

Fact-File 17: Emotional Intelligence...why it matters for managing stress and well-being



Extracts from our Guide on EI at Work: Working with Emotional Intelligence

A Quiet Emotional Revolution

There's an emotional revolution going on. It stems from a growing realisation emotions do matter for good work, good relationships and a good life. Office, factory, work, school or home, emotions affect how we think, who we are and how we live. They:

- ❑ Play a role in every corner of our lives; influencing our moods, decisions, actions – our entire outlook on life and work.
- ❑ Have a big impact on how we behave, how we cope with change and stress, how well we get along with loved ones, workmates, friends, bosses and customers
- ❑ Impact physical health because of a close connection between our immune system and brain areas that regulate emotions.
- ❑ Determine how satisfied, motivated, happy, healthy and effective we are in work and life – our level of achievement, focus, purpose, perseverance, optimism, hope and joy.



“People who experience chronic anxiety, long periods of sadness and pessimism, unremitting tension or incessant hostility or cynicism were found to have double the risk of disease. This makes distressing emotions as toxic a risk factor as smoking or high cholesterol - a major threat to health.” Daniel Goleman in *EI: Why it Matters more than IQ* p.167

EI: What it is and Why it Matters

Forget intellect. Emotions are the main part of our make-up – the background to everything we do. Learning to live with our emotions, to understand them and harness them for good effect, takes *Emotional Intelligence* (EI).

EI is not just a random concept – it's a real brain function. We're equipped with emotional circuitry hard-wired into us, but instructions on how to use this well has to be learned.

Family and school are where we pick up our first, often most ingrained emotional patterns. But these can be learned and unlearned throughout the lives, because our brain is capable of constantly re-moulding its pathways.

What is EI? Very simply put, it's about:

- ❑ Knowing my emotional patterns, how they affect me and controlling my moods
- ❑ Seeing how my feelings impact others
- ❑ Choosing how I think, feel and act (not be controlled by or at the whim of my feelings)
- ❑ The ability to relate to/get on well with others
- ❑ Communicating what I feel clearly and...
- ❑ Connecting with others – or empathy.

Many of us were brought up believing we should keep emotions to ourselves – that they get in the way of rational work practices. You can't keep emotions out of workplaces – thankfully. Because they play a positive role in doing good work – just as much as they do sometimes get in the way.

“EI is the foundation for a host of critical work life skills - focus, concentration, teamworking, communication, leadership and relationship-building - accounting for 58% of performance in all types of jobs overall. 90% of high-performers are high in EI, while only 20% of low performers are (in EI-2 by Bradberry & Greaves p 20-21)

EI skills like perseverance, resilience, empathy, self-confidence and self-motivation are essential to work and life success; for workplaces that are welcoming, warm, inspiring and connective and for decreasing dysfunctional emotional patterns like anger, apathy and anxiety that turn teams toxic and poison relationships. EI has a lot to do with how much respect, support and positivity there is in a workplace. When it's not there, we notice.

E-Hijacks and Emotional Contagion

The prevailing pattern and frequency of positive/negative emotions generated in any workplace is an often unnoticed determiner of the health and productivity of a work culture. Related to this, are two core concepts that make EI such a potent force for positivity or negativity at work.

The first is emotional hijacks. The amygdala is our fear and anger centre. In situations where emotions run high, we're at risk of being hijacked by them. Feelings control what we say and do because our brain is wired to feel first, and think second. When our amygdala takes over, our rational brain takes a backseat. We act in ways

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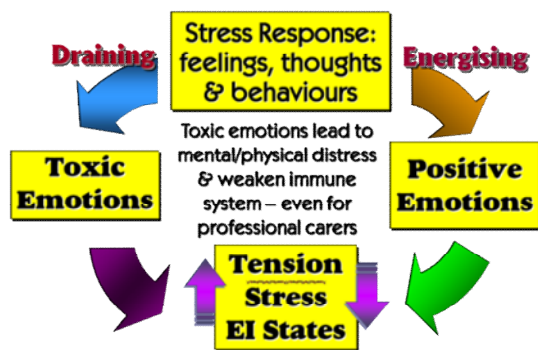


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that make things worse, escalate bad feelings, damage relationships and we generate negative, unhealthy emotions. *That's an 'emotional hijack'.*

Learning how to manage our feelings, moods and stress reactions helps us avert or lessen hijacks. Why bother? Well, that's the second EI concept.

