



Strengthening Clients' Emotional Capacity to Meet Workplace Expectations: Strategies for Managing Emotional Distress in Customer Service Work

WREP Brief #2

Most workplaces are stressful, and when one's workplace involves a substantial amount of direct interpersonal interactions all day long it can be particularly emotionally taxing. It is inevitable that many of the clients that you are working with will be placed in customer service positions. This means that on top of the general co-worker interpersonal situations that can trigger frustration, hurt, and anger, they will have the additional challenge of interacting with *customers*, who can sometimes be demanding, rude, or combative.

Explicitly teaching your clients how to manage the emotional aspects of customer service interactions in ways that will enable them to remain calm and professional in the face of emotional triggers is key to helping them succeed in the service industry.

The ability to effectively regulate our emotional state can be difficult for anyone, but especially difficult for those who have experienced traumatic events. Trauma is the lingering emotional wound that leaves someone feeling hopeless, helpless, and unable to regain a sense of safety.

This article will provide background on how trauma affects the ability to regulate emotions, how service workers face an especially challenging work environment, and a set of tools that workforce professionals can use to help clients regulate their emotions on the job.

Nature Of The Challenge

Frustration, anger and depression, are just a few of the negatively charged emotions that can disrupt a person's ability to meet workplace expectations. Sometimes employees may feel insecure about their ability to do a job well, they may not get along with coworkers, or may simply feel overwhelmed. Leaders and managers can hurt their employees feelings through

insensitive comments, unreasonable expectations, and inflexible practices and policies. The many emotions that customers bring to their interactions with service staff adds to the mix of scenarios that may cause employee emotional distress.

Additionally, though many employers may wish it, employees cannot leave the negative feelings that arise from their personal lives at home - difficult personal issues often manifest in poor performance at work. It is difficult to keep our home lives and work lives separate. When dealing with difficult personal situations like marital problems, family health issues, financial problems, issues with children, eldercare, and much more it can feel impossible to stay focused and calm at work.

Many of these challenges likely show up when you are working with clients as you prepare them to enter the workforce or advance in their careers. You can use your time with them to strengthen their capacity to manage emotional distress. These are skills that they can take with them into the workplace.

You have probably noticed that many clients may try to push distressing feelings away and pretend that everything is okay. Whenever you notice this, it is an opportunity for you to support them through the process of embracing and *managing* their emotions, also known as [self-regulating](#), instead of trying to eliminate emotions from the workplace.

When your clients are able to consistently act in line with their long-term goals (behavioral self-regulation) and feel calm and level-headed doing so (emotional self-regulation), they will have a better chance of success and overall well-being.

Two Components To Self-Regulation	
Behavioral Self-Regulation	The ability to act in ways that are in line with your values and long-term interests. It means you can feel one way but behave in another way. An example that many of us can relate to is not wanting to go to work sometimes but going anyway. Even though we may be feeling dread or unhappiness, we don't act in line with those feelings - we act in line with our goal of providing for ourselves financially.
Emotional Self-Regulation	The ability to exert influence and control over our actual emotions, not just our behavior. If you have ever calmed yourself down when one of your coworkers said something that made you angry, you were using your powers of emotional self-regulation.

Self-regulation can be especially difficult for those who have experienced trauma. When faced with a real threat, it is natural to react with a fight, flight, freeze response - that's how our bodies have developed to survive. Those who have experienced trauma, particularly if they have been chronically exposed to fear and danger from living in an unsafe home or neighborhood, often have a threat response system that is over reactive. Their fight, flight, or

freeze response may become activated when they feel stress or emotional distress even when there is no actual threat. They often perceive threats in situations where others do not.

This hypersensitivity, and the behaviors that follow, make it difficult to do well on the job. Their triggered fight, flight, or freeze reactions may show up in oppositional, defiant, aggressive, or rule-breaking behaviors. They may argue with coworkers and customers over seemingly minor offenses. Or they may appear distant, unmotivated, and hard to engage.

Working in the service industry provides plenty of opportunities to test one's self-regulation skills. Dealing with customer dissatisfaction and aggression are commonplace. ***Service workers are expected to keep a pleasant demeanor and provide service "with a smile." This can be extremely challenging for those who have experienced trauma.***

Additionally, the pressures of service jobs can also be traumatizing. As pointed out in a recent article in [The Atlantic](#), research has consistently shown that the "emotional labor performed by people in customer-service jobs—the smiling through rudeness, the calming of nerves, the constant control of one's own emotions—has what one widely cited study described as 'uniformly negative effects on workers.' It has also been linked to an array of physical and mental-health problems, including depression and high blood pressure."

Under normal circumstances, service workers must be able to handle aggravating customers. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified stress levels for everyone—service workers, customers, and their supervisors. Many service workers, especially those who work in grocery stores, now find themselves on the frontlines of the pandemic. Interactions that were once cordial and polite have become rooted in panic. When critical items like hand sanitizer and toilet paper are in short supply, customers may take out their frustration on a store employee.

COVID-19 related stressors will spread to other service industries as more sectors of the economy open, so all service workers must be prepared with strategies for managing the increased emotional stressors that they will encounter in the workplace.

In addition to dealing with the stress of heightened customer anxiety, workers themselves are likely to feel anxious about the pandemic. Service employees often interact with hundreds of customers each day and are nervous about getting sick. "We just fundamentally can't wash our hands as often as needed, so it's frustrating," says a worker at a New York City-area Trader Joe's store. "The sense of frustration and helplessness is growing. It's making it really depressing to be at work."

For your clients who have a history of trauma, the COVID-19 pandemic is yet another traumatic event in their lives. Strengthening their ability to self-regulate is more critical than ever. Managing and not suppressing their emotions so they can respond to triggers with peace instead of anger may feel next to impossible. Luckily, there are many self-regulation strategies that you can learn and then teach to your clients.

Tools For Success

You don't have to be a clinician or psychologist to help your clients learn to remain calm in the face of distressing interactions with coworkers and customers. **As a workforce development professional, you can help your clients build their self-regulation skills.**

The following series of exercises will assist your clients in developing a stronger internal locus of control— the goal is to move your clients from an external (perceived outside world) to an internal (within yourself) orientation.

People with an EXTERNAL Locus of Control	People with an INTERNAL Locus of Control
Believe that they are not in control how they react to life's experiences	Believe that they have control over how they react to life's experiences
More likely to experience anxiety	Have higher self-esteem
More likely to blame outside forces for their circumstances	More likely to take responsibility for their actions
Often feel hopeless or powerless in the face of difficult situations	Often express confidence in the face of challenges

Notes on technique: In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many workforce development professionals are now meeting with clients via Zoom or another remote platform. These exercises can all be done with your clients remotely or in face-to-face meetings using social distancing. It may feel a bit awkward to lead these exercises at first. That's okay. You will get the hang of it. Don't try to be perfect. Perfect is the enemy of the good.

Self-Regulation: Relax the body to relax the mind

Self-regulation skills help to manage stress. Self-regulation is becoming mindful of your body. Trauma and stress increase the fight, flight or freeze response. Our mind perceives this and interprets it as a proof that danger is near. When we relax the body, the mind receives a signal that danger has lessened. Whether there is danger out there or not, there will be times when your client will begin to feel very stressed or upset at their workplace. Helping them learn quick ways to relax their body will help them relax their mind.

As you are working with clients on this skill, we encourage you to share a personal example of a time you had difficulty self-regulating.

Example: "I remember a time when a supervisor criticized a decision I made. I was very angry because I didn't think she understood what I was saying. I got so mad that I eventually stopped talking and just sat there upset. I got up after our meeting and cried in the bathroom."

Exercise 1: Quick Body Scan

This body scan technique is one that clients can learn to use many times throughout the day to promote emotional wellness, and can also be used in intense moments of emotional distress.

Example Quick Body Scan: First, have your clients do a quick body scan by assessing muscle tension from head-to-toe and back, noticing which muscles are clenched. Instruct them to release all muscles from head to toe, wiggling if that helps. They should become a “wet noodle” and hold that relaxed position for five seconds: In 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Follow-up by asking, How do they feel now? Compare the feelings before and after. Ask them to think about what if any emotional changes they feel. This is a quick activity that only takes seconds to do. They should practice this every 15 minutes or so, even while busy at work.

The best way for you and your clients to learn about and experience the benefits of doing the body scan is to follow an audio guided body scan. Here are links to five different options. Try each to find a couple that you and your clients like best:

1 [One-Minute Guided Body Scan Meditation for Beginners](#)

2 [Two-Minute Body Scan](#)

3 [Three-minute Guided Body Scan](#)

4 [Five-Minute Guided Body Scan](#)

5 [Six-Minute Body Scan Meditation](#)

Exercise 2: Mindful Breathing

You may already be familiar with the basics of mindful breathing - simply put, it is focusing your attention on your breath, the inhale and exhale. You can do this anywhere - while standing, seated or lying down. Your eyes may be open or closed. Clients should be encouraged to do mindful breathing throughout the day but it can also help to practice it when they're feeling particularly stressed or anxious.

When a client is feeling especially stressed or angry, it may help them to start by taking an exaggerated breath: a deep inhale through the nostrils (3 seconds), hold the breath (2 seconds), and a long exhale through the mouth (4 seconds). Otherwise, they should simply observe each breath without trying to adjust it; it may help to focus on the rise and fall of their chest or the sensation through their nostrils. As they do so, they may find that their mind wanders and becomes distracted. Let them know that this is normal and is OK. They can take note that this is happening and gently bring their attention back to their breath.

To help your clients build this mindful breathing skill, lead them through this **short guided meditation**.

1. Find a relaxed, comfortable position. You could be seated on a chair or on the floor on a cushion. Keep your back upright, but not too tight. Hands resting wherever they're comfortable. Tongue on the roof of your mouth or wherever it's comfortable.
2. Notice and relax your body. Try to notice the shape of your body, its weight. Let yourself relax and become curious about your body seated here—the sensations it experiences, the touch, the connection with the floor or the chair. Relax any areas of tightness or tension. Just breathe.
3. Tune into your breath. Feel the natural flow of breath—in, out. You don't need to do anything to your breath. Not long, not short, just natural. Notice where you feel your breath in your body. It might be in your abdomen. It may be in your chest or throat or in your nostrils. See if you can feel the sensations of breath, one breath at a time. When one breath ends, the next breath begins.
4. Now as you do this, you might notice that your mind may start to wander. You may start thinking about other things. If this happens, it is not a problem. It's very natural. Just notice that your mind has wandered. You can say "thinking" or "wandering" in your head softly. And then gently redirect your attention right back to the breathing.
5. Stay here for five to seven minutes. Notice your breath, in silence. From time to time, you'll get lost in thought, then return to your breath.
6. After a few minutes, once again notice your body, your whole body, seated here. Let yourself relax even more deeply and then offer yourself some appreciation for doing this practice today.

Regular practice of mindful breathing can make it easier to do it in difficult situations. We suggest that your clients start practicing this technique 15 minutes a day so that it becomes routine.

Here are five short audio-guided breathing exercises for when your clients need quick stress relief. The last one is a fun breathing exercise for clients to do with their kids, if applicable:

1 [Two-minute Breathe Bubble](#)

2 [Two-minute Mindful Breathing](#)

3 [Five-Minute Mindful Breathing](#)

4 [Five-Minute Breathing Meditation](#)

5 [Belly Breathing with Elmo](#)

Emotional Awareness

One of the most essential factors for self-regulation is self-awareness. Being able to identify and name the emotion you are feeling can help you manage it. Helping your clients learn to manage their emotions is not easy, but it can be done! Self-awareness is the ability to pull back and recognize the feeling you are having. When your clients have an emotional response and are able to bring it into awareness, their chances of handling it well will improve.

You can't expect them to develop awareness overnight after one discussion with them about what it is and how it will help them—they will need time and support to develop it.

If your clients are controlled by their emotions, chances are they may be *engulfed*, *suppressed*, or *resigned*. Helping clients understand these three elements of emotion, how to recognize them and how to manage them will improve their chances of being able to meet workplace expectations.

Engulfed. Being engulfed by an emotion can feel like being swallowed by a wave. It can be a feeling of adrenaline rushing over you and propelling you into action. It can be hard to step back from an emotion that is engulfing you. Anger is one of the emotions most likely to function like this. Once we are engulfed by it, it can easily control us, so we don't feel like we have the power to resist the impulse to react. Your clients have likely felt engulfed by anger at one time or another. In cases of anger, a cool down period is recommended so the body can process and achieve some distance from this red-hot emotion. When your clients feel angry, or engulfed by another intense emotion, we recommend that they use a self-regulation technique, such as the body-scan or mindful breathing.

Suppressed. Have you ever poured out your heart to someone and they simply stare at you quietly? They appear shut off...emotionless. This is a situation where they have suppressed their feelings.

Some clients may be used to ignoring their feelings or pushing them away. However, becoming more aware of their emotions, and *feeling* their emotions, will help clients become better able to manage them effectively.

Resigned. Resigned people *know* what they are feeling, however, they do little to manage their emotions. You may have had a client who was aware that they were extremely angry, but they would not take any steps to address their anger. Despite awareness about their emotions, people who resign to their feelings don't recognize the power they have to change them.

What can you do to help clients recognize these traits? Teaching your clients to be objective and simply state that “this is anger I am feeling” gives them the power not to act on it. Once an emotional response (like anger, or any other) comes into their awareness – once they are able to pull back and acknowledge what they’re feeling – the chances of using that emotion to their advantage greatly improve.

Through emotional self-awareness, your clients can become more in control of their lives and the actions they take. As you support them to become intentional about tuning into their own emotions, they will become more aware of the power they have to respond in positive ways.

Exercise 3: Emotional Recognition

Being able to name the emotion that you are feeling is an important step to not being controlled by it. Providing clients with this [list of emotions](#) can help put a name to their feelings. After your client becomes familiar with the list of emotions, ask them to write a list of what triggers three of them. Example, what is it about other people’s behavior that triggers their anger? What makes them feel anxious? Ask them to identify their responses that have not been beneficial in the past. Then, ask them to identify some positive alternatives.

Self-awareness offers your clients the freedom of choice. How will they react when they are presented with a situation? They have the power to decide.

Here are four additional emotional recognition worksheets and activities to help clients identify their emotions:

- 1 [List of Emotions](#)
- 2 [Identifying Emotions](#)
- 3 [Emotion Regulation Zones](#)
- 4 [Emotion Identification using Emojis](#)

Emotional Management

Acceptance is another powerful tool in managing emotions. Helping clients learn to accept what they are feeling, instead of battling with their emotions, can help them move through them and find peace. Acceptance does not mean resigning to feeling bad forever. Instead, it means accepting that you are experiencing an emotion and accepting that emotions will pass.

Through practicing the art of acceptance, your clients will begin to realize that they are not their anger, fear, grief or any other difficult emotion they are feeling. Instead they will begin to experience these emotions in a more fleeting manner, like clouds that pass by in the sky or a wave in the ocean. Emotions are not permanent states of being. They arise and then disappear.

It’s easy to forget this when you’re in the middle of an upsetting event. However, encourage them to stay mindful about the transience of emotions. Encourage them to allow themselves to

witness and observe their emotions with kindness and patience, giving their emotions the latitude to morph, and in many cases, completely fade away.

Exercise 4: Letting Go

Ask your client to observe their emotion. Acknowledge that it exists, stand back from it and get themselves unstuck from it. Ask them to experience their emotion as a wave, coming and going. They may find it helpful to concentrate on some part of the emotion, like how their body is feeling or some image about it. In conjunction with self-regulation and emotional recognition techniques, imagining emotions like a wave may help your clients move through painful emotions. You can explain the following:

“Try to imagine an ocean wave flowing through you, but not so big that it knocks you over. Don’t try to push the emotion away. This makes it bigger and increases our suffering. Don’t reject the emotion. Don’t judge your emotion. It is not good or bad. It is just there. There are no bad emotions, just emotions. Anger, fear, sadness are all painful emotions, but they are not bad. Everyone has them, and they are just as valid as the happy emotions. At the same time, do not hang on to your emotion. Don’t rehearse it over and over to yourself. Don’t escalate it or make it bigger. Sometimes when we feel a very painful emotion, like anger or a deep grief, we hold on to it, or we intensify it, making it stronger and stronger, in our efforts to deal with it or to give it our full attention. Try not to do this. Just let it be however it is.”

Here are four audio-guided meditations and a tip sheet focused on letting go:

- 1 [Eight-Minute Letting Go of Anger Guided Meditation](#)
- 2 [Ten-Minute Daily Calm Meditation on Letting Go](#)
- 3 [Ten-Minute Letting Go of Stress Guided Meditation](#)
- 4 [18-Minute Meditation for Letting Go](#)
- 5 [Six Steps for Dealing with Difficult Emotions Tip Sheet](#)

Emotional regulation can be difficult for those who have experienced trauma but it is possible for clients to learn new skills. With awareness and practice, your clients will begin to be able to become more relaxed, identify their emotions and manage them more effectively while at work.

Exercises Adapted from

https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/mindful_breathing

<https://www.symbis.com/blog/the-importance-of-emotional-self-awareness/>

<https://positivepsychology.com/emotion-regulation-worksheets-strategies-dbt-skills/>