

Workplace Wellness



How to Set Your Emotional Thermostat

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Life has been really challenging these past two or so years. And now, it's possible that you may be experiencing negative emotions more frequently than you used to, and maybe for longer periods of time before you are even aware of feeling that way. This might be because, over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, you have unknowingly adjusted your emotional thermostat. Here's what I mean.

As you probably know, a thermostat is a device that automatically regulates temperature. The job of the thermostat in your home is to keep the ambient temperature of your house at a comfortable level. This comfortable level is programmed or set into the thermostat by you. Once you set it, the furnace and air conditioner turn on and off automatically, working to keep the room temperature as close as possible to your set-point temperature.

Like the thermostat in your home, you have a similar inner system that automatically regulates your emotional state, although it is slightly more complex (you don't have a compact little device with buttons or a dial to adjust emotions). Let's break it down and simplify it to see how this emotional thermostat works.

The job of your emotional thermostat is to keep your general emotional state at a "comfortable" level. And this "comfortable" level is set by you.

The emotional state that is "comfortable" for you is whatever emotion you are familiar with and are used to experiencing. If, for example, for the past couple of years, you have spent most of your time worrying—worrying while interacting with clients and meeting with other staff, worrying about whether infection prevention and control protocols are keeping you and your clients safe in the workplace, worrying about child care, worrying about keeping your family safe and well—then you have become quite familiar with worry. Worry is "comfortable" for you. It may not be "healthy" or "ideal", but you are familiar with it and used to it, so worry is "comfortable".

"Worry", then, has been programmed *by you* (unknowingly) as the set point in your "emotional thermostat". Now, you will automatically feel worried when a situation arises. When an event happens, worry will be your automatic response—even when the event isn't worrisome—keeping you comfortable and effectively reinforcing the set point of worry. So, how do you get out of this loop?

The answer is simple, but not necessarily easy.

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How to Set Your Emotional Thermostat...cont'd

You need to *consciously* change your set point. In other words, choose to experience more positive and renewing emotions more often and for longer periods of time, instead of automatically and subconsciously choosing to experience negative emotions. I'm not talking about taking time out of your day for long-duration meditation (...but if you have the time and desire to do so, absolutely go for it!). What I'm talking about is consciously choosing "how you are being" as you "do what you do".

For example, when you are washing dishes, what are you inwardly experiencing? Are you worried? Overwhelmed? Frustrated? Or are you calm? Content? At ease? What about while you are driving? Showering? Brushing your teeth?

There are endless opportunities in which you can choose to experience more positive emotions in your day. And the more you experience positive emotions, the more your emotional thermostat will change.

I recommend starting with gratitude. There is so much we take for granted and there is so much to appreciate. Take again, for example, the simple activity of washing dishes. You probably don't think much about it, but it is full of things to be grateful for: hot water, running water, soap, dishes to use, food to eat, a sink in which to wash.

Think about your daily activities, at home and at work. What are you grateful for in these environments?

The trick is not to just think about the things you value, but to truly feel gratitude. You don't even have to be grateful for anything specific. You can just feel appreciative...for the heck of it! It is the positive feeling that shifts the thermostat.



When the positive, renewing emotional state becomes familiar and comfortable, your emotional thermostat has been reprogrammed. Now, you will automatically feel more positive when an event happens, sometimes even when the event itself isn't "positive".

Yes, it takes conscious effort and commitment to change your emotional set point, but once you change it, it will reinforce itself, making it easier and easier to feel renewing emotions. This change is of great service to you and it comes with benefits! You will have more energy to do more of what you want and love to do. You will have less stress, more resilience, and more happiness. You'll think more clearly and have better concentration. Your memory will improve and you will make wiser choices. You'll have stronger, healthier relationships at home and in the office. You will feel better and do better.

Is it time to reset your emotional thermostat?