Emotions are contagious. We catch them like 'flu, but much faster. When we manage moods well – we're cheery, optimistic, supportive or connective – people act the same. We 'resonate' emotionally with each other. This helps us retain energy, handle stress and remain emotionally balanced and creates a positive emotional work climate.



Bad moods are equally infectious. When we act cranky, impatient, intolerant, cynical or sullen, we infect others with toxic feelings and people treat you the same. If you're abrupt, they'll be rude back. If you blame, they'll blame back. When you attack, expect a counter-attack. It's the amygdala at work again – defending us from threats!

“When someone dumps their toxic feelings on us - explodes in anger or threats, shows disgust or contempt - they activate in us circuitry for those very same distressing emotions”, says Daniel Goleman in his book *Social Intelligence*.

People who can't, or won't, control their negative feelings, set off negative emotional chain-reactions that create toxic work climates.

The Cost of Toxic Emotions

Research is showing toxic emotions may pose a serious health threat, just as if they were real, physical bio-hazards. Toxic emotions infect every workplace. They're:

- ❑ Embedded in arguments, caustic comments, dictatorial bosses or cantankerous colleagues

- ❑ Inherent in the stress of work-pressures and meeting deadlines
- ❑ A by-product of not handling our hijacks – the patterns of blame, bullying, rage, resentment that simmer underneath most organisations

The costs of toxic emotions are often invisible. Apart from resignations and absenteeism, they blunt our sense of purpose, poison people's experience of work, rob them of vitality and resilience and drain workforce productivity.

Toxic emotions – generated by you or picked up from others, leave a residual in the body. Unless we learn how to emotionally insulate ourselves from their effects, they can play havoc with our health, behaviour and sense of well-being.

“Strong negative emotions such as anger, sadness, frustration, or despair can be particularly toxic to the human body and affect the immune system's ability to protect it...In effect, handling emotional toxins can be as hazardous as working with physical toxins.” *Peter Frost Toxic Emotions at Work*

Stress at Work: The EI Connection



The stress of non-stop change, the demands to deliver more, cope with more complex work environments, work longer hours and meet tighter deadlines is taking its toll in terms of fatigue, rising stress levels, more caustic

work climates, alienation and illness.

Workplace stress costs Australian organisations hundreds of millions of dollars every year, not to mention costs in lost productivity, accidents, mistakes and staff turnover.

What's the EI link? Well, EI plays a big role in how well we cope with stress and work pressure.

Stress is an emotional reaction first. Depression, acute anxiety, chronic pessimism and many other disabling conditions, are connected to the way we think and react emotionally to stress situations.

- ❑ Not everyone reacts to stress the same way. Some learn to control their stress response better than others – they often seem more resilient, robust, calm and controlled.

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- ❑ The stress response is our bodily reaction to situations we find threatening, tense, fearful, uncomfortable or pressured. It helps us cope with it and can protect and preserve us.
- ❑ Learning how to regulate our emotions and control our stress response and behaviour is one important aspect of EI

In a 2000 Gallop Poll, 80% of workers reported feeling stressed - nearly half said they needed help to learn how to manage it. In 2001, stress claims in the public sector alone cost Australia in excess of \$35 million, according to an ACTU report, and 60%-80% of accidents on the job are stress-related

The Cycle of Stress

When our stress levels go into the red, the same chemicals that energised and made us alert, like cortisol and adrenaline, work in reverse.

They build up in our system – drain us, fatigue sets in, we can't focus, anxiety increases, we feel out of control. These feelings affect our behaviour. We start relating in scratchy ways with people. We snap at them as we start to snap inside. This diagram traces the escalating cycle...



- ❑ We feel more demands on us, so we put more effort and time into work, which eats into relax-time, physical exercise, or other pursuits that kept us balanced.
- ❑ Because this build-up is slow, we ignore the alert signals or wake-up calls this happening. We do defensive routines to justify our bad behaviour. We deny, rationalise, excuse-make or blame.
- ❑ As we get busier, we get more stressed and more off-balance. Things we once handled in our stride start to trip us up. To combat this, we work harder – or withdraw into our shell.

- ❑ We distance ourselves from others and stop connecting with others, which is one support we need in stressful times. Our sense of confidence and energy then wane. We begin to focus even more on how tired, behind-the-game and demanded-of we feel – and that disconnects us more.

Combating Stress and Toxic Emotions

What can we do to manage stress, combat toxic emotions and look after our well-being at work? Here's a few suggestions to practice...

