

CONNECTIONS

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11 Keys to Mastering Difficult Conversations

By Emma Seppälä, Ph.D., **Psychology Today** (Used with the author's permission)

As a happiness and workplace well-being researcher, I hear these questions all the time: What's the best way to master difficult conversations? How can we give feedback with a good outcome?

After all, such talks are inevitable, at home and at work. I've written a number of articles on the topic; here is a summary of that work, including great advice from my colleague Kim Cameron, author of the highly informative book **Positive Leadership**:

1. Deliver more positive than negative feedback.

High-performing organizations deliver roughly five times as many positive statements (supportive, appreciative, encouraging) as negative ones (critical, disapproving, contradictory). This is because bad is stronger than good; our brains focus on negative feedback more than positive feedback. (You know this if you've ever had one bad conversation ruin your whole day.) Positive communication correlates with much higher worker engagement, our research suggests. You can correct your employees, even criticize or confront them, but you want to do so in a positive context. That is when you will see the best results and maintain morale and engagement.

2. Focus on communicating the other person's strengths, unique contributions, and best-self demonstrations.

Traditionally, we tend to focus on giving employees critical feedback. However, by focusing on their weaknesses, we only create competence. By focusing on their strengths, we create *excellence*. Be as specific about positive feedback as you are about negative feedback. We usually gloss over the strengths, mentioning them briefly, but then focus in much greater detail on the critical feedback. Remember to add examples and details to your positive feedback.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2.



Greetings City Employees,

This month, *Connections* focuses on issues related to returning to the workplace (for those of us who have primarily been working from home during the pandemic) and getting back to "business as usual" as City offices and buildings start opening up to the public again. At this point, no particular time frame for this has been announced but it will happen eventually and there is a lot of benefit to being psychologically prepared for this transition.

What are your concerns as we move forward? One of this month's articles, *Having Mixed Emotions about Returning to the Office?*, points out how it is realistic to have a mix of emotions as we consider this new phase we are entering and provides some tips for handling that roller coaster ride. *Refocusing at Work after COVID* also offers some practical suggestions for employees heading back to the office and we have also included information from Mental Health America on how to handle some of the challenges we may face in the coming months that are beyond our control.

For management level staff, we have included several articles about managing your team after the pandemic and having some difficult conversations as we all establish our "new normal". This is also a great opportunity to make improvements in the workplace as Arlyn explains in *Assessing our Culture as we Reintegrate*. EAP has recently created the **Return to the Workplace Guide for Managers and Supervisors** that we hope will be useful to all staff in a leadership role to make the reintegration process go as smoothly as possible.

Don't hesitate to reach out to EAP if there is anything we can do to ease this transition!

~ The EAP Team



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1.

3. Emphasize collaboration and commonalities.

Try to stay objective when you speak about a negative event. Describe the problematic situation, rather than evaluating it; identify objective consequences or your personal feelings associated with it, rather than placing blame); and suggest acceptable alternatives, rather than arguing about who is right or at fault.

4. Be aware of your facial expression.

We deduce how someone is helping from their facial expression. Someone's smile activates the smile muscles in your own face, while their frown activates your frown muscles, according to research by Ulf Dimberg. We internally register what another person is feeling by experiencing it in our own body. Smiling is so important to social interactions that we can discern whether someone is smiling even if we can't see them. Your smile is thus something to think about even if you are delivering feedback over the phone. Smile appropriately to project warmth and goodwill.

5. Maintain eye contact.

Eyes really are the windows to the soul: You can predictably determine someone's emotions from their gaze. Eye contact is the crucial first step for *resonance*, or a person's ability to read someone else's emotions. It's also important for creating a feeling of connection. Make and maintain eye contact when you're giving someone feedback.

6. Control your voice.

From infancy, we are acutely aware of the voices of people we consider important, and the way we feel about another person shifts the way we speak. The tone of our voice, more than the words themselves, can give away how we feel. In fact, new research shows that we can often predict someone's emotions from their voice.

7. Take an easy posture.

The way a person sits—slumped or sitting tall, arms open or crossed—transmits a message. When we walk into a room and find someone sitting with their arms crossed, we feel less connected to them. Having your chest open, arms uncrossed, making sure to keep nodding, smiling, and vocalizing (saying things like “mm-hmm” and “yes”) will help. Make sure you take on a non-dominant stance. Your role is already powerful; the best way for the other party to hear you is if you are not domineering.

