



WORKPLACE WELLBEING

Chapter 4

Emotional Self-Awareness and Emotional Regulation

Responding Rather Than Reacting at Work

In this chapter

Explore how recognising emotions, understanding personal triggers and developing regulation strategies can support healthier communication, resilience and workplace relationships.

SPACE TO BREATHE THERAPY



Emotional Self-Awareness and Emotional Regulation: Responding Rather Than Reacting at Work

Every day in the workplace we experience a wide range of emotions. We may feel confident after a successful presentation, frustrated when plans change unexpectedly, anxious before an important meeting or disappointed following difficult feedback. Emotions are a natural part of being human, and they influence how we think, behave, communicate and make decisions.

Many people believe professionalism means leaving emotions at the door when they come to work. In reality, this is neither possible nor healthy. The goal is not to suppress emotions but to recognise, understand and manage them effectively. This is where emotional self-awareness and emotional regulation become essential.

Emotional self-awareness is the ability to recognise and understand our own emotions as they occur. Emotional regulation is the ability to respond to those emotions in a healthy, constructive way rather than reacting impulsively. Together, these skills form an important part of emotional intelligence and contribute significantly to workplace wellbeing, communication, leadership and resilience.

Employees who develop these skills are often better equipped to manage stress, navigate conflict, build positive relationships and maintain their wellbeing during challenging situations.

What Is Emotional Self-Awareness?

Emotional self-awareness is the ability to identify, understand and acknowledge your emotions as they arise.

Rather than simply feeling stressed or frustrated without understanding why, emotionally self-aware individuals are able to pause and recognise:

- What they are feeling.
- Why they are feeling it.
- What triggered the emotion.
- How it may influence their behaviour.
- How it may affect those around them.

Awareness creates choice

This awareness creates an opportunity to choose a thoughtful response rather than reacting automatically.

Why Emotional Self-Awareness Matters

Our emotions influence many workplace behaviours, including:

- Decision-making.
- Communication.
- Problem-solving.
- Teamwork.
- Leadership.
- Customer interactions.



- Conflict resolution.
- Motivation.

When emotions go unrecognised, they can unintentionally affect our judgement and relationships.

For example, someone who feels overwhelmed may become impatient with colleagues without realising their behaviour has changed. Recognising the emotion early allows them to pause, take a breath and respond more constructively.

Understanding Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation is the ability to manage emotions in a healthy and balanced way.

It does not mean:

- Ignoring emotions.
- Pretending everything is fine.
- Suppressing feelings.
- Avoiding difficult conversations.

Instead, it involves recognising emotions, understanding them and deciding how best to respond.

Healthy regulation

Healthy emotional regulation allows us to remain calm, respectful and professional, even during difficult situations.

Responding Rather Than Reacting

When we react impulsively, our behaviour is often driven by emotion rather than thoughtful decision-making.

Examples of reacting include:

- Sending an angry email immediately.
- Raising your voice during a disagreement.
- Walking away from a conversation in frustration.
- Becoming defensive when receiving feedback.

Responding involves creating a pause between the emotion and the action.

For example:

- Taking a few slow breaths.
- Asking for time to think.
- Clarifying misunderstandings.
- Choosing calm and respectful language.

The power of the pause

This pause often leads to better decisions and healthier relationships.

Recognising Emotional Triggers



Everyone has situations that trigger emotional responses.

Common workplace triggers include:

- Tight deadlines.
- Unexpected changes.
- Feeling criticised.
- Conflict.
- Heavy workloads.
- Lack of communication.
- Feeling undervalued.
- Being interrupted.
- Public speaking.
- Making mistakes.

Recognising personal triggers is an important part of emotional self-awareness.

When you know what tends to affect you emotionally, you can prepare healthier ways of responding.

Recognising Physical Signs of Emotion

Emotions are often felt physically before we consciously recognise them.

You may notice:

- Increased heart rate.
- Muscle tension.
- Clenched jaw.
- Shallow breathing.
- Sweaty palms.
- Restlessness.
- Headaches.
- Feeling hot or flushed.

