

Personal Development Resources

Quick Guide to Managing Your Emotions at Work

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We've all been in one of "those" situations before. You know... when your favourite project is cancelled after weeks of hard work; when a customer snaps at you unfairly; when your best friend (and co-worker) is laid off suddenly; or your boss assigns you more work when you're already overloaded.

In your personal life, your reaction to stressful situations like these might be to start shouting, or to go hide in a corner and feel sorry for yourself for a while. But at work, these types of behaviour could seriously harm your professional reputation, as well as your productivity.

Stressful situations are all too common in a workplace that's facing budget cuts, staff layoffs, and department changes. It may become harder and harder to manage your emotions under these circumstances, but it's even more important for you to do so. After all, if management is forced into making more layoffs, they may choose to keep those who can handle their emotions and work well under pressure. No matter what the situation is, you're always free to choose how you react to it.

So, how can you become better at handling your emotions, and "choosing" your reactions to bad situations? In this Quick Guide, we look at the most common negative emotions experienced in the workplace – and how you can manage them productively.

Why are we focusing only on negative emotions? Well, most people don't need strategies for managing their positive emotions. After all, feelings of joy, excitement, compassion, or optimism usually don't affect others in a negative way. As long as you share positive emotions constructively and professionally, they're great to have in the workplace!



Common Negative Emotions at Work

In 1997, University professor Cynthia Fisher conducted a study and identified the most common negative emotions experienced in the workplace:

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

Below are different strategies you can use to help you deal with each of these negative emotions.



Frustration/Irritation

Frustration usually occurs when you feel stuck or trapped, or unable to move forward in some way. It could be caused by a colleague blocking your favourite project, a boss who is too disorganized to get to your meeting on time, or simply being on hold on the phone for a long time.

Whatever the reason, it's important to deal with feelings of frustration quickly, because they can easily lead to more negative emotions, such as anger.

Here are some suggestions for dealing with frustration:

- Stop and evaluate – One of the best things you can do is mentally stop yourself and look at the situation. Ask yourself why you feel frustrated. Write it down and be specific. Then think of one positive thing about your current situation. For instance, if your boss is late for your meeting, then you have more time to prepare. Or you could use this time to relax a little.
- Find something positive about the situation – Thinking about a positive aspect of your situation often makes you look at things in a different way. This small change in your thinking can improve your mood. When it's people who are causing your frustration, they're probably not doing it deliberately to annoy you. And if it's a thing that's bothering you – well, it's certainly not personal! Don't get mad, just move on.
- Remember the last time you felt frustrated – The last time you were frustrated about something, the situation probably worked out just fine after a while, right? Your feelings of frustration or irritation probably didn't do much to solve the problem then, which means they're not doing anything for you right now.



Worry/Nervousness

With all the fear and anxiety that comes with increasing numbers of layoffs, it's no wonder that many people worry about their jobs. But this worry can easily get out of control, if you allow it, and this can impact not only your mental health, but also your productivity, and your willingness to take risks at work.

Try these tips to deal with worrying:

- Don't surround yourself with worry and anxiety – For example, if co-workers gather in the break room to gossip and talk about job cuts, then don't go there and worry with everyone else. Worrying tends to lead to more worrying, and that isn't good for anyone.
- Try deep-breathing exercises – This helps slow your breathing and your heart rate. Breathe in slowly for five seconds, then breathe out slowly for five seconds. Focus on your breathing, and nothing else. Do this at least five times.
- Focus on how to improve the situation – If you fear being laid off, and you sit there and worry, that probably won't help you keep your job. Instead, why not brainstorm ways to show how valuable you are to the company?
- Write down your worries in a worry log – If you find that worries are churning around inside your mind, write them down in a notebook or "worry log," and then schedule a time to deal with them. Before that time, you can forget about these worries, knowing that you'll deal with them. When it comes to the time you've scheduled, take time to evaluate these things, and take whatever actions are necessary to mitigate any risks.



Anger/Aggravation

Out-of-control anger is perhaps the most destructive emotion that people experience in the workplace. It's also the emotion that most of us don't handle very well. If you have trouble managing your temper at work, then learning to control it is one of the best things you can do if you want to keep your job.

Try these suggestions to control your anger:

- Watch for early signs of anger – Only you know the danger signs when anger is building, so learn to recognize them when they begin. Stopping your anger early is key. Remember, you can choose how you react in a situation. Just because your first instinct is to become angry doesn't mean it's the correct response.
- If you start to get angry, stop what you're doing – Close your eyes, and practice the deep-breathing exercise we described earlier. This interrupts your angry thoughts, and it helps put you back on a more positive path.
- Picture yourself when you're angry – If you imagine how you look and behave while you're angry, it gives you some perspective on the situation. For instance, if you're about to shout at your co-worker, imagine how you would look. Is your face red? Are you waving your arms around? Would you want to work with someone like that? Probably not.



Dislike

We've probably all had to work with someone we don't like. But it's important to be professional, no matter what.

Here are some ideas for working with people you dislike:

- Be respectful – If you have to work with someone you don't get along with, then it's time to set aside your pride and ego. Treat the person with courtesy and respect, as you would treat anyone else. Just because this person behaves in an unprofessional manner, that doesn't mean you should as well.
- Be assertive – If the other person is rude and unprofessional, then firmly explain that you refuse to be treated that way, and calmly leave the situation. Remember, set the example.



Disappointment/Unhappiness

Dealing with disappointment or unhappiness at work can be difficult. Of all the emotions you might feel at work, these are the most likely to impact your productivity. If you've just suffered a major disappointment, your energy will probably be low, you might be afraid to take another risk, and all of that may hold you back from achieving.

Here are some proactive steps you can take to cope with disappointment and unhappiness:

- Look at your mindset – Take a moment to realize that things won't always go your way. If they did, life would be a straight road instead of one with hills and valleys, ups and downs, right? And it's the hills and valleys that often make life so interesting.
- Adjust your goal – If you're disappointed that you didn't reach a goal, that doesn't mean the goal is no longer reachable. Keep the goal, but make a small change – for example, delay the deadline.
- Record your thoughts – Write down exactly what is making you unhappy. Is it a co-worker? Is it your job? Do you have too much to do? Once you identify the problem, start brainstorming ways to solve it or work around it. Remember, you always have the power to change your situation.
- Smile! – Strange as it may sound, forcing a smile – or even a grimace – onto your face can often make you feel happy (this is one of the strange ways in which we humans are "wired.") Try it – you may be surprised!

Key Points

We all have to deal with negative emotions at work sometimes and learning how to cope with these feelings is now more important than ever. After all, negative emotions can spread, and no one wants to be around a person who adds negativity to a group.

Know what causes your negative emotions, and which types of feelings you face most often. When those emotions begin to appear, immediately start your strategy to interrupt the cycle. The longer you wait, the harder it will be to pull yourself away from negative thinking.