8. Breathe.

Research shows that the emotions we feel change the way that we breathe. You have probably noticed that when you're stressed or angry you breathe quickly and shallowly, and when tired or exasperated, you are more likely to sigh. Similarly, when we are with someone who sighs a lot, we may feel that they are annoyed at us. Before your conversation, try to take some deep, calming breaths. When you exhale, your heart rate and blood pressure decrease, so focus on breathing out longer than you breathe in. Doing this for a couple of minutes before a meeting will help you start from a place of calm. That calmness will also help your interlocutor feel more at ease.

9. Pay attention.

Our mind wanders 50 percent of the time, research suggests. Moreover, given our busy schedules and the messages and emails that pop onto our screens all day, we are sometimes not present with the people in front of us: We're still processing something that happened earlier, or thinking about an article we just read or a call we just had. The people you are talking to can tell. When you are not fully present, you are less likely to hear them and respond skillfully, let alone understand where they are coming from.

10. Be authentic.

Even if you follow all of the other tips listed here, it's critical that you be authentic, or all of your efforts will backfire. Just think of how you feel when you're around someone who seems to be something they are not: We often walk away feeling uncomfortable or manipulated—and our blood pressure rises in the face of inauthenticity, according to research by James Gross at Stanford.

11. Show compassion.

Rather than seeing the feedback situation as “work” or something you need to get through, see the conversation as an opportunity to connect with another person who has their own needs and pain. Everyone, at some point, goes through tough times, sad times, painful times. By remembering the human experiences we all share, you will find that you are able to bring kindness and compassion into the conversation. If you are giving feedback, you will probe into what has prompted your employee to act a certain way, and you will find the right words to encourage a different type of behavior. Research shows that employees feel greater loyalty and are inspired to work harder for managers who are compassionate and kind.

*For more on happiness and happiness at work, check out my book **The Happiness Track**.*

Assessing Our Culture As We Reintegrate

By Arlyn Gonzalez, MSW, LCSW, Employee Assistance Specialist

The MAC/WIC Workplace Climate Survey found that 25% of survey responders reported that they had experienced workplace harassment, bullying, or discrimination in the past year. This is unacceptable, it is time for us to do better. To create a healthy work environment for all employees to be able to thrive and succeed.

The reintegrating back into the workplace, provides us an opportunity to change the harmful work culture that has been occurring across the City of Madison. It is a chance for us to recreate what we envision our work culture to be like. Below are some recommendations for managers and supervisors to consider to address this:

1. Supervisors/managers should do an anonymous survey to determine what was previously going well, what needs to improve, and what employees would like their work culture to look like. Having an anonymous survey will allow employees to feel safe in being open and honest in their experiences. This can help managers better identify what changes they need to make and give an employee an opportunity to feel heard and have input on what things will look like moving forward.

2. Assessing work culture can also be done in individual meetings with employees but it is crucial for this to be addressed in a meeting with the entire staff. Use this meeting as a place to go over the survey results and to brainstorm what people want the culture to look like moving forward. Additionally, it is important to remind employees of the resources available to them such as **EAP, DCR, and the MAC Peer Advisor Program.**
3. Finally, make a plan! Establish work culture rules as a result of this conversation and ways in which you are planning to hold yourself and your employees accountable. Employees may not know what to expect and what things will be like when they are all in the office again. Remember that this is a process and so you may have to reconvene and makes changes as you go.

Having a conversation about workplace culture is a great way to reengage employees and increase retention rates. As we are having these workplace culture meetings it is also important to allow individuals to tell their stories and experiences during this past year. Normalize that this is another transition filled with uncertainty, which may have us behaving in unusual ways, thus needing to be patient and compassionate. Reignite your employee's passion by reminding them of the purpose and value in the work that they all do.

If you would like more information and tips on holding a back to work meeting check out EAP's "**Return to the Workplace Guide for City Managers & Supervisors.**"



Managing your Team after COVID-19

By FEI Workforce Resilience

Being a manager during a stressful event, such as COVID-19, may be a new experience for you. Learning to adapt to changes in your work environment and workload, as well as your employees, is important. And, once the dust settles, a new normal will start to present itself. This new normalcy can create emotions you have never recognized or addressed before in your staff. When going back into the work environment, each employee will handle the transition differently.

