. Add ongoing media coverage and it could feel like eternity until normal life resumes.

Second, male balloonists – the disproportionate majority of us – may face added challenges. Men often find sharing, working through feelings, and expressing themselves verbally more difficult than women do. Feeling he can work his way through anything with some time and space, a guy might not seek or accept offered or needed support. And a guy will insist he can objectively or factually analyze happened alone – despite the difficulty or impossibility of this. Blame may cloud perspective and override ownership or acceptance as hard-to-face facts emerge. Retreating to their guy cave is common but counter-productive; reaching out to others is required. Both of these factors, however, are manageable with an awareness of their impact and effects. And there's just no substitute for man-to-man talk with a friend who understands ballooning, someone who's been there before, or a counselor who'll listen and guide you through this. Self-care is key to recovery.

THE BIG QUESTION: COME BACK OR CALL IT QUILTS?

You may initially doubt you'll ever fly or crew again, but don't sell your equipment just yet. It's entirely your decision, and a number of factors come into play. Answer the following questions to help you clarify your thoughts:

1. Why did you get into flying? Why have you stayed? What does it mean to you?
2. How long has it been part of your life? How big a part? Would leaving be harder than staying?
3. Why exactly would you leave? Be honest – to avoid further risk or pain?
4. When would you have stopped flying if the accident didn't happen?

5. What activities/commitments will replace flying and your social network?
6. Will injuries heal, limit your abilities, or disqualify you from flying?
7. Do those closest to you support your returning?
8. Plan your comeback – what are your first goals and milestones?
9. How can your experience serve the greater good?
10. Where can you best share what you've learned: safety seminars, newsletter/magazine articles, websites/blogs, etc.

Don't make either decision too fast or expect immediate clarity, but answers are on their way once you ask the right questions. Getting out of ballooning might be premature or for the wrong reasons. Your first feelings after an accident may be the strongest but least stable and durable; make sure some thought and analysis prevail at a turning point like this. Some of the most amazing recoveries and returns I've seen have been the most seriously injured you'd expect to retire. While this involves and affects others, this is a decision you need to make and own by yourself.

Choosing to leave flying is completely understandable. The terms have changed; the rewards no longer justify the investment. Loved ones might not feel the risks are worth it. There are more important things in life than balloons. But don't let any accident define your terms of leaving. As an exit strategy, make sure you're moving toward another activity or compelling future rather than avoiding a painful past. The former will preserve your best flying experiences and memories; the latter will tie you to the accident, make you feel stuck, stall your recovery, and interfere with building your new life. And don't let your worst ballooning memory be your last. At least take one more flight so you know you could and did. Either memory will stay with you for life – make it positive and healing.

Surprisingly, most pilots and crew return to flying in some, full, or larger capacity even after the worst accidents. No matter how bad their mishap, this group can't imagine life without flying and are determined to resume or expand former flying roles. Get started with these tasks to take this route:

1. **Give yourself a break – from the accident and ballooning.** Harm may have come, but you didn't intend this. Stay grounded with non-ballooning life and stay as fully involved with family, friends, work, and other activities as possible. Forgiving yourself is essential for healing.
2. **Decide it's possible and exactly what you want.** Work through any doubts and be sure you own this decision. Anything less than 100% is sabotage. Make sure both your head and your heart are committed to any decisions.
3. **Consider new lateral roles short- or long-term.** A pilot might observe or crew on a flight or just walk around a festival launch field before flying again. A ride operator can buy time and options by hiring a pilot and moving into management. Consider safety instruction via seminars, articles, and other leadership roles: your mishap and insights are assets, you're highly motivated, and if it happened to you it could happen to any of us.
4. **Find a mentor.** A trusted figure (instructor, pilot, crew chief) always emerges to ease your return. Your first flight (or series of flights after a major accident) has tremendous restorative power. After a sufficient time period, they'll invite you out to get back in the saddle, watch you

closely, offer you burner time, and take over the moment you're less than 100%. There's no other way to stop second-guessing yourself and regain confidence in your skill.

