

Emotions at Work

Overview

How to manage your emotions in today's changing workplace.

- Five hard-to-handle emotions
- Frustration
- Worry or insecurity
- Anger
- "Feeling down"
- Dislike
- Ways to manage your emotions at work
- A sense of control

Managing your emotions in the workplace is more important today than it ever has been -- because today's workplace is a challenging place. Change is constant due to reorganizations, mergers, transfers, and individual job changes. Most of us are juggling multiple priorities, sometimes with limited resources. And the work force is more diverse than it has ever been, with a wide range of people of different ages, backgrounds, and beliefs working together.

To succeed in today's work environment, says Daniel Goleman, author of *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, it's important to understand our emotions, control our reactions, and recognize how our emotions affect our actions and the actions of others. When we manage our emotions, we're better able to handle the changes and challenges all jobs bring, such as adjusting to a new boss or co-worker, working on a team, or handling a conflict with a co-worker or customer.

Five hard-to-handle emotions

The range of emotions we experience at work is enormous. During a 5-minute presentation to your boss, you might feel worried, proud, relieved, and happy, and your boss might experience a variety of feelings as well. In fact, whether we are aware of it or not as we work, we are constantly moving from one emotional state to another.

Some emotions present an extra challenge when we encounter them at work. Five hard-to-handle emotions that are common in the workplace that we need to pay attention to, according to research by Ohio State professor Cynthia Fisher, are: frustration; worry or insecurity; anger; feeling "down"; and dislike.

I. Frustration

The complexity of today's work environment and the demands that are placed on all of us to perform make frustration or irritation one of the most common negative workplace emotions. Frustration can build from many situations including:

- a lack of resources impacting our ability to perform well
- a co-worker's poor performance that is undermining our performance

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- limited promotional opportunities that make us feel stuck in a job
- a difficult manager who ignores our suggestion for a process improvement

Frustrations, especially those that are chronic, need to be dealt with early, or the feeling can spiral into anger, a much more difficult emotion to control.

2. Worry or insecurity

Change, and the feeling of loss of control that change often triggers, can make us feel nervous or insecure at work, and can even affect our self confidence. Typical changes that can cause us to worry and that may increase our feelings of apprehension are:

- hearing a new downsizing rumor
- finding out a new manager is going to lead the team
- being assigned to a new project or area of responsibility
- learning the company may merge with another company

With so much change in our everyday work world, it's no wonder that many of us feel more worried and insecure than ever before. Finding ways to cope with this feeling is a positive way to take some control in times of uncertainty.

3. Anger

Slamming doors and yelling come quickly to mind as examples of anger. But it's important to remember that anger takes many forms and that most of them are not physical. Here are some common forms of anger at work:

- being excessively critical of others
- berating or bullying others
- being abrupt and dismissive
- being cynical and sarcastic
- “sabotaging” other people’s work indirectly; for example, by being consistently late to meetings, responding late to messages or not sharing information

Anger sometimes is a symptom of fear, insecurity, depression or even substance abuse. Unless anger is managed it can be misdirected to targets in our personal and work lives, without us realizing it. Many of us, after a bad day at work, have gone home angry and then erupted in an angry outburst at a partner or a family member. Unmanaged anger has obvious costs -- in productivity, team relationships, and physical and emotional well-being. It is often a signal that something serious is wrong and this needs to be addressed.

4. Feeling “down”

Everyone feels “low” or has a bad day now and then. When we feel down, we may:

- have low energy
- worry more than usual
- feel distracted or guilty about time away from family and friends
- feel disappointed or unhappy
- just not feel “up” to doing a full load of activities

Feeling down can be a response to a setback-- not being recognized for an achievement at work, for example -- or feeling overloaded. Some people feel down after they’ve finished an important or especially exciting project and return to more ordinary tasks. Others feel low because of circumstances in their personal lives. Most people bounce back from these occasional “blues.” But left unchecked, feeling down can interfere with productivity and with relationships with co-workers. It’s important to keep in mind that a prolonged period of feeling low, or feelings of worthlessness and despair, can be a sign of depression, which should be treated with professional help.

5. Dislike

We work with many different types of people who have a wide variety of personalities. All of us, from time-to-time, find ourselves working closely, or even reporting to someone we do not like from a personal point of view. Examples could be:

- a demanding boss who rarely thanks employees for a job well done
- a co-worker who doesn’t pull her weight
- a customer who speaks rudely to you

All of us need to find ways to work effectively and productively with people we dislike, without letting our emotions affect our actions.

Ways to manage your emotions at work

It’s possible to become more aware of your emotions and to recognize and identify the feelings you’re having so that you understand what triggered them and learn to manage them more effectively.

- *Recognize your emotions in their early stages, before they feel out of control.* By reviewing your day’s activities and the feelings that were triggered by them, there’s a good chance you will discover the source of whatever difficult feelings you may have experienced. If writing things down helps you clarify your

thoughts, you might try doing this as you're reviewing your emotions and the work circumstances when they occurred.

- *Learn to express your emotions in appropriate ways.* Allow yourself to deal with difficult feelings in appropriate ways for the work place. If you feel angry, take the time to consider what may have triggered the feeling and consider actions you could take to diffuse such a situation in the future. You don't need to pretend you're not feeling the way you are, but you do need to deal with the emotions so that they do not affect your interactions with others. Kerry Patterson's books *Crucial Conversations* and *Crucial Confrontations* contain practical advice for managing difficult emotions even when talking about difficult subjects.
- *Give appropriate feedback to clear the air.* For example, if a co-worker has said something in a meeting that offended you and this is bothering you, talk with the person about it, preferably soon after the event and in private. Be matter-of-fact and focus on what was said or done and how it made you feel, without attacking the person individually. Remember, even though expressing your emotions can be useful, it's never appropriate to do so at work by yelling at or demeaning others.
- *Remember how you managed a problem in the past.* If an event at work -- like a conflict with a co-worker or an unusually stressful workload -- is triggering an emotional challenge, consider how you overcame a similar problem in the past. What worked? What didn't?
- *Problem-solve by writing it down.* This can be especially helpful if a problem is keeping you awake at night. If you are having an ongoing conflict with a co-worker, you might write: "Every time we talk, even about unimportant things, we end up arguing. Maybe I did something to offend him once but don't know it. Maybe ask him out for lunch and find out." This can help you come up with strategies, and can keep the problem from distracting you.
- *Seek support from your company's employee assistance program (EAP) or the program that provided this publication.* Talking to a professional can help you gain perspective on problems and come up with solutions as well as specific techniques that will help you manage your emotions more effectively.
- *Build up your emotional resilience.* Pay attention to your overall physical and psychological health. Eat well, get enough sleep, and exercise regularly. If you're well-rested, well-nourished, and physically strong, you'll have more energy to meet emotional challenges. This will help keep you "emotionally resilient" and help you feel more in control of your emotions and your life.
- *Maintain support systems outside of work.* Talking honestly about your concerns with close friends or your partner can help reduce your anxiety and keep problems in perspective. Choose someone you trust who knows you well enough to give you honest feedback when you need it.

- *Cultivate interests outside of work, including activities with good friends.* Remember, not all satisfaction comes from work accomplishments.

Researcher Sigal Barsade observes, “You bring your brain to work. You bring your emotions to work. Feelings drive performance.” Emotions often have a positive impact at work. Learning to manage our most challenging emotions takes effort, but the payoff is big. We learn to deal with problems before they overwhelm us, we’re better team participants, and, most importantly, we increase our sense of control and effectiveness in our lives -- both at work and outside of work.

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