Address changes in behavior.

As a manager, you are responsible for your employees' ability to fully engage with their work. Returning to the workplace following COVID-19, may present employees with a unique emotional barrier—fear of being exposed to COVID-19 in the workplace. Some employees will share this fear with you upfront; others may not. So, it is important to pay attention to changes in your employees' behaviors to recognize how they may be feeling, and address that in a constructive way. Behavioral changes—such as an employee being late, missing meetings or deadlines, avoiding new tasks or responsibilities, or disrupting the team with a short temper or impatient emails—can all be indications of emotional unease or fear related to COVID-19. It's important to follow up with employees with your observations about their behavior and ask what's going on, explain how their behavior is affecting the team, and ask how you can help.

Keep communication open.

When returning to work, remember to keep the lines of communication open to all your employees. Let them know they can come to you about anything impacting their engagement with work. Each employee may communicate differently. Some individuals are hesitant to proactively engage in communication with management. Take the time to check in with all your employees—even those who appear to be handling things well. Even if they are perfectly fine now, your openness and support now will encourage them in the future.

Listen and share.

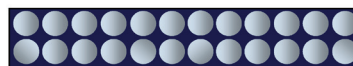
Allow your staff to express their feelings to you and listen. Simply by listening, you can help ease fear or other emotions they are facing. In addition, sharing your own experiences related to fear might be helpful to your employee. Knowing that a person in a leadership role is going through or has gone through similar feelings might help some staff feel better about the situation.

Compromise and accommodate.

Your employees are your business' greatest asset. If you notice changes in an employee or they confide in you that they have reservations about returning to the office, do your best to make a supportive plan. For example, if they ask to work from home for a week longer or they request to work in a space separate from other staff to ease their fears, set some boundaries and accommodate these requests. If the reality of your business means that you simply can't make the specific accommodation your employee requests, explain that honestly and share whatever options you can.

Create an opportunity. This pandemic has provided a moment to stop and reevaluate company values and practices. The workplace behaviors that you likely shared during the pandemic of team solidarity, compromise, efficiency, creativity, and compassion, do not need to disappear when everyone returns to the workplace. These can elevate your workplace and your company's bottom line. A successful return to work plan includes figuring out how to support and integrate these behaviors into your company's culture and goals going forward.

Franco, F. & Gregg-Meeker, C. (2020, April 20). Managing your team after COVID-19 (A. Gaddis, Ed.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.



Return to the Workplace Guide
for City Managers and Supervisors

Employee Assistance Program
CITY OF MADISON
April 2021

<https://www.cityofmadison.com/employee-assistance-program>

EAP staff have created the **Return to the Workplace Guide for City Managers and Supervisors** to assist City leaders with the process of reintegrating their staff back into the workplace and also preparing their staff as the City transitions back to serving the public in person.

Refocusing at Work after COVID-19

By FEI Workforce Resilience

In many places, local orders to quarantine or stay-at-home are being lifted. Companies are making plans to resume operations. This will likely be a slow process that varies greatly depending on where you live and the type of job you have.

You may be excited, or even a little apprehensive, about returning to your workplace. Your workday may not look the same as it did before, and there will likely be new procedures to follow. For many, working from home was a new experience that required a big adjustment in how they performed their duties. Returning to work will be another adjustment. Here are some ideas that can help make this next adjustment a bit easier.

Familiarize yourself with your company's new procedures and make a plan. Your work schedule or duties may not look the same when you return to work. Many companies will be making accommodations to continue to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As an example, this may take the form of split work weeks, where you spend part of your time in the office and part of your time working from home.

Understanding what is expected of you will help you to meet those expectations. Having a plan for your week will help you keep track of when and where you are working, as well as what tasks you need to complete that week. Be sure to talk to your manager if you have any questions or concerns about the new policies or expectations for your job.

Create a checklist to make sure you have all the supplies you need. Take time to gather any work equipment that you need to bring back to the office. Make sure this is organized and ready to go the night before, so that you can grab it on your way out the door the next morning. Be sure to include things you might need to protect yourself, such as cleaning supplies to help sanitize your workspace, or protective wear. Since you may be moving between work and working from home for a while, organizing a work bag for yourself could keep you from forgetting something important.

