Calming the tempest



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Jo Maughan provides some practical tips for managing strong emotions in the workplace

Key Points

What is the issue?

We all encounter strong emotions in the workplace, whether our own or those of other people, and these can be difficult to handle.

What does it mean to me?

If you want to feel better equipped to deal with these emotionally charged situations, both compassionately and professionally, read on.

What can I take away?

An understanding of the psychological and physiological background, and powerful ‘in the moment’ strategies to use either when you’re feeling strong emotions such as anger or frustration, or when you’re dealing with someone feeling those emotions.

At times, we all encounter strong emotions in the workplace, whether our own or those of other people. It can be difficult to know how to deal with them because they’re usually unexpected, and in Western society we seem to have bought into the idea that there’s no place at work for emotions. Whereas in reality, we are all human beings with feelings; whether we like it or not, and whether we recognise it or not, our feelings are always there. So when they break through into the open, we need to have simple strategies at our finger tips to be able to handle them compassionately, constructively and professionally.

Have you ever been in emotional situations like the ones I found myself in some years ago? (Names have been changed to protect the innocent.)

It’s 2009. I’m sitting at my desk opposite my boss, who’s also sitting at his desk in our bright, open plan area. He looks up from his computer, stands, and comes round to my desk. He perches on the low, white cupboard, and says: ‘Your project is off. Bob doesn’t want to do it anymore. He’s engaged EY to look at longer-term options.’ ‘What?’ I reply in disbelief. He repeats exactly what he said again. I feel a ball of anger inside, as I think about all the time my colleagues and I have spent on this project. As I start to speak, tears well up in my eyes: ‘Just like that? The team has been working on this project for nine months. I’ve now got to tell them it’s off. Just like that?’ I’m crying now. I’m surprised at myself but I can’t seem to hold it back. I feel really angry and frustrated. So much time wasted! ‘I’m sorry’, he says, ‘I should have guessed a change was coming when things went quiet.’ I nod, and take myself

off to the toilet to vent my frustration, which for me means crying.

Roll forward one year. We go into a small, window-less meeting room. It's certainly private. Mark is ahead of me. I am behind, so I close the door. We sit down at the small, round table. We both know this is the meeting where I will tell him the amount of his annual bonus. I'm the bearer of bad news as Mark was given a 'below expectations' performance rating by his former manager a couple of months before. 'As you know, I'm going to tell you the amount of your bonus today', I say. 'Yes', Mark replies in an upbeat and expectant tone. He's smiling. 'There's no easy way to say this', I say. 'The HR Committee has decided that there will be no bonus for anyone rated "below expectations" for the year, which, as we know, includes you.' He rises to his feet. 'I didn't agree with that rating!' He angrily shouts. 'Sarah wouldn't listen to what I had to say. All those hours travelling, weekends and all, and this is how I get treated!' He is red in the face. I stand up too. 'I can see you're angry. And I can understand why. But what's happened has happened. All we can do now is look forward.' He sits down with a thud, deflated. I sit down too. We then have a very honest conversation.

So, what's going on psychologically and physiologically when we experience strong emotions, such as anger, frustration, shock, or despair at work? My clients tell me it's helpful to understand the background, so let me explain. We will have just received a psychological 'trigger'; that is the limbic part of our brain has reacted to interpret what someone said/ how someone looked/ what we read in that email etc as a threat, the same way it did when early man saw a tiger in the jungle. When I heard 'Your project is off', my limbic brain interpreted it as a threat to my existence as a tax director – someone who gets things done. When Mark heard '…will be no bonus…', his limbic brain most likely interpreted my words as a threat to his existence too: his ability to buy food for his family and pay the bills. Neither are logical but the limbic part of the brain is not logical. It's primitive. Professor Steve Peters refers to it as the 'chimp brain' in his book *The Chimp Paradox*.

Did you know that the limbic brain activates in just 1/12 of a second? So fast, we cannot prevent it: the amygdala fires, hormones are released into our bodies e.g. adrenaline, cortisol, and we are primed to fight, freeze or flee. Social norms mean we are unlikely to actually fight or flee, and yet physiologically we want to, and our emotions are firing as if we were. Interestingly, as freezing is more in-line with current social norms it may actually happen. Do you freeze when challenged?

While the limbic brain is in charge, the pre-frontal cortex part of our brain, that houses reason and logic, is receiving less oxygen. This explains why, in emotional situations, it's very difficult to think rationally.

So, if this is what's going on and we can't prevent our limbic brains' automatic reactions, what can we do when faced with strong emotions? What strategies can you employ as a professional person with a job to do?

I recommend simple, 'in the moment' strategies. My reason is this: if they're simple you'll be more likely to remember them, and be more likely to be able to access them in moments of heightened emotion.

Here are my tips:

(You can follow them in order, one by one, or just use the ones that work for you.)

Scenario 1: When you're on the receiving end of someone else's strong emotions

1. Breathe deeply into your diaphragm. Keep doing this, consciously.
2. Say nothing.
3. Think to yourself: 'this person is experiencing strong emotions, something is going on for them.'
4. When you are feeling sufficiently calm, repeat back to the person what you heard them say – as close to word for word as possible. By doing so, you show you have listened to and heard them, which is often what the other person unconsciously wants. Often they will start to become calmer.
5. Name the emotion you are witnessing without telling the other person how they are feeling. For example, 'it sounds like you're angry' or 'you seem angry', rather than 'you are angry'. Although this can seem like a risky thing to do, in my experience it is very effective. The mere act of naming the emotion tends to wake the other person up to how they are being. They will usually pause, dis-engage their limbic brain, engage their pre-frontal cortex, and become more rational.
6. Buy time. It's okay to suggest you both take time out, and speak again later.

Scenario 2: When you're feeling emotional yourself

1. Notice how you're feeling and acknowledge your feelings to yourself. For example, say to yourself, 'I am angry.'
2. Tell yourself: 'it's okay, it's okay, it's just my limbic brain. It's okay, it's okay.'
3. Breathe. Breathe, and try to breathe more deeply; when we're feeling emotional, we tend to breathe more shallowly.
4. Signpost how you're feeling to the other person as they are likely making assumptions. In the situation with my boss, I could have said something like, 'I feel really angry and frustrated. These are tears of frustration.'
5. Communicate what you want to happen next. With my boss, I could have said something like: 'Sorry, I need some time out right now. What you've told me has been a big shock. Let's resume this conversation tomorrow.' By starting with the word 'sorry', you're giving the other person a clue that you may be about to say something they're not expecting.
6. When you're alone, reflect on what happened. Consider whether your emotional response was understandable and proportionate in the circumstances. If yes, as was the case in both my situations, in my view, forgive yourself for being a human being. If you think your response was out of proportion to the circumstances, consider if this phrase fits – where there's heat there's history? It may be that the present situation is triggering you back to an event that happened in the past which you've not yet fully processed; your 'present moment' emotion is in fact a mixture of your present reaction and your unprocessed past reaction. If this is the case, I recommend you consider doing some personal work. For example, engage a coach, counsellor or therapist to fully understand and process the past events and emotions. In my experience, such an investment in yourself lasts a lifetime and leads to you developing a greater repertoire of behaviours and responses to draw upon when work (and life) throws you challenges. In short, you become a more resilient and authentic professional or leader.