

MINKLER

If at first you don't succeed . . .

You're hot, thirsty, and you just gotta have a cold, fizzy Dr. Pepper. You slide your dollar into the vending machine, press the Dr. Pepper button, and . . . oh no! As the wrong drink rumbles down the chute, you realize you pressed by mistake the button for warm noncarbonated rhubarb-kumquat.

You compose an e-mail to your client, proofread it, press "send" . . . and as your message streaks into cyber space, you realize you called your client "Dearest Poopsie," because you'd just previously e-mailed your sweetheart and forgot to change the salutation.

Many things turn out wrong. And when you make one of those sudden "Oh no!" blunders, you utter a choice epithet that your mother never taught you, and then you do what your mother did teach you: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again."

Good advice for the ages. But where did your mother learn it? Who first said it? Ben Franklin? J. S. Bach? Euclid? Yogi Berra?

I looked up that famous sentence on the Web and didn't find its origin. But 13 422 entries came up, offering variations on the "try, try again" part. Here are a few of the best:

If at first you don't succeed . . .

- Cheat.
- Change the rules. (Kalen Hammann)
- You know how I feel.
- Failure may be your style.
- Transform your data set.
- Destroy all evidence that you tried. (Steven Wright)
- You're doing about average. (Corry)
- Try, try again. Then quit. No sense being a damn fool about things. (W.C. Fields)
- Skydiving is not for you. (Steven Wright)

And my favorite:

- If at first you don't succeed, try playing second.

As adults, we can laugh at these cynical variations on Mom's proverb. But we still try, try again when something suddenly goes wrong. It feels good to take Mom's advice, just as it does to eat her chicken soup. And we earn points for doing so. Right?

Wrong, according to William Gehring and Adrian Willoughby, of the University of Michigan. Trying again is not your

choice. And Mom plays no part in it. Your anterior cingulate cortex makes you do it.

The anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) is a tiny nerve bundle tucked between your two cerebral hemispheres. When you're doing something that requires instant good decisions, such as driving in heavy traffic, playing high-stakes poker, or purchasing a soft drink, your ACC can magically make subjective judgments about whether something has gone wrong, even before you consciously realize it. Your ACC triggers an emotional response that causes you to try again for better results.

According to the report by Greg Miller in *Science* magazine for 22 March 2002, Gehring and Willoughby used electroencephalogram (EEG) electrodes to monitor the brain activity of people playing a gambling game. When people lost, their anterior cingulate cortices registered a dip in voltage within 200 to 300 milliseconds after the outcome of each bet was revealed.

And after losing a bet, people were more likely to bet big the next time around. Gehring said, "It's the gambler's fallacy: If you lose money, you're due for a win. Here's a brain system that's tuned the same way."

Other researchers studied people with damage to their anterior cingulate cortex and surrounding brain areas. These subjects made poor decisions because they have difficulties judging the emotional significance of the results of their behaviors.

If your anterior cingulate cortex is fully functional, it will make you put another dollar in the vending machine and try carefully to press "Dr. Pepper." It will make you apologize to your client for calling him or her "Dearest Poopsie." (It won't keep you from repeating the mistake, however. After e-mailing your client with the apology, you may well then e-mail your sweetie with the salutation, "Dear Valued Client.")

With your anterior cingulate cortex on duty, your mom doesn't have to advise you about trying again. She can concentrate on other vital life aspects such as eat your carrots, always wear clean underwear, and you might phone home once in awhile.—*Bill Minkler*