Allow yourself extra time. A morning commute is not really a part of people's lives right now, but it will be again. It may take some adjustments to your routine to get out the door on time to make it into work. When you do return to your workplace, allow yourself extra time for your commute. Keep in mind any new procedures for drop-off at your childcare provider and any additional time you may need for that.

If you arrive at work early, you will have time to settle back into your workspace. You may want to clean or sanitize your area before you begin the day, or you may want to spend some time rearranging things to help you work more efficiently.

It will be exciting to see people again face-to-face, so try to socialize mainly during break times. Remember to keep social distancing measures in place as you return to work, keeping six feet between you and your coworkers when possible. The ability to talk to your coworkers face-to-face for the first time in a long time will be a tempting distraction from work for the first few days. Socialization is important and catching up with coworkers can ease the stress about COVID-19.

During this transitional time, many employers may initially allow a bit more time for people to reconnect as they come back to work.

Adaptability is an important skill to develop. By adjusting to life in quarantine, you have already proven you can be adaptable. The way you work and the tasks you are responsible for now may need to change to prevent the spread of COVID-19 or accommodate new business realities. Try to be understanding and remain patient with yourself and your coworkers.

Take it one step and one day at a time. Don't try to take on too much at once and become overwhelmed. Staying organized and focusing on one task at a time will help you get back into the swing of working at the office. Remember it will take time to adjust to the new normal in your workplace. Don't try to rush yourself or others. Everyone will adjust to being back in the workplace differently. It is important to find what works for you.

Practice meditation or mindfulness exercises. The skills and techniques you learn from the practice of mindfulness or meditation can help you relax, reduce stress, and improve your focus. These techniques can bring you back to the present moment and help you calm a chaotic mind. This calmness will give you the focus needed to complete the tasks assigned to you. Taking a few minutes in the day to reset yourself may be just what you need to get through a particularly difficult task.

Contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) if you need help adjusting. Be sure to take care of your health as you return to work, including mental health. This is a stressful time and transitioning back to the workplace can add extra stress. Your EAP is available to help you process these emotions and refocus. Additionally, your EAP can assist with locating various resources that may be helpful at this time, including family care needs (if your benefit includes this service).

If you need extra support during this transition, call your EAP at 266-6561 and schedule a time to talk with a counselor.

Having Mixed Emotions about Returning to the Office?

By Melanie A. Katzman, Ph.D., *Psychology Today*

They are an edge, not an impediment.

At last! The moment we have all been waiting for! Or is it? After months of lockdown, WFH, and physical distancing, many non-essential businesses are starting to reopen or considering a gradual reentry. The return to stricter daily schedules, bedside alarms, commutes, and the need to wear something other than active-wear marks a significant change (for better or worse) for many of us. This is especially true for people who have been isolating, working from home, or living for an extended period with (or without) family or close friends.

Ask yourself a quick “How do you feel?” Are you able to capture your emotion with one simple word? Or do you have to pause, to capture the complexity of the moment? Communicating how we feel is particularly difficult when multiple—often contradictory—emotions are competing for our attention.

You may be experiencing:

Excitement, relief...

- Finally! I can escape house arrest.
- I can get back to business as (kind of) usual.
- With all that’s happened in the world, I want to be *with* and think *with* my colleagues.
- No more seeing colleagues in Zoom boxes; coworkers can share a coffee and co-create in person.
- My life and career are moving on (at last).

You may also be feeling:

Fear and anxiety...

