

Lost in Emotion: Managing Workplace Stress and Conflict



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Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices

I'll be the first one to admit it—I'm one of those people who cry at the drop of a hat. Not to mention sad movies and humane society PSAs. According to the research on crying, some people are simply more prone to crying than others. So I was not at all surprised when I left the theater red-nosed and puffy-eyed after watching the new Pixar film, *Inside Out*. In addition to giving my tear ducts a workout, the film led me to reflect on emotions, stress and conflict in the workplace.

In the movie, 11-year old Riley faces a particularly tough time in her life when her family moves from the Midwest to San Francisco. Throughout this bumpy journey, Riley is accompanied and guided by her emotional companions: Joy, Fear, Anger, Disgust and Sadness. Throughout the film I found it hard to resist being drawn to Joy, the emotion that wants Riley to be optimistic, resilient and happy.

The lessons from the movie resonate in real life as well, and especially in the workplace. Deadlines, board meetings, and ambitious (or unrealistic?!) fundraising goals pile up on top of the normal everyday grind of keeping the board up-to-date, the bills paid and myriad stakeholders happy. It's no surprise that negative emotions and stress are often our companions in the workplace.

According to the American Institute of Stress, occupational pressures and fears are by far the [leading source of stress](#) for American adults. To be effective, entity leaders must be able to recognize emotional stress in their own lives, as well as in the lives and behaviors of their co-workers and direct reports. Understanding and identifying emotional stress is the first step in resolving it. If left unaddressed, emotional stress can take a devastating toll, including:

- Burnout
- Absenteeism or [Presenteeism](#)
- Loss of interest at work
- Increased risk of health problems including heart disease, depression, and obesity
- Alcohol or drug abuse

With risks that serious, emotional buildup and stress deserve our attention, focus and careful intervention. While the subjects of human emotions and stress are complex, here are a few important things to keep in mind:

- **Remember that Everyone Portrays Emotions Differently:** While I tend to cry easily, my co-workers

may be a tad more stoic. Watch for changes in behavior that could be a sign of overwhelming stress or the inability to cope with life's ups and downs.

- **Be Self-Aware:** How do you handle emotions in the workplace? Just as smiling can be contagious, so can stress and related negative feelings. Reflect on your verbal and nonverbal reactions to situations that arise in the workplace. Remind yourself that your behavior affects those around you.
- **It's Normal:** The most important truth about the sense of feeling overwhelmed is that it is a universal feeling. At one time or another, each of us feels overwhelmed, "under the gun," or burdened by demands such as deadlines, complex tasks, and financial or other stressors.

Know Your Stress M.O.

In order to treat your stress, it is important to first understand how you naturally react to it. We often respond to stress in one of three ways:

1. **Foot on the gas** – An angry, agitated, or "fight" stress response. You're heated, keyed up, overly emotional, and unable to sit still.
2. **Foot on the brake** – A withdrawn, depressed, or "flight" stress response. You shut down, pull away, space out, and show very little energy or emotion.
3. **Foot on both** – A tense or "freeze," stress response. You become frozen under pressure and can't do anything. You look paralyzed, but under the surface you're extremely agitated.

Treat Emotional Buildup Before It's Too Late

- **Exercise the Stress Away** – Working out has been proven to have a beneficial effect on a person's mental and physical being. Whether this entails taking a five-minute walk around the park during your lunch break or heading to the gym after work, remind your self that you deserve and need a break... today.
- **Watch Your Caffeine Intake** – According to a study at Duke University Medical Center, [caffeine amplifies stress](#) in people who consume it every day. Consider reducing your consumption of coffee or other caffeinated drinks to reduce unnecessary stress.
- **Talk It Out** – If your emotions are getting to be too much, don't hesitate to reach out to someone. Whether it is a loved one or a professional, it is always better to look for help sooner than later.
- **Don't Always Be the Yes (Wo)Man** – Saying yes to every option or project that comes your way might make you feel like Mr. or Ms. Nice, but it can lead to unmanageable stress over time. Resolve to say "yes" to a manageable number of optional work or volunteer assignments, and stop feeling bad when you need to say, "No."
- **Find Fun in Everyday Activities** – Whether it is taking the time to sit down and watch your favorite TV show, read a good book, or catch up with a cherished friend, it is important to do something positive for yourself every day. Having something to look forward to can make even the most stressful day a little more bearable.

As an employer, you are not responsible for the emotional well-being of your employees, but you probably play a huge role in their happiness. Endeavor to make joy an ever-present companion in your workplace.

Emily Wilson is a summer intern with the Nonprofit Risk Management Center and is excited to apply her past experiences and knowledge to a better understanding of risk. If you have questions or comments you can reach the NRMC at 703.777.3504.