- ☑ **Monitor stress signals**, pay attention to wake-up calls and signs of slipping into stress
- ☑ **Get in tune with and express feelings**. This has a calming effect and literally gets the Amygdala to release 'antidotes'.
- ☑ **Delve deeper into real feelings** – finding the right feeling word (ie. *not* angry – “I was feeling left-out, ignored...”) also has a calming effect.
- ☑ **Avoid muttering maddening messages** – eg. “I feel frustrated, 'pissed-off'” are surface level feelings. They wind us up and infect others.
- ☑ **Reframe your wind-up thoughts** – ones that fuel bad feelings. See what they do to you, and find more calming or consoling thoughts.
- ☑ **List emotional strengths and weaknesses** – ones that have a positive effect for you and others – and ones that have a negative effect.
- ☑ **Pay attention to emotional impacts** you have on others – get feedback on your behaviour.
- ☑ **Identify your triggers** – situations that hijack you, get up your nose or stress you.
- ☑ **Choose your mood** – don't bring bad ones to work and infect others. Consider impact on you and others – be emotionally responsible.
- ☑ **Change stories you have about people**. Bad stories breed bad feelings. Good stories breed more positive emotions that can lead to more healthy feelings and act as a buffer against other's toxic emotions.
- ☑ **Practise Positivity**. Get a handle on levels of

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pessimism and optimism. Catch yourself feeling negative and re-frame more positively.

- ☑ **Create connective moments.** Connecting may be the last thing you feel like when you're stressed and the first you should. Connecting may be a great stress reliever. Empathy is calming, restoring and healing.

"Research shows connecting and compassion may be pivotal in stress relief. Without them we are more vulnerable to toxic emotions - both our own and others. They have a constructive effect on neurological functioning, well-being, physical health and personal relationships and counters the physiological and psychological harm done by stress." In *Becoming a Resonant Leader* McKee, Boyatzis & Johnston p. 38

- ☑ **Cultivate compassion.** Identifying emotionally with others increases connectivity, insulates from toxic emotions and counters physical effects of stress by calming bodily reactions.
- ☑ **Do things that energise you** – tasks that interest you, you find meaningful, extending, that give feelings of satisfaction/completion.
- ☑ **Regular physical activity** helps drain toxicity. Walk. Cycle. Swim. Garden. Dance. Build
- ☑ **Eliminate avoidable stressors.** Make a list of stressors then work through it to see which you can eliminate, lessen or re-proportion.
- ☑ **Work out what really matters most.** Get back in touch with your personal vision, work out what you really should be doing – and do it.
- ☑ **Forgiveness, acceptance and small acts of kindness.** Exercise tolerance for frailties of others. Identify things you sweat over you can let go. Accept what you can't change and do a kind thing for someone every day.
- ☑ **Sanctuary.** Find spots in your environment where you feel more calm, inspired, powerful or protected – and visit them daily or weekly.
- ☑ **Self-reflection.** There are mental disciplines you can use to focus thoughts, control emotional reactions, and take on new patterns of being, thinking and acting that can relieve stress.

Being Well in Workplaces

We hear more these days about the need for work-life balance. Research and common sense, supports the idea that people perform at their best when they're healthy, positive, emotionally-balanced and feel valued by their organisation.

Many organisations (not nearly enough) are providing staff with services to encourage them to look after their health and wellbeing: emotional self-management, healthcare and happiness classes, stress seminars, work-gyms, massage, meditation-relaxation sessions, Tai-chi, pilates, yoga, even colour and aroma-therapy.

- ☐ Staff perceive programs like these as morale-boosters. They feel more valued, recognised, appreciated and rewarded.
- ☐ Organisations see investments like these far outweigh the costs of dissatisfaction, demotivation, depression, burnout and losing staff to stress-related illness.
- ☐ People are more productive and motivated if they enjoy a healthy lifestyle.

Cultivating 'well-being' at work acts like stress inoculation. It also lifts motivation when exercise, relaxation and meditation are incorporated as regular routines into work-life. Workplace well-being programs can be effective on all these levels, either as a preventive strategy to combat stress before it manifests physically or as a way to identify and contain it before it gets critical.

While initiatives like this are great, getting at the systemic causes of toxicity by creating more emotionally intelligent, supportive, compassionate workplaces is still the ultimate solution.

The Change Forum runs a range of programs for staff on emotional intelligence at work, workplace well-being and stress reduction. ☎: 07-4068 7591

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