



Manage Those **Big ADHD Emotions** at Work

.....
Ari Tuckman, PsyD, CST, MBA

Folks with ADHD tend to feel their emotions more strongly.

This also means that you then tend to wear those emotions on your sleeve and to be more influenced to act on your emotions. This can make you a lot of fun to be around: “Let’s go to the beach today!” But when those stronger emotions are irritation, frustration, or anger, they can have serious social consequences, especially in the workplace.

Of course, you probably have some valid reasons for those emotions, but it’s important to express them in the right ways at the right times, so that you feel good afterward about how it all worked out. It’s easy to blow a good message with a bad delivery—or to tarnish a good reputation.

So, let’s talk about some ways to still be yourself, but with perhaps a bit of a longer fuse as you deal with the demands at work. The good news is that there are a number of places that you can act to improve your emotional regulation.

Set a resilient foundation

We all do a better job of being wise, calm, and intentional about emotional responses when we’ve gotten enough sleep, are generally eating healthy enough, and are getting some regular exercise. And let’s throw in practicing mindfulness for bonus points. This is all easy to say—and also harder to be consistent about if your ADHD is casting too long a shadow on your life.

This is the foundation for resilient emotional regulation that will affect how you feel and function, so this is your first place to take some steam out of those strong emotional responses that can feel like a runaway train.

Manage stress

We all tend to be more reactive when we feel stressed out, burned out, and/or overwhelmed. When the demands exceed our coping skills, our emotional regulation ability drops off, so our responses tend to be more unfiltered. We probably also have less ability to motivate ourselves to start or persist on those tasks that would reduce our burden or to advocate effectively for ourselves (more on this below), so we continue to feel like we’re drowning. Obviously, no one is bringing their best in these moments. Therefore, part of managing your emotions involves managing your overall stress level.

If your ADHD is making it harder to do what you need to do, then perhaps you would benefit from starting or adjusting your medication or meeting with a therapist or coach. Or maybe the problem is more specific to your job. For example, a client recently told me that he doesn’t have the spreadsheet skills that would make his job much easier, so he is going to seek out a coworker to show him how to do what he needs to do.

If you worry about the quality of your work, perhaps because of your ADHD, you may feel self-conscious about asking for help for fear that it will reveal what you don’t know. That is indeed a risk,

in which case you may be better off learning the necessary skills on your own. However, most coworkers are willing to overlook a lack of knowledge from someone who is actively trying to fill that gap. Besides, if you don’t really know how to do something, it’s probably not as much of a secret as you hope it is.

Feeling effective in your work will not only help you chip away at your to-do list more quickly, but will also give you the confidence to be able to handle whatever gets thrown at you. This will give you more emotional resilience to handle something blowing up.

Set appropriate limits

Sometimes the problem isn’t your ability to get things done, but rather that there’s just too much to do. This might be that your boss or customers keep piling it on. Or it may be more self-imposed if you tend to take on projects quicker than you complete them. The problem may be more specific, like if you feel like you must agree to do something that you really don’t want to do. Whether you feel generally overwhelmed or more specifically trapped, it burns up a lot of self-management juice to carry this stress.

Therefore, it’s important to know what you can actually handle before you take something on. You might begin this by being better about keeping your schedule and to-do list current, so you can see what you already have on deck. Then you may need to spend some real cognitive effort to think about this new task, how you feel about it, how it ranks relative to what else you need to do, whether you can pull it off under the requested timeline, what the potential consequences would be for saying no, and so on. There’s a lot that might go into that decision.

If you feel like you drop the ball too often, you may feel like you don’t have the social capital to say no, that you kind of owe it to the other person to say yes because you need to make up for all

those times that you messed up. It's possible that the other person has said this, but it may also be mostly your own guilt talking. Feeling trapped in this dilemma will burn up a bunch of your emotional regulation energy.

You may find it helpful to have a more direct conversation with the other person about how they feel about your performance and reliability and what their expectations are for you. You may be nervous to open that conversation, but you may find that your anxiety about it is worse than what the other person says. If they do confirm your fears, then take a few deep breaths and move the conversation to what you can do to better meet their expectations. Maybe see if they can be flexible about how you do the work or the timing, so you're more likely to give them what they want.

You may also have times when a coworker or your boss is having a bad day and you need to deal with it. Part of emotional regulation involves managing our own emotions in the face of someone else's emotions. Before jumping into action, try to take a moment to think about what's going on and maybe ask some questions: What exactly are they upset about? Do you have a role to play in addressing this? Do you want to? It's a positive to be collaborative, but this may not be your problem to solve, and maybe the best thing you can do is stay calm until they are, too.

Keep your head on

Emotional regulation begins with emotional awareness: How am I feeling right now? And why? Racing from one task to the next or just being tuned out robs us of those small check-in moments. Use the times that are already in your day—like waiting for an elevator, when you get back to your desk after a meeting, in the bathroom, or any other time there is a break in the action. There's a temptation to grab our phones, but instead make a point sometimes of taking your emotional temperature. Mindfulness, therapy, coaching, or just talking to a friend provide an opportunity to notice and understand better what's going on in your life and how you're doing with it.

If work is really getting to you, you may also find it helpful to talk to a coworker—or perhaps with a colleague who works elsewhere. They may have some suggestions, but even just a supportive ear can bring you back to emotional center. Resist the



If work is really getting to you, you may also find it helpful to talk to a coworker—or perhaps with a colleague who works elsewhere.

temptation to just complain or trash your coworkers; it feels satisfying in the moment, but it doesn't really make you feel better afterwards. Instead, try to focus more on what you can do to change the situation—or recognize that you can't do much about it and need to work on accepting it. This means doing your best to let go some of the feelings about the situation.

If you find that you're reacting more strongly to a situation than it seems like you should be (or maybe than someone else thinks), then take a moment to think about why. We all have certain situations that really get us going, so what's getting triggered for you here? What does this situation remind you of and do to you? It can be really hard to be objective in these moments, so you will probably find it helpful to take a break if you can. Tell the person you will call them back. Take a walk down the hall. Wait before sending that email response. If you can't leave the situation, like when you're in a meeting, then look away from the person who is firing you up and try to think of other things until that strong emotion starts to drop off.

You may also find it helpful in these hot situations to remind yourself of the bigger picture. For example, the problem with your project is frustrating but isn't the end of the world. Or you can remind yourself that you don't need to respond to that snarky comment because you're better than that. When it's your boss or a coworker who is behaving badly, give them the grace that you would give yourself. Remind yourself that they have their own struggles, some of which you don't know about, and that how they're treating you may not be about you. You don't need to take it personally. Be the bigger person in that moment. **A**



Ari Tuckman, PsyD, CST, MBA, is a psychologist and sex therapist in private practice in West Chester, Pennsylvania, specializing in diagnosing and treating people with ADHD, as well as couples and sex therapy. His most recent book is *ADHD After Dark: Better Sex Life, Better Relationship*. He has appeared on CNN, National Public Radio, and XM Radio and been quoted in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, *USnews.com*, and many other media outlets. A former member of CHADD's board of directors, he serves as the current conference committee co-chair representing CHADD. A frequent contributor to *Attention* magazine, Dr. Tuckman is a regular guest on CHADD's webinars and podcasts.