

Emotions at Work

Overview

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

- Five hard-to-handle emotions
- 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, too. 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 and that we need to pay attention to are fear, anger, feeling "down," guilt, and insecurity.

I. Fear

Some experts say that fear is the emotion felt most often at work and by the greatest number of people. No one escapes it, from the company president to support staff. It takes many forms, including the following:

- fear of authority
- fear of failure
- fear of being inadequate

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- fear of conflict
- fear of losing your job
- fear of loss of control

Fear often produces physical symptoms of anxiety, including headaches, heart palpitations, sleeplessness, and heartburn. It is a common response to change or impending change (a new supervisor, new co-workers, new expectations) and the uncertainty that this can bring.

2. 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 many 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 or responding to messages after it’s too late

People who don’t realize that they are angry sometimes turn their anger inward and become anxious and depressed. Others misdirect their anger to safer targets in their personal lives without even being aware of 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.

3. Feeling “down”

Everybody feels “low” or has a bad day now and then. For many people this takes the following form:

- low energy
- worrying more than usual
- feeling distracted
- just not feeling “up” to doing a full load of activities

Feeling down can be a response to a disappointment -- 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 a more serious depression, which should be treated with professional help.

4. Guilt

Guilt is the emotion many people feel when they aren’t living up to their own standards or the standards they believe others have for them. Guilt can take the form of feeling undeserving or inadequate or that you aren’t managing your time well enough. Guilt is an emotion many people feel who are trying to balance their work and personal lives. For instance, many parents feel guilty about not being at work when they are at home and about not being at home when they are at work. People who feel guilty often become angry at themselves or others.

5. Insecurity

Most people experience insecurity or self-doubt at some time or another -- when they confront a new kind of task, for example, or when a new co-worker threatens their self-confidence. Feelings of insecurity are often fueled by the fear that we are being excluded. This fear can also lead to jealousy. Fortunately, these feelings are usually fleeting. But sometimes feelings of jealousy, inadequacy, and lack of confidence can be so strong that they inhibit our ability to work in a group. Insecurity can make us afraid to speak at meetings for example, when we disagree with a decision and this hesitation can affect our work as well as limit our opportunities for advancement. Feelings of jealousy can erode trust and make it impossible for us to work together productively.

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.* Once you’ve identified how you’re feeling, allow yourself to deal with those feelings in appropriate ways at work. If you feel angry, for example, take a little 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

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are, but you do need to deal with the emotions so that they do not affect your interactions with others.

- *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 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.* Many people find it helpful to write a brief description of what's bothering them and a plan for taking care of the problem. This can be especially helpful if a problem is keeping you awake at night. For example, someone who is having ongoing conflict with a co-worker 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 gives the problem a "place," helps 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.* Having close friends (including a partner or spouse) you can talk with honestly about your concerns 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.

Learning to manage our most challenging emotions well takes effort. But the payoff is large. We learn to deal with problems before they overwhelm us, we're better team participants, and, most important, we increase our sense of control and effectiveness in our lives -- both inside and outside of work.

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