

# HOW TO DEAL WITH CRINGE ATTACKS

*What to do when your brain sucker-punches you with an embarrassing memory*

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Oh man, the cringe attack. When we least expect it--in the shower, folding laundry, or doing something equally mindless—our brains decide to sucker-punch us with a flashbulb memory of an embarrassing moment from our past. Sometimes it's from decades ago!

It's a physical cringe—a mortifying \*zap\* that makes us swear under our breath, shake our heads, or yell “What was I thinking?” at the universe.

Turns out cringe attacks are super common, especially if we tend to be hard on ourselves or our own worst critics. Our brain doesn't let us forget when we've transgressed the Inner Rulebook—“I should always be dignified,” “I should always do the right thing,” “I should always have good judgment,” “I should never make a fool out of myself”--the list goes on.

How to stop cringe attacks? Here are three very different approaches: consider them the front, back, and side doors:



1. **Give yourself a break.** Cringe attacks bring us back to a memory of doing something wrong, dumb, or ridiculous. But we can't go through life expecting to make zero mistakes, have zero lapses in judgment, or make zero stupid decisions.

Therefore, forgive yourself. Have compassion for your 15-year-old self who woefully failed to impress your crush. Take good care of the version of you who was insensitive when your friend disclosed an illness. Forgive yourself for scoring a goal for the other team all those years ago. In short, let go of the expectation that you never do anything cringey. Give yourself permission to have a full range of human experiences, including dumb mistakes.

2. **Remember the whole memory.** Cringe attacks play a very short movie clip: a split second of sneezing snot on your teacher. The look on your friend's face after you told that offensive joke. The few seconds it took your crush to say oh, um, sorry, she already had a date to prom.

Therefore, expand the movie to include "before" and "after" to give your cringeworthy moment some context. Think about the other times you interacted with that teacher, hung out with that friend, or delighted in pining after your crush rather than zeroing in on the lowest of the lowlights.

3. **Tell someone who will support you.** Cringe attacks hurt because they feel mortifying, humiliating, or otherwise shameful. To counter this, do the opposite of what the shame is telling you to do (keep it a secret) by telling someone non-judgmental. Telling your embarrassing story to someone who will support you, hype you up, or otherwise pop the shame bubble will take away its power.

All in all, re-think cringe attacks as something that happens to everyone--you, me, anyone who's ever been to middle school--and feel connected to an oh-so human experience.

