

Managing emotions

Sometimes, we overreact. It happens to everyone. We get caught up in an immediate, instinctual emotional response, and we do or say things that we later regret. Our emotional responses, such as fear, anger, or fright, are linked to our survival instincts. We can't turn them off. They're part of being human. Our emotions are also strongly linked to memory and experience. If something bad has previously happened to us, we're likely to have a strong emotional response when confronted with a similar situation. They're also linked to values and sense of self – we tend to have a much stronger emotional reaction when we feel that one of our core values is being challenged. And they're linked to our broader sense of well-being and physical health – an insensitive remark from a colleague on the day we have a migraine is likely to illicit a more emotional reaction than when we're feeling healthy and happy, for example.

For all these reasons, our emotional responses aren't always rational, and may indeed appear quite irrational to an outside observer. It's helpful to keep this in mind when a powerful emotion arises within us and we're tempted to respond accordingly. At times like these we need to remember that we're professional, rational people, with colleagues who respect us and expect us to exercise awareness and objectivity.

Taking a few deep breaths really can make all the difference. This slows our breathing and our heart rate, and gives us a few crucial moments to choose how we'll respond. Most of us have learned the hard way that it's always a better option to take a few moments, maybe a brief walk to the water cooler, before sending an angry email, or marching over to confront a colleague.

Different people are likely to be prone to different negative emotions, based on our particular personalities, and the situations in which we find ourselves. It's helpful to have an understanding of the types of emotions we personally struggle to control, and to have strategies to deal with these when they begin to appear.

In 1997, Bond University professor of management Cynthia Fisher conducted a study called *'Emotions at Work: What do people feel, and how should we measure it?'* According to her research, the most common negative emotions experienced in the workplace are:

- Frustration/irritation
- Anger/aggravation
- Worry/nervousness
- Dislike
- Disappointment/unhappiness

Frustration usually occurs when we feel stuck, impeded or undermined in some way. It's important to deal with feelings of frustration quickly, because they can easily lead to anger and aggravation.

Anger is a highly destructive emotion in the workplace – it damages relationships and creates a toxic atmosphere. When experiencing frustration or anger, we need to make a conscious decision to stop ourselves giving in to an immediate reaction. The following actions can help us to compose ourselves:

- Take a few deep breaths.
- Try to re-establish a sense of objectivity.
- Evaluate the situation. Ask yourself why you feel frustrated/angry. Be clear and specific – explain your feelings to yourself.
- Try to find something positive about the situation. Look at it in a different way. Maybe there's an opportunity you can make the most of, even if this isn't how things were supposed to go.
- Remind yourself that whatever has gone wrong, it probably wasn't anyone's specific intention to cause you inconvenience or annoyance. Try not to take things personally.
- Recognise that your frustration or anger won't help the situation, and might make it worse. Try to look at yourself from the outside, as an impartial observer. Think about the times you've felt embarrassment or pity for someone you've seen giving into their anger, thereby alienating the people from whom he or she needs help or cooperation. Recognise that a conscious decision to be calm, patient and accommodating is far more likely to help you achieve your objective.

Worry/nervousness might stem from lack of confidence in relation to a particular task, or anxiety in relation to a particular colleague or manager, concerns about job security, or non-work-related issues that weigh on our mind during working hours. Prolonged or serious anxiety can impact our mental health, our productivity, and our willingness to be proactive and visible at work.

- Try to find ways in which you can exert control and improve the situation. Maybe you need to have an honest conversation with your boss about your workload or a particular assignment. Maybe you need to look at ways to build your self-confidence. Maybe there's a friend or colleague who can lend a sympathetic ear, or a hand with a particular task to ease.
- It can be helpful to write down your worries in a notebook or 'worry log', and schedule a time to deal with them. Try not to think about them outside that time. When it comes to the time you've scheduled, direct proper concentration and focus to thinking about how to tackle them in practical, achievable ways.

Occasionally, we all have to work with people we **dislike**. Be professional and respectful at all times. Set aside your ego and personal feelings and treat the person with courtesy. Be assertive and set a good example in terms of how people at work should treat one another.

Disappointment or unhappiness at work might be caused by a specific event or set-back, or it could be a more general feeling experienced over a longer timeframe. Either way, it erodes our energy and enthusiasm, and lowers productivity. Steps to help us cope include the following:

- Consider your mindset. Things won't always go our way, but it's up to us to decide how we deal with disappointment.
- Adjust your goals or expectations. Maybe you need to delay a deadline or reach a compromise – but you don't necessarily have to give up entirely.
- Spend some time thinking about what precisely is making you unhappy – and what aspects of this are in your own power to address and take action accordingly.

We may feel that this is all easier said than done. But we can choose how we react to particular situations and emotional triggers. Just because our first instinct is to anger, or fear, or anxiety, doesn't mean this emotional reaction should be allowed to control our response.

Sources

<https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/managing-emotions.html>

https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newCDV_41.htm

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/blamestorming/201708/how-manage-your-emotions>