

Manage distracting emotions

Source:

Seibert SE; Kraimer ML; Heslin PA, 2016, 'Developing career resilience and adaptability.' Organizational Dynamics, vol. 45, pp. 245 - 257, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2016.07.009>

Going to and going through emotions

Two more effective ways to manage unwanted, disruptive emotions are:

- Going **to** emotions — by being willing to have and fully experience negative emotions without struggling, judging, or trying to banish them; and
- Going **through** emotions — by taking action guided by your plans and priorities, regardless of what you are feeling. People go through emotions when, for instance, they strongly feel like staying in bed but instead adhere to their plan to head out for early morning exercise.

Strategies for **going to** emotions are to:

1. Label your thoughts and feelings.

Instead of saying to yourself, “I am panicking,” say, “I have a sensation that my heart is racing.” Instead of saying, “I am so depressed,” say, “I am having the feeling that I am depressed.” Doing so helps to avoid fusion, which occurs when people view themselves as not just experiencing emotions (e.g., “I feel depressed”), but in fact being “fused” (or synonymous) with their emotions (e.g., “I am depressed”). The defusion enabled by labeling thoughts and feelings places them in a broader context of being merely a part of ourselves that can co-exist with us making progress toward attaining our goals.

2. Engage in expressive writing.

Because bottling up negative emotions makes them grow, simply writing about them can be a cathartic means of self-discovery and meaning-making. Stress relief and fresh insights for addressing your career shocks can stem from brainstorming about topics such as how you feel and alternative ways of making sense of what happened. Try doing so for 5—10 min each day until the negative emotions subside.

3. Play musical thoughts.

Think of an upsetting or distracting thought (e.g., “I am such an idiot,” “She is so unkind,” or “How could they have made such a moronic decision?”) and believe it as intently as you can for about 10 s. Now sing that thought to yourself to the tune of Happy Birthday, Jingle Bells, or any other song of your choosing, and then try to again hold it in mind in its original form. Playing musical thoughts can help to defuse unhelpful thoughts of their emotional sting and any powerful urges to act on them.

4. Urge surf.

Whenever experiencing an uncomfortable emotion (i.e., anxiety, anger, betrayal, resentment, or sadness), try to just notice the urge as it rises, peaks, and then eventually falls, just as waves in the surf gradually dissipate after breaking. No matter how apparently overwhelming a disruptive emotion and related urge seems to be, it will inevitably pass — even if not acted upon.

Strategies for **going through** emotions are to:

1. Ask: “How do you help?”

The thoughts that spurn disruptive emotions are often debated in our heads in terms of whether they are true vs. false, or reasonable vs. unreasonable (i.e., “I deserve to be upset about this!”). Instead, ask yourself whether the topic is workable, that is, helpful or unhelpful for attaining your objectives. Ask yourself: “Does thinking about this topic help me to . . . be the person I want to be? . . . build the sort of relationships I’d like? . . . achieve my career objectives? If not, try to divert your thoughts and actions to something more productive.

2. Choose to “pass” rather than “play.”

When tabloids target celebrities with misleading stories, some chose to “pass” by taking such stories in their stride, paying little attention, and shrugging them off as just part of being famous. Other celebrities choose to “play” by reading, analyzing, dwelling on, and complaining about such stories, thereby becoming highly upset! Next time you begin to ruminate on a career shock, try to choose to pass rather than play, thereby avoiding becoming distracted and exhausted by fighting needless battles with unworkable ideas.

3. Treat unhelpful thoughts like a monster on the bus.

Experiment with construing uncomfortable feelings like monsters in the back of a bus that you are driving. Remind yourself that they can be there without you needing to be unduly distracted or guided by them, or trying to get them to leave the bus. Just as day follows night, they will eventually leave of their own accord — often more smoothly and permanently than if you engage in a battle to ignore them or kick them off.