

Emotional Intelligence

3 Exercises to Boost Your Emotional Intelligence, According to Research

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June 26, 2024



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Summary. Everyone struggles to manage their emotions at times. It's normal to have negative feelings and we can't expect ourselves – or others – to leave those behind just because we're at work. But those negative emotions can be detrimental to our relationships,... [more](#)

Have you ever reacted to a situation at work in a way you weren't proud of? Or sent an email when you were upset that you later regretted? No matter how successful or accomplished we may be, we all struggle with managing our emotions at times — and suffer the consequences afterward.

There's an unspoken and long-held belief that you're supposed to “leave your emotions at the door” when you enter your workplace. But it's not that simple. Emotions aren't like shoes you can kick off. And, as most of us have painfully noticed, it's often the people

that we care about the most and want to upset the least — our loved ones or important colleagues — who bear the brunt of our inability to handle our negative emotions.

Research shows that negative emotions impact not only our relationships but also our ability to show up at our best — our focus, attention, memory, physical health, mental health, and decision-making all suffer when we're feeling emotions like stress, frustration, fear or anger. It's critical to know how to handle them. This is where emotional intelligence comes in.

I've taught emotional intelligence to thousands of leaders at the Yale School of Management and witnessed the transformative effect it can have on a person's success. Three key elements of emotional intelligence are self-awareness, self-regulation, and positive connections. In my latest book *Sovereign*, I examine science-backed strategies for how to strengthen these skills. These strategies can boost your emotional intelligence quickly.

Tap Into Your Self-Awareness in Two Minutes

When you interact with someone in a way you later regret, it's usually not intentional. You often didn't mean to be rude, disrespectful, or unkind. You just failed to be self-aware.

What is self-awareness? The ability to be conscious of what is happening in your mind — Am I upset? Am I tired? — and not falling prey to reactivity or impulsive behavior when someone pushes your buttons. Developing self-awareness, by improving emotional intelligence, prevents relationship mishaps.

There is a dedicated part of our brain that pays attention to our internal state through a process neuroscientists call interoception, but here's the catch: We often fail to use it.

An exercise I teach in all my classes can help you immediately tap into that part of your brain and boost your self-awareness.

Sit down and close your eyes. Bring your attention inward. Then do these three steps:

1. Notice the state of your body.

On a spectrum of energy ranging from very tired to very energized, where do you fall today? Scan your body. Notice how it feels: Are you hungry? Are there places where you feel particularly tense or relaxed?

2. Take note of your thoughts and their “traffic level.”

Thoughts pass through the mind all day, popping in and out constantly. If each thought was a car, what would the traffic level be? Is it a busy highway, a quiet country road, or somewhere in between?

3. Notice your emotions.

Whether you consider yourself emotional or not, you feel emotions every minute of the day. You may feel calm, curious, or enthusiastic, or you may feel more neutral, angry, or stressed.

You can measure emotions in two ways: First, how pleasant or unpleasant are they? On a spectrum from pleasant to unpleasant, where do your feelings currently fall? And second, how intense are they? They may be neutral. On a spectrum from intense to not intense, where do they currently fall?

By doing this exercise, you'll get a quick assessment of your internal thought traffic and stress levels. It'll help you decide whether you're in an optimal state to do what you're about to do next.

For example, let's say next up on your calendar is an important meeting with a difficult colleague to whom you are planning to give feedback. You do this quick self-awareness exercise and realize you're feeling tense and have a speedy highway running through your mind. It's possible that your colleague will interpret the heavy thought traffic in your mind as you being distracted, stressed, irritable, and disrespectful. Your communication will be less effective, and the outcome of your interaction may not be as good as it could be. Self-awareness can prevent this *faux pas* if you

choose to either reschedule the meeting or do something to improve your state of mind prior to the meeting. (More on that next.)

Self-Regulate with Your Breath

Research I conducted with colleagues at Yale University, as well as numerous other studies, show that breathing exercises are one of the most effective and fastest ways to handle emotions in real time. Using your breath can get you from a heightened emotional state (let's say a 10 on a 1-10 scale) to a more relaxed one (say, a 2) in mere minutes.

One exercise you can try is to lengthen your exhalations. Why? When you inhale, your heart rate increases. When you exhale, it slows down.

Whenever you need to self-regulate, for example before presenting to the senior leadership team or when you're trying to stay patient in a frustrating meeting, try this exercise: Close your eyes and breathe in for a count of four and out for a count of eight for a minimum of two minutes.

Taking a few minutes to slow down and lengthen your exhales will activate your parasympathetic nervous system, the part of your autonomic nervous system that helps your body rest and digest, the opposite of the "fight-or-flight system" which prepares your body to either fight or flee from a perceived threat. As a result, you'll calm you down quickly.

Forge Connections with Micro-Moments of Upliftment

Ever noticed how some people can leave you feeling drained, tired, and down? While after interacting with others, you feel hopeful, uplifted, and energized?

What's the difference? In the second case, you were likely dealing with what we call a "positive energizer," a highly emotionally intelligent person who understands the importance of micro-

moments of upliftment. Studies have shown that those people not only have a positive impact on our wellbeing, but they are also capable of creating super-productivity in organizations.

You can hone your skills as a positive energizer (after all, a key aspect of emotional intelligence is being able to connect with others in a positive and life-affirming way) by finding small moments to uplift others. These aren't about being Pollyannish or putting on a fake smile. (That veers into toxic positivity.)

Highly emotionally intelligent people know how to create positivity in a values-driven way: They do it with humility, empathy, compassion, honesty, integrity, and forgiveness. What does it feel like to be around people who have these values? You feel safe, seen, heard, valued, appreciated, and understood.

Try to see every encounter as an opportunity to leave the other person feeling uplifted. It takes less than a minute to share a compliment, a laugh, a compassionate word, or even a smile. Research shows you won't just leave the other person feeling better; you'll feel better yourself — as long as your words and actions are authentic.

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While these three exercises can help you in the moment, you can also train yourself to be more self-aware, emotionally intelligent, and positive through regular meditation practice. Neuroscience studies show that meditation strengthens areas of the brain that promote self-control, self-awareness, and emotion regulation. This may be because you create more spaciousness from your thoughts and feelings when you are meditating than when you are doing some other relaxing activity. Your words and actions become less unconscious and reactive. You respond with greater skill. No wonder many CEOs meditate.

Our work relationships matter a lot, and yet we rarely, if ever receive any formal schooling or training about how to relate to others. Cultivating emotional intelligence — especially self-

awareness, self-regulation, and positive connections — helps us to not only make our interactions more pleasant and productive, but also increase our well-being and be better leaders.

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