

Tools - Emotional control

Below are 3 tools for managing emotional control

Emotional contagion

We all practice self-regulation every day in our home and working lives, with varying degrees of success. For example, scientists have discovered – rather shockingly – that our stress permeates out through our skin and infects, as it were, the people sitting close to us. It's a distressing thought-picture, particularly for any parent, but it highlights our responsibilities: Don't infect the team!

Try this simple tool when you notice your stress levels rising or feel yourself getting a bit 'limbic': Go for a walk around the office or outside and notice the feeling of your feet in your shoes. Concentrate on the feeling. If you notice your attention going elsewhere, that's okay. Bring your attention gently back to the feeling of your feet in your shoes. This simple exercise is called mindful walking and can be done in five minutes.

Labelling emotions

Matt Lieberman has found that using simple language to name emotions *lowers* the arousal of the limbic system, producing a quieter brain state that allows the prefrontal cortex to function more effectively. The implications of findings such as these for business are profound. It means that if people suppress their emotions in order to be – or seem to be - 'professional', they actually make it harder for themselves to function professionally.

Use these steps when you anticipate experiencing a difficult emotion or when you're feeling it:

- Give the emotion a name. Something simple that you recognise. It does not have to be a name everyone would use; you can create your own. For example what one person might call it anger another you might call irritation.
- If you find it difficult to name the precise emotion just make a name up.
- Say the name to yourself, write it down, and draw a picture. Anything that gets it out.
- Step back and take a minute or two to notice how you feel.

This might all sound very straightforward – and it is - but neuroscientific research shows it works!

Priming your mind

It's possible to manage negative triggers by using 'priming', which is when we fill our heads so full of a particular idea that it seems to crop up wherever we look. For example, when you decide to buy a particular make of car you prime your mind and as a result you seem to see them everywhere.

It's easy to prime our brains in a negative way. Think of an archetypal bad morning. You've slept badly and then you slept through the alarm, you spilled your coffee on the way into the office and then found you've left behind some important papers you were working on at home.

"This," you say to yourself, "is not going to be a good day." And then - not surprisingly – it isn't. Your brain has been primed to be on the lookout for everything that goes wrong.

You could, of course, prime your brain differently to notice the positives in your day. So set yourself the goal of noticing a certain number of positive event each day or the positive in every challenging situation.

The social control model

Stanford psychologist James Gross has developed a model for emotional regulation, assessing the pros and cons of the different techniques.

Avoidance takes several forms, from not getting into emotional situations by avoiding the person who annoys you to distracting yourself by reading a book or focusing on something else. The successful children in Mischel's Marshmallow Test employed various avoidance techniques.

Suppression, embodied in the attitude of British stiff upper lip, can be bad for your health, raising your blood pressure and heart rate. It also uses up more brain energy and fails to deal with the cause of the emotion. In fact, there's some evidence that it increases the intensity of it.

Reappraisal involves looking at the situation in a different light and interpreting events in a more positive way. It can be a successful strategy, dealing with the root cause of the emotion and reducing amygdala activity.

Mindfulness, as discussed, has been shown to reduce our reaction to emotional triggers and also has several health and concentration benefits. Taking the time to become more mindful through a meditation practice can have long-term results.

Gross makes the point that all of these techniques require practice and, like a muscle, the more we use them the more our abilities develop. This is true whether it's a supportive technique like mindfulness (along with all its associated benefits), but remember that it's also true of negative techniques such as suppression (and all the associated side-effects).

So when a colleague asks for space to think about an issue that's causing them stress, go out of your way to respect the request, and ensure you're training yourself and your leaders in the supportive techniques because you can rest assured we're all quite adept at the poor ones!