5. **Prepare or review a checklist.** Stress kills memory, and both pilots and crew need a checklist even more now to prevent oversights and omissions. Most accidents happen on landing when risks and multi-tasking demands shrink safety margins. Routine and predictability will calm and reassure you if anxiety arises.
6. **Review procedures.** Something obviously failed; correct or upgrade any beliefs, missteps, habits, or procedures that led to the mishap. Analyze the whole event to figure out where decision-making went wrong or techniques failed. Discuss this in detail with crew as well. Briefing them before and debriefing after flights leads to continuous improvement and rebuilds feelings of safety and trust.
7. **Manage exposure to triggers.** The smell of propane, the sight of a power line, or the mention of a name can trigger a flashback or sense of panic. Identify what triggers set you off. Once you feel safe again eventual, gradual, and repeated exposure to triggers will desensitize you so they no longer cause anxiety. Recovery requires you to be comfortable, confident, and in command in every future flight environment.
8. **Focus on what you want, not what you don't.** A clear goal or outcome is essential; focus on the set-up, flight sequence, or final approach safety demands. "Not thinking about the accident" keeps you reliving it fresh while "returning to safe flying by mid-season" keeps you moving forward.
9. **Give yourself time.** Rush and risk setbacks – you'll know when it's right. For some, a week off is too long while other need a few months or even more. You've been through a lot and will hit your stride soon again; constantly recognize progress you're making.
10. **Be realistic.** An accident can touch and change every part of your life. A rough landing for a sport pilot can quickly fade into a good lesson or learning opportunity in the past. Recovery is much more complex for a male commercial/corporate pilot whose accident took a life, especially that of someone close. Perspective can minimize frustration and speed healing.

That's what it takes and how it's done. There's no denying the tough work and challenges, but it's completely do-able. Many I've seen return after the worst have become their local flying community's greatest asset – more involved and active in safety than anyone. If accidents have silver linings, this could be it. If you choose to stay in flying, expect to play a greater role in everyone's safety.

BOUNCING BACK – RESILIENT AND AGILE

Bouncing back doesn't mean denying the past happened; it means living forward knowing it did. Those who adjust best after an accident seem to be highly resilient and emotionally agile. Modern psychology has extensively studied healthy and adaptive behaviors and found many related skills you can learn and practice. Some are more inclined toward these, but a quick Google search for questionnaires, inventories, and guidelines will help you chart your best course. The difference between surviving and thriving becomes your choice.

Being resilient or agile means many things. It's solving problems and maintaining a quality of life in the face of grief, stress, and sadness. Managing emotions and controlling impulses and behavior. Being positive yet realistic about the future. Seeing your accident for what it is while embracing the challenges it created. Maintaining healthy relationships (which will change, begin, or end) and boundaries. It's knowing you can handle any curveball life can throw your way.

Those who've fared best after accidents share the best lessons. Own it. Take immediate control. Learn from it. Act versus react. Lean on friends and family. Be grateful. Restore your flying status or take life in a new direction. Prevent what happened from ever occurring again. Reframe it. Share and teach it. Forgive yourself and others. Know when to let it go. Identify and deploy your signature strengths. Step into a greater role in ballooning safety. Focusing on what you can do versus what you can't will speed your recovery.

One trait, however, stands supreme: giving and contributing. Resilient thriving requires expanding your skillset and reaching out to others. Selfless service promotes the greater good and healing while turning only inward leads to neither. Years later, you'll find an accident has actually spurred balloonists into leadership roles. Crew have gone on to become pilots, event safety officers, and first responders. Others organize seminars, develop national safety protocol, or websites that benefit everyone. All go through a period of growth and renewal even when the next step wasn't immediately clear. Not at all what you'd expect or dare imagine as emergency vehicles and police tape surround your landing site.

Accidents are often life-changing but need not be isolating or debilitating. We understand where you are right now. If a full recovery seems daunting, don't panic. Your only concern is the next step in front of you – embrace it. And you have something we didn't: a map and guides to show you how this works. Just as broken bones heal stronger, you will too. Find meaning in what you've experienced. There are incredible experiences, surprises, and gifts you'll give and receive which you can't even imagine right now. People around you and total strangers are waiting for you to reach out. You don't know it yet, but you're now one of the most motivated and qualified people to help others stay safe. The worst can in fact bring out the best in you. Balloonists are highly resilient, and you are now one of our greatest assets. It's not your darkest hour, it's your finest hour. Here's wishing you a speedy recovery!

As a 15-yr old crew member, Gordon Schwontkowski ran thru driving rain from the end of a crown line to shut his balloon's fan as 8 other pilots launched into damage, injury, and fatality. With no experience or credential, he decided that day to make flying safer. In the 35 years since, he's codified pilot/crew safety into articles, books, FAA pilot training standards, insurance coverage for crew, seminar/convention presentations, accident investigations, legal consulting, festival safety, and more.