

Managing Your Moods at Work

Overview

Dealing with emotional ups and downs at work.

- How your moods affect your work
- Getting off to a good start
- Managing your moods during the workday

Most of us have emotional ups and downs at work. Some days we can't wait to get to work and other days we can't wait to go home. Our moods may be affected by a great variety of factors -- from the weather to a long commute to a personal issue or a conversation with a customer.

It's normal to experience different moods during the workday, but it's also important to know how to manage them. Recent studies have found that moods can have a strong effect on performance. Research has also shown that moods are contagious -- people can "catch" moods from each other. It will be easier to do your best at work and help your co-workers do their best, if you are aware of your moods and know how to control them.

How your moods affect your work

Your moods may affect your work in many ways. Some of these may be obvious. If you're feeling low because of a problem at home, you may find it harder to get started on a challenging project. If you're overjoyed by a great performance evaluation, you may be able accomplish even more than usual.

Your moods can also affect your work in more subtle ways, according to a recent study by Nancy Rothbard at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and Steffanie Wilk at the Fisher School of Business at Ohio State University. They found that

- *The mood we bring to work has more effect on our performance* than do mood changes caused by events in the workplace.
- *Both positive and negative moods can affect your performance*, but positive moods are more powerful.
- *The moods of customers or clients* may affect your moods.

All of this means that while you need to be aware of your moods all day long, it's especially important to start work in a good mood or a positive frame of mind. Why does this matter so much? A possible explanation is that your mood at the beginning of the day carries over into events that occur later and affects how you cope with them.

Getting off to a good start

Many things can affect the mood you bring to work. You may have a long commute. You may have a tense relationship with a roommate or family member. Or, you may leave for work when it's dark outside, so you don't have sunshine and blue skies to lift your spirits. In situations like these, you can still arrive at work in a good mood if you plan ahead.

- *Get enough sleep.* Sleep deprivation is one of the most common causes of mood swings. Research has found that Americans sleep two hours less per night than their great-grandparents did. And many adults get only six or seven hours of sleep a night instead of the eight or nine that doctors recommend. This adds up to a full night of sleep a week less than people need to do their best at work. If you get too little sleep one night, try to make up for it the next by going to bed earlier or sleeping later, so you won't build up a "sleep debt" you carry through the week.
- *Eat a healthy breakfast.* Food can have a strong effect on your moods. You'll feel satisfied longer if you eat complex carbohydrates and protein, which are digested more slowly and make you feel satisfied for several hours. Avoid refined sugars that provide a quick mood-enhancing energy rush often followed by an energy crash. Try low-fat yogurt topped with whole-grain cereal and fresh fruit, toasted whole-grain bread spread with peanut butter and sliced bananas, or an egg-white omelet with vegetables.
- *Eliminate hectic morning routines.* Take steps to develop a manageable morning routine for yourself and your household. Setting a wake-up time that ensures you have enough time to do what needs to be done before leaving for work will make it easier to arrive at work on time and in a relaxed mood. Pick out your clothes, organize what you need to take to work, and set the breakfast table the night before.
- *Establish family routines to prepare for the morning rush.* If you have children, help them get organized the night before, too. Get each a plastic cube or cardboard box and have them put in it everything they'll need to take to school, such as a backpack and completed homework. Consider making lunch preparations a family activity and try to get much of it done the night before. All of this will help to ease worries about lateness or forgetting something.
- *Avoid arguments with the people you live with before leaving for work.* Tensions at home can spill over into the workplace. Try to resolve any disagreements before you have to leave for work -- ideally, the night before. If you can't do this, put off talking about difficult issues until you get home. This can have benefits for everyone in your household. An argument before work may affect your child's performance in school as much as yours on the job.
- *Make your commute more pleasant.* When researchers asked 900 working women how much they liked 15 regular activities, they found that commuting ranked at

the bottom of the list -- even lower than housework. But there are ways to make a commute more pleasant, whether you drive or use public transportation. Allow enough time for the trip so that a traffic jam or delay doesn't ruin your mood. Think of your commute time as your private quiet time. Listen to music, radio programs, or recorded books by authors you enjoy. Keep a photo that makes you happy in your wallet or on the car seat and look at it if your frustrations rise.

- *Keep breakfast snacks available as a backup.* If your commute doesn't always allow you to eat breakfast at home, keep healthy snacks in your purse or car or at your office so that you won't start work feeling irritable because of hunger pangs. You might also want to join a carpool or take the bus or train with a friend who's always in a good mood.