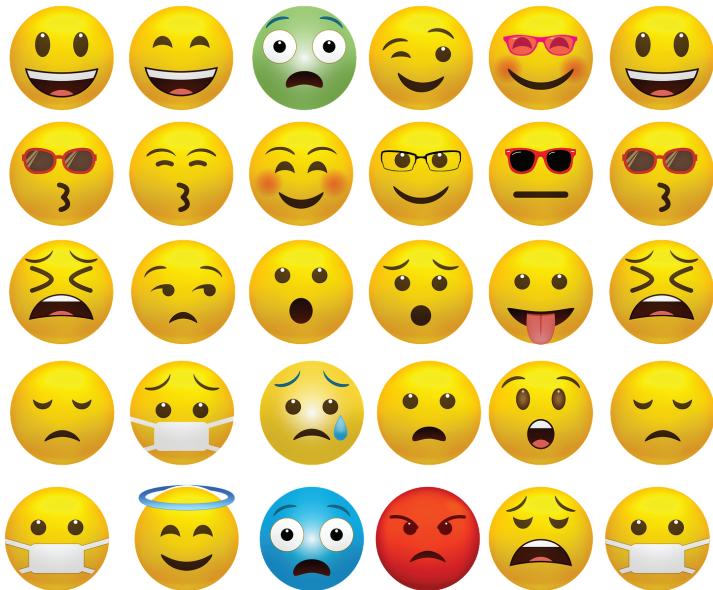
- What procedures will be in place to ensure we are safe at the office?
- How will I get to work? I’m really afraid to use public transportation.
- I don’t have childcare; summer camp was canceled; how can I return to the office?
- We don’t have a return to work date yet; do I renew my lease? Can I WFH in a summer house I rent with friends? Will I be called back on short notice?
- I don’t want to return to a life in overdrive!

Reentry is activating many affective states and the good news is that we don’t have to choose just one. Mixed emotions are often a more accurate and adaptive reaction to complex experiences. Some people believe they should have a singular feeling toward someone: like or dislike. Or one reaction towards an event: happy or sad. This can be very limiting. Accepting conflicting feelings is important because it indicates that you are open to various inputs; willing to consider a wider array of information. Avoiding the negative (or attempting to) can result in irresponsible denial. A dose of positivity can power people through adversity, while overly rosy lenses can put you out of touch. Recognizing, valuing, and giving voice to competing reactions increases resiliency—especially in the face of adverse events.

The pandemic has forced many of us into a highly alert emotional state where unpredictability has become the norm. This lack of certainty leads to a loss of control and may spark mood swings as we try to make sense of the events around us. Feeling two emotions at once, wavering between strong feelings ... it’s easy to feel out of balance. When this happens, it’s even more difficult to align ourselves with others. Although you and your colleagues are well-intended trapeze artists, you may be missing the chance to emotionally connect.

It’s important not to be self-critical if you can’t decide on a singular descriptor of your current state. Equally, you need to have patience with others. “How am I feeling?” “Mixed” is an acceptable answer—and likely a very honest one. You may feel strongly one way in the morning, but by mid-day, your perspective might have shifted. And the same is true for your co-workers. You may be aligned one day and at odds another.

Especially during these unsettling times, resist labeling each other. Recognize that your emotional responses may vacillate. If we acknowledge that the pandemic has been a global crisis—with some silver linings—it will help us find meaning and maintain momentum. Mixed emotions are part of the wonders of being human.



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What can you do to cope amidst the complexity of conflicting feelings? Here are some immediate steps:

Actions:

- Recognize that you can be excited for a return to work and quite fearful. Instead of silencing one part of your reaction, try to formulate questions that need answering to increase your comfort. Rather than guessing (or fretting), ask your employer directly about COVID safety protocols at the office.
- If you are full of enthusiasm (or are pretending to be), be sensitive to others who may be feeling trepidation.
- If any of your co-workers died or lost loved ones, consider ways to honor their passing now that your team is back together again. This will allow people to mourn and to more easily move through their grief. It may have been months since the loss, but the emotions are likely still lingering.
- If you are managing a team where some members lost their jobs, make room to appreciate the contributions of all those who are returning, while also allowing colleagues to express their feelings about missing coworkers.
- With leaner teams in place, there's the possibility of increased responsibility and maybe even a promotion. There's also a chance that more work has to be done by fewer people. Create forums to refine role descriptions and make sure everyone is clear on responsibilities.
- Try to schedule 1:1 or small group meetings with your team to learn more about their concerns. This includes practical issues around on-site work and safety, as well as questions around career advancement and productivity. Remember, in many instances, daily outputs may have soared while working from home, even though discussions around promotion stalled.
- Before you all jump back on the treadmill, why not review ways your team may have been efficient—with less intensity—during lockdown? What new guidelines can you establish?
- At the start of quarantine, you may have missed many of your usual routines. Now, as you return to work, you may find yourself longing for some of your lockdown rituals. What can be incorporated into the new normal (e.g., a lunchtime visit from your family or a mid-day exercise break)? Share these ideas with your coworkers, as they too may be wanting a reason to wear those yoga pants again.
- While it's tempting to tell extreme stories of either how hard you had it, or conversely, what a great time you had becoming an expert baker or virtuoso of home improvements, be sensitive to your audience. Share your real self, which likely was someone who, over the past few months, had moments of grace and periods of frustration and fear.
- You don't have a magic wand, but you do have two ears. You can't eliminate fear or promise a whole new office life, but you can—and should—encourage people to be candid about what they're experiencing. And in return? Listen. Provide clear, transparent communication about what you know and what you don't know. Be honest! Share what you're doing as a business to lower the risks for staff and customers. Be clear about the improvements you can offer.
- Human beings are social animals and experience improved mental health when responding to a crisis together. If you can gather, safely distanced, make this a time to share feelings and make an event of it (offer drinks or a treat). Let those newly minted chefs show off!
- Be a mixed emotions role model. Set the stage for others to steer clear of a single, uni-dimensional answer to "How are you feeling?"

