

HEALTH

## Bukayo Saka's Euro 2020 agony, and the psychology of bouncing back

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Luke Shaw, Bukayo Saka and Calvin Phillips after Sunday's penalty shootout  
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The psychotherapist Alejandra Sarmiento was at Wembley stadium on Sunday night. How did she feel when the England player Bukayo Saka missed the critical penalty? “My God, all I wanted to do was rush on that pitch and just hug him.”

Sarmiento, born in the UK of South American heritage, has more empathy and insight than most. Not only is she a complex trauma and psychosexual specialist at the Soke mental health and wellness centre in Chelsea, west London, her two sons are professional footballers. “I get blurred between mother, therapist and football fan.”

She felt the agony we all felt. “When Saka misses — the absolute soul-destroying moment — you could literally feel it for him, with him.” It can feel so bad because, Sarmiento says, “it’s such a projection of our own hopes and expectations, [that] this collective failure feels even more personal”.

So how do we bounce back? Or, if that sounds too breezy, claw back confidence and hope and move forward? At this point, in football as in life, we can react to defeat in a number of ways. If we're 14 we might have a cry and stomp upstairs, berating the referee. If we're a reasonable adult we think that is such a shame, but honestly, it is a game. So yes, England, feel sad briefly, but no self-loathing please.

Sarmiento says: "A lot of people deal with failure in a very violent way." This denotes a mental rigidity, a brittleness, and (while they're not necessarily male) a stereotypically toxic masculine energy — also reflected in the attitude "we have to be stoic, we have to be strong, we have to persist, you just get through it, no pain no gain".

That's the opposite of resilience. To be truly resilient, Sarmiento says, "there has to be fluidity. You have to learn to fail. And ideally you fail forward. You learn from your mistakes. And the resilience comes from having the ability to take a pause, so you can understand what went wrong, and then redirect and readapt — what are you aiming for?"

Resilience, she says, is about "radical honesty". So, did you truly prepare for that presentation, or were you hungover? But crucially, "it's not about perfection, it's about preparation and progress". Which means retaining that ability to "keep preparing" — even in the aftermath of mistakes or perceived failure — "so there is progress".

So, "if you went for a promotion and you didn't get it, what is your disappointment?" Not getting the salary? The challenges? If so, "how can you find that elsewhere? Because maybe that rejection is actually a redirect." Fundamental to bouncing back is the ability to be accountable to yourself — and to develop "an understanding of yourself".

It's also to recognise that "sometimes that progress is one step forward, 20 steps back". And you don't give up, "because you know you're going to take three leaps forward, and half a step back. Success is never ever linear. Healing is never ever linear."

Bouncing back is thus about making peace with the pain, she says, not staying in the pain. “If something’s gone wrong, there’s going to be disappointment — and there should be. You’ve been working towards something. If that doesn’t happen, you should grieve. You can’t leapfrog the sadness.” Repress it and eventually it will erupt — volcanically.

Yet, as part of that grief and radical honesty, an ability to acknowledge your good points as well as any negatives is key — “we’re all flawed and fabulous” — or you risk transforming one mistake into “I’m worthless”. Friends, family and teammates can help you shift perspective, particularly, she says, “when shame distorts our perception”.

But because resilience is “forever ongoing”, bouncing back in life is not as simple as a goal two minutes into the match — it’s more the messy scramble of that Italy equaliser. It’s knowing that “with every failure we have the opportunity to develop strength, to develop wisdom. And also to develop perspective.”

For those of us fretting about Saka bouncing back — as Sarmiento says, we all saw “the shoulders go down, he’s in tears; it’s a devastation” — she notes that the 19-year-old volunteered to take the penalty. “That’s what’s impressive.”

Saka will also know that “footballers do miss penalty shots. The pressure in that moment supersedes your proficiency.” And, Sarmiento says, “in the light of day he will be able to understand. ‘That’s just part of my journey, that does not define me.’ But it takes a while, and you have to have that pause to feel that pain and let it process. And then you get up — and start again.”

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