

Should the Past Define You?

by [Mike Hawkins](#)



Your past, good or bad, happened. You can't change it. This includes what happened yesterday, last month, last year, and all the years before. But just because it happened, should it define who you are now? Should you and others use your past as the best measure of who you are today?

Our past accomplishments, mistakes, and circumstances are what we and others often think about when considering who we are. To most, this seems perfectly logically and factually accurate. After all, our past is our story. It reflects our previous

decisions, experiences, and abilities. It reflects our prior character, attitude, and knowledge. Perceptions are often based on realities.

Yet, we did what we did based on what we knew at that time. Yes, we still live with the consequences of many past decisions, but if we've learned from them and know more now, should the past still define us? Should we be viewed, judged, and defined by what did or didn't do despite thinking differently now?

Others can choose to view us however they want, but shouldn't our view of ourselves reflect how much we've changed? Our past should only define us to the extent that we still make the same decisions, hold the same values, rely on the same knowledge, and behave as we did before. In other words, how we see ourselves now should be based on what we are doing now which includes what we've learned and what we're doing different.

Most importantly, because we do our best learning through adversity, who we are now should reflect the adversity we've been through. Assuming we've learned through our adversity, the more adversity we've been through, the more learning we've experienced, and the more we've changed. Hence, the more we should view ourselves and be viewed by others differently.

In regard to others' perceptions, who we are isn't based what others remember about us. Or even who others consider us to be now. We might care about what others think, but we shouldn't let others dictate our self-perceptions. When we outsource how we perceive ourselves to others, we are allowing others to control our core being.

Yet our view of ourselves isn't as simple as seeing ourselves as we are now. What about who we can be in the future? Isn't who we are working toward being a better perspective to hold of ourselves? Despite our current circumstances reflecting our current behaviors, shouldn't we extend our self-appraisal to what we are learning and becoming?

Maybe the best way to think of and define ourselves is by who we can be. We should embrace the confidence that comes with thinking about our potential. We should picture ourselves based on what we can and expect to do. Of course we can't ignore our current realities. We can't foolishly dream about a future without taking actual steps to achieve it. But as long as we are making progress, we should incorporate our progress into our self-perceptions.

Should the Past Define You?

If you accept this idea of viewing yourself as a blend of what you've learned from your past, who you are now, the progress you are currently making toward a better future, and who you envision yourself to be in the future, here are a few principles to follow:

- See your past mistakes as learning experiences. Learn from them, apply what you learned, and appreciate that you are better now having gone through them. The lessons might have been hard, but consider them good.
- As you continue to learn, ensure your experiences are not wasted. Don't hit the equivalent of the delete button on that which you spent so much time. Record your lessons learned and put them into practice.
- Don't let others hold you back by anchoring you to the past. If they are worthy of your consideration, look for any kernels of truth from their perspective that might help you, but don't dwell on them. Let the past go and look forward.
- Own your identity. Don't rely on others for approval or validation. Don't seek or depend on others' affirmation. Don't ruminate on or worry about what people think of you. Have a self-confidence based on your own self-appraisal.
- Be grateful for your uniqueness. Don't compare yourself to others out of jealousy or judgement. There will always be others better than you in any specific area, but you alone possess your unique blend of DNA, nurturing, education, values, and experiences.
- Move from knowing to doing. Intercept any tendency to say "I know I need to [improve in some way]". Replace knowing what to do with action. Start doing. Take a small step. Then another. Keep going until you can say "I'm doing what I need to be doing."
- Make a plan for your future that includes a vision for achieving your dreams and the crucial steps you will take to get there. Document your plan so it guides you and you can share it with others who can help sustain your accountability.
- Keep learning. Celebrate your progress, but don't become complacent. The world is constantly changing. Keep your mind open. Seek new knowledge, especially in life skills. There is no end to learning how to communicate effectively and have great relationships.
- Maintain discipline. You might need to make adjustments and change your approach, but keep doing whatever is needed until your desired outcomes become part of you. (For more on discipline, https://alpinelink.com/docs/The_Key_to_Success_Self-Discipline.pdf.)

PDF version of this article: https://alpinelink.com/docs/Should_the_Past_Define_You.pdf.

Article written by [Mike Hawkins](#), award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

For other articles on reaching your peak potential, visit: www.alpinelink.com/blog.