Most importantly, be patient with yourself and others. Changing your mind or emotional expression isn't a sign of weakness, it is authentic, and serves as an invitation for colleagues to reflect on their own humanity in turn.

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ACCEPTING REALITY



Sometimes in life we end up in situations that we just can't change. Radical acceptance is all about fully accepting your reality in situations that are beyond your control. This doesn't mean you approve of the situation, are giving up, or that it isn't painful. You are still allowed to (and should!) feel however you feel, but by accepting that it is what it is, you give the problem less power over you and you can begin to move forward.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS



Notice when you're fighting against reality. The first step in accepting reality is gaining awareness that you're resisting it. It may seem like this would be easy to spot, but there are actually a lot of subtle ways that people push against reality. If you're feeling bitter or resentful, wishing things were different, or thinking about how life isn't fair, you might be fighting reality.



Remind yourself that you can't change what has already happened. Before you can make peace with reality, you have to acknowledge that there's no going back to the way things were. Doing this may be challenging and painful, but by identifying what you can and can't control, you can turn your energy towards coping with the things you can't change.



Embrace your feelings. You might still be angry, scared, overwhelmed, or lonely – that's okay. Accepting reality includes everything that you're feeling, too. When you accept these feelings and let yourself experience them without any judgement, you can work through them in a healthy way.



Pretend that you're accepting reality. Even if you're still struggling to fully accept reality, think about what it would look like if you *did*. How would you act if you simply accepted things as they are? What would your next step be? Changing your behaviors and actions to reflect "pretend acceptance" can help you to actually shift your thoughts.



Relax your body. If you're feeling stressed or are pushing against the reality of your situation, there's a good chance your body is tense. This is often associated with resistance and keeps your mind on high alert. Physically relaxing your body can help you feel more ready to accept what is reality. Try yoga, taking a hot bath or shower, deep breathing exercises, or getting a massage to help you relax.



Use coping statements. These are sentences that remind you that different, healthier ways of thinking are possible. Repeating them can help you get through difficult moments – you can focus on just one or make a long list of your own. Some examples are: *It is what it is. I can't change what has already happened. I can accept things the way they are. I can only control my own actions and reactions.* If it helps, write your coping statements on Post-It notes and put them in places where you will see them multiple times a day, or set an alarm/create an event on your phone with a coping statement to pop up with a reminder every now and again.



Know that it takes practice. Radical acceptance is a great tool to cope with hard situations that we can't control, but it can take a while before it comes easily. Don't get down on yourself if you don't master it immediately. Start by trying it out in smaller situations, like when you're stuck in traffic or your internet is acting up during a call. By practicing radical acceptance on a daily basis, it will be easier to use as a coping tool when bigger, tougher challenges come your way.

FAST FACTS



Practicing radical acceptance has been shown to reduce feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety.¹



Acceptance coping skills are linked to lower rates of mental illness and suicide.²



Radical acceptance can reduce distress in dealing with negative thoughts or events.³

TAKING A MENTAL HEALTH SCREEN IS ONE WAY TO WORK ON YOUR MENTAL HEALTH. VISIT [MHASCREENING.ORG](https://mhascreening.org) TO CHECK YOUR SYMPTOMS.



It's free, confidential, and anonymous. Once you have your results, MHA will give you information and resources to help you start to feel better.