Managing your moods during the day

The key to managing your moods during the day is to balance the "up" and "down" times. Your overall sense of well-being is determined partly by factors you can't control, including your genes and family background. So it's unrealistic to try never to have a bad mood or to stay in an upbeat mood every minute of the day. You don't have to avoid all unpleasant feelings to be happy. Just don't allow them to crowd out all the good feelings. Here are some tips.

- *Be aware of and keep track of your moods.* Pay attention to your moods at different times of the day and in different situations and note how, if at all, they affect your work. Get feedback if you aren't sure about this. Ask a co-worker you trust: "I've been feeling a little irritable today. How did I come across in meetings?" You might also keep a notebook of your moods. Write down your four or five most noticeable mood changes during the day. This can help you identify the situations or times of day that are most challenging for you, so you can figure out how to control them. For example, if you often become grouchy in the late morning because you're hungry, you may need to eat a healthier breakfast.
- *Acknowledge your bad moods and don't allow them to affect others.* Avoid blaming others for your moods. ("Talking with him always gets me upset.") Even if you're in a bad mood, be courteous and businesslike with co-workers and customers. Read Martin E. P. Seligman's useful book, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*, to get practical ideas on how to adopt a more optimistic outlook.
- *Set boundaries.* Take steps to avoid "catching" the bad moods of chronic complainers. Have a polite exit strategy you can use when someone starts to gripe. If you're sympathetic to a co-worker's concerns, you might say, "I'd like to help you, but I'm on a deadline. Could we talk about this later?" If you know there's nothing you can do to help, you might excuse yourself to make a call.
- *Make the most of your lunch break.* When at all possible, take your lunch break. Try to make time to eat away from your work area, in a lunch area with co-workers

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you enjoy being with. Try to keep lunchtime topics light, fun, and upbeat. Bring or buy a meal that is a healthy balance of foods so that you have the energy and stamina to feel good throughout the afternoon.

- *Take mini-breaks to stretch in your work area as needed to build energy and boost your mood.*
- *Connect with positive people throughout the day.* Being around upbeat people makes us feel good. Scientists have found that most of us at times “mirror” or copy the physical gestures of others without realizing it. When co-workers adopt stiff, negative postures, we unconsciously imitate them. We also copy body language that’s more relaxed and optimistic. When we’re with upbeat, optimistic people, we don’t just relax mentally -- we relax physically, too. Spend time whenever you can with positive people. Plan to take breaks and eat lunch with them and watch for opportunities where you can work most closely with people you enjoy being with.
- *Limit how long you “hold on” to a negative emotion.* Daniel Goleman writes in *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* that we may not have control over when we’re swept by an emotion, or *what* the emotion will be. But we can control how long an emotion will last. Some bad moods go away quickly on their own. But sometimes we need to take an active role to send them away. Consider giving yourself a “two-minute warning” when a bad mood has gone on for too long. Give yourself two minutes more to think about the subject, then move on to something else.
- *Learn relaxation techniques you can do at work.* Physical tension can prolong a bad mood. Keep your posture and gestures relaxed but not sloppy when you’re sitting or standing. Avoid crossing your arms or legs or clenching your fists. Try deep breathing or muscle-relaxation techniques. If your moods are caused by mental stress, you may benefit from visualization techniques, such as looking at a pleasant picture or envisioning yourself in a setting that makes you feel good. Most bookstores and libraries have good books, videos, and CDs or DVDs that describe these techniques. The program that provided this publication also offers resources and materials on stress reduction and relaxation.
- *Reduce or eliminate alcohol consumption.* Alcohol is a depressant, and a drink or two at dinner can still affect you the next day. Consider reducing or eliminating your alcohol intake if you often feel moody or irritable at work.
- *Talk with a doctor if your moods are severe or frequent enough to affect your work.* Mood swings can result from some illnesses, medications, and normal biological changes such as menopause. Mood changes can also be a sign of seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a condition that makes some people more likely to feel “down” in certain seasons, typically in winter when they get less exposure to sunlight because days are shorter. You may have a health concern that needs attention if your moods seem to be worse or last longer than other people’s.

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If your doctor can't find a medical reason for your mood swings, you may be experiencing depression and you may benefit from talking with a professional. The program that provided this article may be able to help you locate a professional in your area.

Most of us can't avoid occasional bad moods. You may not always be able to prevent them from occurring, but you can control how you respond to them. You can keep your moods from affecting your performance, and your overall sense of well-being, by being aware of your moods and how to manage them.

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