

How to Deal With Negative Emotions at Work

We seem to really get a kick out of complaining about work. We hover around the water cooler, confide in our friends, and even share our workplace horror stories with our spouses.

But recounting all the things that made us miserable one day doesn't help us enjoy our workday more tomorrow. A better strategy is to actually address the negative feelings we have.

When annoyance, self-doubt, or the blues surface at work, we can learn to work through these feelings. Here are three emotion regulation strategies you can use—and how to put them into practice for a happier work life.

1: Mindful acceptance: Let be the things you cannot change

Negative emotions exist. Pushing them away or ignoring them does more harm than good, even if we might be tempted to do so.

Instead, try acknowledging your emotions and giving them a seat at the table. Maybe you feel bad because your boss plays favorites—and you're not the favorite. Or maybe you're frustrated because your teammates are always running late. It's okay to feel these negative emotions. You don't need to judge yourself.



To learn how to practice acceptance at work, start at home by writing out a list of the things you can and cannot control. First, focus on the things you cannot control. Let any emotions you have rise to the surface. Work on accepting these emotions, and yourself, just as you are—saying things like, “I am angry that I didn't get a promotion, but that's okay. I am allowed to feel angry.” Experience these emotions, but don't hold on to them or ruminate on the causes. Just let them fade in their own time.

You might be better served by actually changing your situation if you have the ability to do so, rather than accepting an abusive boss or unhealthy work environment. Use that list of things you can control to take action.

2: Self-distancing: Observe your situation like a “fly on the wall”

We all experience unpleasant situations, especially at work. You may ruminate about a meeting that went poorly, a coworker who slighted you, or a lack of acknowledgement for a project you poured your heart into. But the longer you feel bad, the more that bad feeling compounds.

To calm these negative emotions, mentally removing yourself from the situation is a helpful trick. Research suggests that a more distanced, third-party perspective can reduce the intensity of the negative emotions you feel. To try it, imagine that you're a fly on the wall, observing your situation. How do you see the situation? How do both people look—you and the other person? By cultivating a broader perspective, you'll often discover that the situation is not as bad as you thought it was.

Be careful not to mentally remove yourself from the situation permanently. There are many benefits to staying mindfully present for your work life.

3: Reappraisal: Find the positives in negative situations

Finding the positive in negative situations is an especially useful emotion regulation strategy when something happens at work that you judge to be undesirable.

To begin to change your perspective, learn to pause in the face of something negative and think of or write down at least one positive. For example, did you get critical feedback on a recent presentation you gave or a report you wrote? Might you reappraise this as helpful information for your career growth—an opportunity to learn how to do better next time? The more frequently you challenge yourself to find the positives, the easier it will be for your brain to start noticing them on its own.



When you're not used to using reappraisal (or the other strategies), it can sound difficult or contrived. I know this because I confronted a major negative experience at work a few months ago: I lost my job. But a positive spin goes a long way; I ended up taking advantage of that situation to start writing a "happiness at work" column for Jhana, a blog for Psychology Today, and more articles for Greater Good. I saw my job loss as an opportunity to find work that makes me a lot happier.

Using reappraisal isn't always the best approach. Again, if the situation is controllable, then you might be better served by taking action instead of changing your perspective.

4: Practice makes perfect

By trying these techniques in easier, "practice" situations, you'll build your emotion regulation ability, so that you're more prepared to handle the tougher situations. For example, it'll likely be easier to identify potential upsides when your company upgrades to new software than when your boss is yelling at you for missing an important deadline. So take the time now to build these skills—it pays off big in the long run.

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