Notice the early signals

Learning to notice these early signs allows you to pause before emotions become overwhelming.

Emotional Self-Awareness During Stress

Stress can significantly influence our emotions and behaviour.

Some people become:

- Irritable.
- Withdrawn.
- Quiet.
- Tearful.
- Impatient.
- Overly critical.



- Perfectionistic.

Others may:

- Overwork.
- Avoid tasks.
- Become forgetful.
- Struggle to concentrate.

Recognising how stress affects you personally helps you respond more effectively before stress escalates into burnout.

Emotional Regulation Strategies

Developing emotional regulation is a skill that improves with practice. Helpful strategies include:

Pause Before Responding

When emotions are high, avoid responding immediately. A short pause allows the thinking part of the brain to regain control.

Name the Emotion

Research suggests that simply identifying an emotion can reduce its intensity. For example: “I’m feeling anxious.” “I’m feeling disappointed.” “I’m feeling frustrated.” Naming emotions helps create clarity.

Slow Your Breathing

Deep, slow breathing helps calm the body's stress response. Taking several slow breaths before responding to a difficult situation can improve emotional regulation.

Challenge Automatic Thoughts

Ask yourself: Is there another explanation? Am I making assumptions? What evidence do I have? How would I advise someone else? These questions encourage balanced thinking.

Take a Break

If emotions become overwhelming, stepping away briefly can help you regain perspective. A short walk or a few minutes away from your desk may prevent an impulsive reaction.

Emotional Self-Awareness and Communication

Our emotional state influences how we communicate.

When emotionally aware we are more likely to:

- Listen actively.
- Speak respectfully.
- Stay curious.
- Ask questions.
- Express disagreement calmly.
- Show empathy.

This strengthens workplace relationships and reduces unnecessary conflict.

Emotional Self-Awareness and Leadership



Leaders who understand and regulate their emotions create healthier workplace cultures.

Emotionally intelligent leaders are more likely to:

- Stay calm under pressure.
- Support their teams.
- Listen openly.
- Manage conflict fairly.
- Build trust.
- Encourage psychological safety.

Leaders set the tone

Employees often model the emotional behaviour they observe in leaders.

Emotional Self-Awareness and Neurodiversity

Emotional awareness looks different for everyone.

Some neurodivergent individuals may experience:

- Strong emotional responses.
- Delayed emotional processing.
- Difficulty identifying emotions (alexithymia).
- Sensory overload that affects emotional regulation.
- Emotional exhaustion following prolonged masking.

Understanding these differences helps individuals develop personalised regulation strategies rather than expecting one approach to suit everyone.

Employers also benefit from recognising that emotional expression varies across individuals and should not be judged through a single standard.

Building Emotional Self-Awareness

Emotional awareness develops through regular reflection.

Helpful questions include:

- What am I feeling right now?
- What triggered this emotion?
- How is it affecting my behaviour?
- What do I need at this moment?
- What response would be most helpful?

Pause and check in

These simple questions encourage thoughtful responses rather than automatic reactions.

Everyday Habits That Support Emotional Regulation

Small daily habits strengthen emotional wellbeing over time.

These include:



- Getting enough sleep.
- Taking regular breaks.
- Staying physically active.
- Eating regularly.
- Maintaining healthy boundaries.
- Practising mindfulness.
- Talking with trusted colleagues.
- Reflecting on your experiences.
- Seeking support when needed.

Emotional regulation becomes easier when overall wellbeing is supported.

The Benefits of Emotional Self-Awareness

Employees who develop emotional self-awareness often experience:

- Improved resilience.
- Better communication.
- Stronger relationships.
- Greater confidence.
- Better decision-making.
- Reduced workplace conflict.
- Improved leadership.
- Better stress management.
- Increased wellbeing.

Organisations benefit through healthier teams, improved collaboration and stronger workplace cultures.

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Emotional self-awareness involves recognising and understanding your emotions.
- ✓ Emotional regulation is about responding thoughtfully rather than reacting impulsively.
- ