

Outbursts and Breakdowns: When an Employee Becomes Emotional, What's a Manager to Do?

By Natalie Kroc | July 21, 2020 | SHRM



An employee who erupts into an angry tirade or bursts into tears may be just as surprised as everyone else at the workplace by the sudden onslaught of emotion.

As workers deal with the uncertainty and loss resulting from a global pandemic, a recession and racial tensions, such emotional flare-ups are increasingly likely to occur. However rattling, a meltdown is not necessarily a terrible thing.

Emotions that aren't dealt with "don't go away. They just go underground, to the detriment of everybody," said Laura Putnam, a workplace wellness consultant and the CEO of Motion Infusion, a wellness and performance improvement provider in San Francisco.

With so much for employees to worry about, "there's an extra load on a manager right now, no question," said Jordan Friesen, national director of Workplace Mental Health at the Canadian Mental Health Association, based in Winnipeg, Canada. "But the idea of creating a sense of psychological safety among your employees hasn't changed; it has just become more important."

When an Employee Crumbles

Managers who find themselves in the middle of an employee's emotional crisis should aim to be patient and kind—and to stay calm themselves. Other tips for dealing with breakdowns in a compassionate way include:

Allow the employee to vent, if possible. "Give the employee some space and time to experience whatever emotion they're having," said Krystal Lewis, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Md., who also has a private practice in Chevy Chase, Md. "As long as no one is at risk, don't jump in and intervene right away." If the employee says something hateful or threatening, however, it is the manager's responsibility to tell the employee that behavior is not acceptable.

If the outburst initially occurs in a public place, gently guide the employee to a more private area. This can help preserve both the employee's dignity and the organization's reputation.

Listen actively to what the employee is saying. Don't be afraid to be a little curious and ask a genuine question, which can show that you're trying to understand what the employee is going through.

Don't try to "fix" the employee's problem—and think twice before giving advice. Offering up a quick solution can backfire because it can make the employee feel like you don't understand or, worse, that you don't care.

Beware of well-intentioned but clichéd reassurances like "It'll all work out," or "I know you can get through this." Phrases like these can seem dismissive and out of touch.

If the outburst continues for an extended time, suggest a change of scenery. Encourage the employee to go for a walk or take a break and offer to come along.

After the outburst is over, acknowledge the difficulty of these times. Ask what you as the manager can do to help. Ask how the team can help. It may be helpful to ask if anything can be done to ease the employee's anxiety—for example, a scheduling change or a shift in workload.

Do not direct the employee to an employee assistance program (EAP) or other outside resource until the very end of the conversation. "It shouldn't be just putting it on the employee—'This is your problem, here, go fix it,' " Lewis cautioned.

"The typical formula for dealing with emotions has been to just refer out," said Putnam, who is the author of *Workplace Wellness that Works: 10 Steps to Infuse Well-Being and Vitality into Any Organization* (Wiley, 2015). But providing a referral to an EAP can come across as aloof and disinterested if there isn't a sense of rapport between the employee and the manager. "It's difficult to play this role if there's not a foundation of trust," she said.

Signs an Employee Might Be Near a Breaking Point

Of course, it's always better to prevent an employee breakdown than to clean up the aftermath. Managers may notice performance or personality changes that can indicate a worker is struggling, including:

- *Coming to work late or being absent frequently.
- *Extreme tiredness, which may suggest difficulty sleeping.
- *Trouble making decisions or staying focused.

*A notable difference in performance—less productive or significantly more productive. "If they are at work more than they normally would be, taking on multiple tasks and projects—even if they are getting things done—using that as a way to cope with outside stress could be problematic," said Lewis, who researches stress and anxiety.

*Seeming down or frustrated or not showing much emotion at all.

*Changes in relating to co-workers, particularly if short-tempered or irritable.

Don't make the mistake of assuming female employees are more likely to have an emotional breakdown at the office. [A January study by Totaljobs](#), a London-based job board, found that while women were twice as likely to have cried in the workplace (41 percent compared to 20 percent of men), men were far more likely to have been overcome by anger. Forty-three percent of men reported shouting in the workplace, compared to 26 percent of women. Men were also three times more likely to get upset because a project missed a deadline, went over budget or got canceled.

Preventative Measures to Implement Now

"Managers are uniquely positioned within the organization to create a safe harbor for their team. This is more true now than ever before," Putnam said. To this end, managers can build employee trust by incorporating routines that anticipate workers' concerns and prevent or address some of their worries.

One-on-one check-ins. Managers should check in with their employees on a one-on-one basis, ideally every week, experts said. That's not the same as taking a couple of minutes at the start of an in-person or virtual meeting to ask how everyone is doing.

During this one-on-one time, employees should be encouraged to talk about the demands of the job, their workload, any safety concerns or any personal issues. Some employees may have no one they can talk to outside of work.

"The message should be, 'We care about you first,' " said Mari Ryan, the founder and CEO of Advancing Wellness, a workplace well-being consultancy based in Watertown, Mass.

Communication—lots of it. "There is a huge amount of job insecurity right now," said Ryan, who is the author of *The Thriving Hive: How People-Centric Workplaces Ignite Engagement and Fuel Results* (Pequossette Press, 2018). "So it's important to communicate in a really transparent way—and frequently." She suggests a weekly or even daily e-mail from a manager or head of the organization saying, "Here's what's going well, here's where we're having challenges." A lack of communication only adds to the uncertainty, so even if nothing has changed, tell employees that.

The second type of communication that employees need right now: anything that pertains to benefits or help they can receive. "Whatever resources your organization offers, make sure that employees know about them," Friesen said. "Employees in crisis may not have the energy or the will to take on an extensive search" to uncover the details of a company's physical and mental health or financial services options.

"By repeating simple messages often, employers can reach more employees and have more of an impact," said Jenny Burke, senior director of the Impairment Practice at the National Safety Council in Itasca, Ill.

Modeling self-care. For physical and mental well-being, good self-care is essential. But for employees who are already strained, carving out time to do something for themselves might seem like an impossible task.

Managers can lead the way by practicing good self-care and making it a point of discussion with their teams. "Getting some exercise, preferably outside, getting enough sleep, eating healthy foods—these can all create a sense of security and are things each person feels they can control to some degree," Ryan said. During work hours, managers can allow time for employees to take walks, engage in meditation or yoga, or take part in support groups and other wellness-related opportunities.

Mental Health as a Priority Going Forward

It's expected that the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the recession and racial tensions will continue to manifest in the coming months and years, Burke said. "Providing support for individuals and educating employees is critical but will have limited impact if workplaces do not simultaneously work toward the reduction or elimination of stressors in the workplace."

Lewis agreed that even after the virus is under control, unemployment goes down and racial tensions ease, "it's important for organizations to come up with a long-term plan to make sure they have the supports in place for dealing with employees who will be suffering from anxiety, depression and trauma in the future."

Organizations have a responsibility to their workers to reduce stress on the job and to provide for their physical and mental well-being, Friesen believes. "If it's the human beings that make the work great, we as the employers need to be taking care of them," he said.