The Functions of Stress & Negative Emotions

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Functions of the Stress response

The stress response (and associated worry and anxiety) is essential for our survival. It is important to remember that the stress response serves several important functions:

1. It **motivates** actions that are essential to our survival (i.e., a fight, flight, or freeze response).
2. It **communicates** to those in our environment that we are dealing with stressors and that we need support.
3. It serves a **self-validating** function (i.e., tells us how something important in our life is changing or is affected, and helps us learn how to deal with recurrent stressors over time).

We are all faced with stressors on a day-to-day basis… "stressors" very simply become "stressful" when we are not sure how to handle an event or a situation or when our worry or anxiety associated with that stress fails to serve an ongoing purpose. The situations that cause stress for you may not be a problem for your neighbor or friend or colleague, and things that bring stress to that same neighbor or friend or colleague may not worry you at all. It is how you think about and react to certain events that determine whether you experience them as stressful or fairly easy to deal with.

Functions of Emotions

Emotions – even those that feel unpleasant or seem negative – can serve several important functions:

1. Emotions motivate actions that are essential to our survival (e.g., a fight, flight, or freeze response).
2. Emotions communicate to those in our environment that we are dealing with stressors and that we need support.
3. Emotions serve a self-validating function (i.e., they tell us that something important in our life is changing or is affected, and help us learn how to deal with recurrent stressors over time).

People may find that they are less effective at understanding their thoughts and actions, as well as less effective in their interactions with others when they ignore their emotions. They may gain important information from examining exactly what an emotional response may be communicating to them. You may, for example, may be surprised to find yourself reacting angrily when invited to a special event. Upon further reflection, your may realize that the anger reaction is telling you that you are overcommitted and should reconsider your work/life balance, at least temporarily.

Dealing with Your Emotions

Emotions occur when we experience certain things in our environment. It can be beneficial to spend some time considering or writing down the kinds of things which evoke strong emotional responses from you. If you know that dealing with a specific co-worker always leaves you in a sour mood, you can prepare yourself before interacting with them, and "soften the blow."

One way to deal with our emotions is not to try and change our emotions themselves, but to change how we *react* to our emotions. There's nothing inherently wrong with being angry at your co-worker; the issue arises if we express our anger in an inappropriate way, such as swearing loudly at them in the middle of the office.

But changing only the way we react to our emotions seems to be something of a band-aid solution; after all, we'll still be feeling the unpleasant things like anger and sadness, even if we express it more productively.

Fortunately, it's also possible to change the emotions we experience, by changing the way we think about the events in our lives. For example, trying to see things from your co-worker's point of can help you empathize with them, and lessen your anger.

It's important to keep in mind that, despite our best efforts, there are always going to be things that can catch us off guard, causing a strong emotional response and a reaction. When this happens, it's important to take responsibility for our reactions – apologize if you feel that you acted inappropriately, and explain the emotions that you're feeling. **Explaining our emotions to others can help them understand our point of view, and enables us to work with them to find a solution.**