



Why Other People's Emotional Responses Impact Us

Dealing with distressed workers is challenging for a number of reasons, not least of which is the impact other people's emotional responses have on us. Humans are social animals, and considerable research has demonstrated that we undergo a wide range of involuntary connections with others in social settings. No person is impervious to the emotions of others, and in fact we are typically highly sensitive and responsive to them.

Despite your best efforts to set boundaries between yourself and the emotional reactions of a distressed worker with whom you are dealing, you may find yourself being impacted by their negative responses. You may feel that you are somehow guilty or to blame, or you may feel angry or upset. Remember that these types of reactions are natural, and that it is possible to manage your reactions more effectively once you realize that others' emotions are much more a function of their own thoughts, experiences and situation than they are a reflection on you.

It can be helpful to understand why and how other people's emotional responses impact us:

- As social animals, it can be adaptive for us to communicate distress to elicit help from others. When others show distress in their facial expression (frowning), posture (slouched over), tone of voice (shaky, soft) or speech ("*I just don't know what to do*"), we are likely to feel concern and an urge to help.
- Empathy, to some extent, allows us to share other people's emotions (e.g., feeling the sadness of someone who has lost a loved one). Feelings of empathy occur not just in the mind, but also can have physical effects on us.
- When those around us are persistently angry, bitter or anxious, they can be draining to be around. We feel uncomfortable being around them, and frustrated when we feel we cannot help their situation.
- When those around us express negativity, we may also hear and see negative information and contemplate negative interpretations of events. This can also dampen our mood for the moment.
- Positive emotions exhibited by others tend to trigger positive feelings in ourselves ("infectious laughter", "positive aura"). This may be why we tend to be drawn to positive individuals, and feel less inclined to spend time with people who express negativity more frequently.
- How genuinely a person comes across emotionally can impact our feelings during an interaction. We tend to feel more uncomfortable when talking to someone who is purposefully suppressing negative emotion.
- The way we carry ourselves in an interaction can be infectious. When a person talks in a hostile manner, we have a natural tendency to match that hostility. The same effect happens in cases of warmth (i.e., if someone talks to us in a friendly manner, we naturally want to be friendly back).



How does knowing this information help managers deal with negative emotions in the workplace? Sometimes, simply being aware of the ways others can affect our emotions gives us more options in terms of how we want to respond. It can be helpful, for example, to enter a conversation with a distressed worker prepared for the impact their emotions may have on us. To be able to calmly handle emotionally charged situations can be a useful skill set for anyone in a leadership role.