

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Identifying and Managing Emotion

Identifying Emotion

Having noticed the signs that emotions are occurring, your next step is to understand and identify those emotions. You can begin this process by asking yourself questions that will help you understand the ways that emotion has affected you. Good questions to ask include:

- What am I feeling now?
- What are my senses telling me?
- What is it that I want?
- What judgments or conclusions have I made (and are they accurate)?
- What is this emotion trying to tell me?

The answers to these questions are key to using your emotions in the service of your life goals, rather than allowing your emotions to use you.

Often, your physiological (body) reactions suggest vital clues to the nature of your emotional state. If your face begins to get warm while you are talking with someone, you may be embarrassed. If you have "butterflies" in your stomach, you may be nervous. If you feel excited and giddy and there is a smile on your face, you may be happy. If your head pounds, your heart races, and you feel increasingly tense and hot, you are probably angry. However, if you feel tense, your heart is pounding, your palms are sweating, and you feel cold, you are probably frightened rather than angry.

You can also learn to identify emotions based on the way they make you feel, think and act. Perhaps certain memories come to the surface of your mind when you are feeling sad that aren't there at other times. Perhaps you were hurt in the past by a romantic partner with a particularly striking face, and find over time that when you meet new people who remind you of that partner, you automatically respond negatively towards them. Consciously knowing what you are feeling and why may suggest a set of actions you can take to help you change your feelings.

Managing Emotion

Understanding your emotions makes it possible for you to manage them so that they work for rather than against you. For instance, having established that you are feeling sad, you can take steps to make yourself feel happier. More pointedly, if your sadness (or anger, or anxiety, etc.) would normally influence you to act in a way that might damage yourself or someone else, becoming aware of that emotion can enable you to take steps to not act in that destructive way.

As an example, suppose you are in a meeting at work and your boss calls your carefully researched proposal "a stupid harebrained idea". A careless comment like this might make you angry: your heart beats faster, your head pounds, your blood pressure goes up, and you experience a compelling urge to give your boss a piece of your mind. Though you want to yell at your boss, doing so might likely get you into trouble, and might even get you fired. A better solution would be to suppress your outburst by actively managing your emotion, respectfully disagreeing with your boss, and then later finding a safe outlet for your hurt feelings.

Assuming you are an emotionally intelligent person, you might manage such a hurtful comment in the following way:

First, by recognizing that your pounding head and racing heart are signs that you are angry.

Next, by thinking about your goals with regard to your relationship with your boss (e.g., to maintain steady employment). Although giving your boss a piece of your angry mind would likely help you feel better in the short term, doing so could ultimately create serious problems. Recognizing this danger, you might decide that while your boss's comment was unreasonable and even sadistic, there is nothing particularly useful to be gained by sinking to his level.

Later, after the meeting is done, you can think about ways to handle your boss's tendency to put you down. Soliciting opinions and help from knowledgeable other people who care about you may help you figure out the best way to proceed. You may need to look for another job, or a departmental transfer. Alternatively, a private meeting with your boss or with your human resources staff might result in successful resolution of the problem.

By actively managing your emotions, you are taking steps towards becoming more emotionally resilient. You are also taking steps to avoid pitfalls and problems that strong emotions would otherwise push you towards.

Early on in this article we said that the foundation of emotional resilience (and thus emotional intelligence) is largely a matter of attitude and belief. How people think about themselves and their relationships with others and the world forms the base on which emotion management skills sit. Negative, defeatist attitudes towards self and others make it more difficult for you to successfully manage your emotions. Positive, empowering attitudes, on the other hand, make emotional resilience seem like second nature.

Emotionally resilient people tend to display the following positive characteristics:

- Happiness
- Control
- Optimism
- Mindfulness and Flow
- Hardiness
- Communication
- Relationships
- Compassion and Empathy

Happiness is elusive for many people. The vast majority of us are raised to think that obtaining material things will make us happy. Food clothing and shelter are not enough to satisfy. For example, once you purchase the house you've been saving for, you start thinking about furniture you want to buy or how the landscaping needs to change. Each desire, once satisfied, gives birth to new desires in an endless progression. The more we buy into the idea that we'll be happy when we have enough of the right sort of possessions, the more trapped we become. We become jealous of people who have more than we do, and we risk bankruptcy to pay for things with credit we can't afford. The more 'stuff' we desire, the less happy we are.

The facts are: possessions don't make people happy, except when there isn't enough of it to purchase the essentials of food, clothing and shelter. Studies examining the relationship between family income and happiness show that money is only related to happiness when there really isn't enough of it and real deprivation occurs. No relationship has been measured between money and happiness for any family living above poverty wages, suggesting that once basic needs are taken care of, further happiness cannot be bought at any price. As a result of these types of findings, researchers now consider happiness to depend less on people's actual circumstances and more on how people choose to respond to their circumstances.

Your happiness is not dependent on whether you drive the right car, live in the right neighborhood, or wear the latest clothes. Instead, how happy you are depends on how you approach your life and the
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people around you. True satisfaction is not about getting what you want but rather is about wanting what you have. Learning to be content with what you have is the true path to happiness.