Sources

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DEALING WITH ANGER AND FRUSTRATION

TOOLS
2
THRIVE



In challenging times, you may find that you have little patience with other people or get upset over minor things. Anger and frustration are complicated emotions that often stem from other feelings, like disappointment, fear, and stress. Taking some extra steps to decrease your overall tension can prevent your feelings (and the reactions that they cause) from spiraling out of control.

TIPS FOR COPING



Pause before reacting. When you feel yourself getting mad, take a moment to notice what you're thinking, then take a few deep breaths or count to ten in your head. By giving yourself even just a few seconds before reacting, you can put some emotional distance between you and whatever is upsetting you – and you might even realize that you're actually tense because of something else.



Change your surroundings. Anger can make you feel trapped. Whether you're mad at someone in the same room as you or just angry at the world, sometimes physically relocating yourself can help you start to calm down. Go to another room or step outside for a few minutes of fresh air to help disrupt the track that your mind is on.



Get it all out. Keeping your feelings bottled up never works, so allow yourself time to be angry and complain. As long as you don't focus on it for too long, venting can be a healthy outlet for your anger. You can open up to a trusted friend or write it all down in a journal. Sometimes it feels better to pretend to talk directly to the person (or situation) that you're angry at – pick an empty chair, pretend they're sitting in it, and say what you need to get off your chest.



Release built up energy. Anger is a high-energy emotion, and we store that energy and tension physically in our bodies. Exercise is a great way to get rid of extra energy and can improve your mood. Some people find grounding exercises (like meditation or deep breathing) helpful to calm intense feelings, while others prefer more high impact activities like running or weightlifting. Think about what you usually do to decompress, like taking a hot shower or blasting your favorite music and use the tools that you know work for you.



Get organized. When things around you feel chaotic, it's often a lot easier to get frustrated and snap at people. Dedicate a few minutes each day to tidying, planning, or reorganizing. Implementing a routine can also help you feel more on top of things by adding structure and certainty to your daily life.



Eliminate stressors if possible. Sometimes there's no way to completely get rid of a big problem, but there's often more than just one issue contributing to your frustration. Things like an overwhelming workload or unhealthy relationship can make you feel on edge. Pay attention to how and why you're feeling stressed and see if you can make small changes to improve a challenging situation to make it less burdensome.



Manage your expectations. Negative feelings often stem from people or situations not meeting your standards or assumptions. It's frustrating to feel let down but recognize that you can't fully predict anyone else's behavior or how situations will play out. Shift your mental framework so that you aren't setting yourself up for disappointment.



Don't be afraid to ask for help. If you're working to cope with your anger but feel like you can't get it under control, it's time to get some extra support. Anger can fester and become explosive if not resolved. A number of mental health conditions can manifest as anger, so this may actually be a sign of depression or anxiety – treating an underlying condition can help heal your anger as well.

FAST FACTS



Of people who took an anxiety screen at mhascreening.org in 2020, 71% felt easily annoyed or irritable at least half of the time or nearly every day.¹



Of people who took a bipolar screen at mhascreening.org in 2020, 82% reported being so irritable that they shouted at people or started fights or arguments.²



One poll found that 91% of respondents said that they feel people are more likely to express their anger on social media than they are face-to-face.³

TAKING A MENTAL HEALTH SCREEN IS ONE WAY TO WORK ON YOUR MENTAL HEALTH. VISIT [MHASCREENING.ORG](https://mhascreening.org) TO CHECK YOUR SYMPTOMS.



It's free, confidential, and anonymous. Once you have your results, MHA will give you information and resources to help you start to feel better.

Sources

¹Proprietary data. [MHAScreening.org](https://mhascreening.org). 2020.

²Ibid.

³IBM Watson Health-NPR Health Poll. November 1-14, 2018. <https://www.ibm.com/downloads/cas/2YQ8NLD5>

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PROCESSING BIG CHANGES



Change is a guaranteed part of life. It's something everyone experiences at one point or another — good or bad. Sometimes that change happens in big ways when we aren't expecting it or aren't prepared for it. These types of situations can make navigating your path forward really difficult. By providing yourself with tools for processing change, you can adapt more easily.

TIPS FOR PROCESSING CHANGE



Focus on what you can control. One of the hardest things about big change is how helpless it can often make you feel. At some point, you'll probably have to accept the change that you're experiencing and then focus on what you can control within that. For example, you can control how you react to situations, how you start each day, or how nice you are to yourself and others. It can be comforting to know that there are still things that you have control over, even when other things are changing.



Write out your feelings on paper. When you're processing big changes, your brain may feel like it's constantly racing. It's easy to feel overwhelmed with all of the things you're feeling and thinking. Instead of holding it all in your mind, allow yourself to release it. Writing things down is one of the best ways to do that. Start a journal—jot down a quick list of your thoughts and feelings or write a letter to yourself or someone else. Just get it all out onto paper.



Keep up your self-care where you can. When so much of your life feels different and overwhelming, it's tempting to want to stay in bed or on the sofa and avoid what's bothering you. However, it's important to keep up your normal habits as much as possible, especially when it comes to protecting your mental health. The changes you're facing may mean a totally different routine, but incorporating the small, familiar self-care habits that you know work for you — even if it's something simple like showering or taking a walk after dinner — can give you the mental clarity to process the big changes.



Find support. With any change that you're facing right now, there's a good chance that someone else has felt the exact same way that you're feeling too. Depending on what you're struggling with, you may be able to talk to friends or family about it, find an online support group, or open up to a mental health professional. Whoever it ends up being that you turn to, having someone who can listen and provide support can help you through any transition you're working through.



Tune into the good. No matter what kind of change has come into your life, there is most likely some grief that coincides with processing it. Even a seemingly good change like getting a new job can have you grieving the day-to-day interactions you had with coworkers where you used to work. Let yourself grieve, but also try not to get stuck spiraling into the fear, anguish, and negativity that those changes may bring. Instead, try and retrain your brain to think of the positives in your life by doing things like practicing gratitude, focusing on the small things that bring you joy, or reframing challenges as opportunities.



Make plans. It's okay if you aren't an incredibly organized person, but when you're processing big changes, it can be helpful to focus on planning. You don't have to stick to your plan perfectly; just starting small with what your day or week is going to look like can help get rid of that uncertainty that comes with change.



Think of your strength. Big changes tend to challenge and test you, but it's likely that you'll grow from all of the things that you're facing. Remind yourself as often as possible that you are strong and capable and can make it through whatever challenges you're facing (and that you've made it through some tough changes in the past). Maybe even say it out loud to yourself to really let it sink in. With each passing day, you're building resilience.

FAST FACTS



People that journaled about significant events reported more satisfaction with their lives and better mental health over those that did not.¹



Strong social support from family members following significant life events seriously lessens depression symptoms in teens and has a lasting positive effect in dealing with life changes.²



Adults who avoid problems struggle more with depression later on than those who actively approach problems with coping strategies.³

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It's free, confidential, and anonymous. Once you have your results, MHA will give you information and resources to help you start to feel better.

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Sources

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COVID-19 and “Diseases of Despair”

Even before the arrival of COVID-19, our nation was experiencing a mental health crisis, with suicide rates climbing to their highest level since World War II.

Since the pandemic's arrival, we've faced a series of hardships: the loss of loved ones, economic insecurity, social unrest, ongoing stress, anxiety and uncertainty.

These hardships are known to exacerbate “diseases of despair,” such as substance abuse, alcohol dependency, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Studies show millennials, minorities and essential workers are among the hardest hit. However, we're all impacted—children, parents, coworkers and friends.

Experts recommend reaching out to those who appear to be struggling. Listening to their concerns and providing emotional support can be very effective. It's also important to watch for sudden changes in mood, feelings of hopelessness, withdrawal and incidents of self-harm. These are signs that professional help is necessary.

Keep in mind that diseases of despair are treatable conditions. By getting proper therapy and developing effective coping strategies, it is possible to overcome these conditions and regain emotional well-being.



NEED HELP?

Your EAP can provide additional guidance and resources.

2021 WEBINAR SERIES

MAY 19, 11am CT

How To Recognize and Respond To Suicide Risk

REGISTER

Suicide prevention starts with recognizing the warning signs and taking them seriously. If you, a family member, co-worker or friend appears to be having suicidal thoughts, there's plenty you can do to save a life. We'll take a closer look at what to say and resources you can use, including emergency hotlines.

Presented by **Nancy Pierce, MA, LCSW**
Consultant and Trainer
Mental Health Crisis Consultants

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*Thanks for reading,
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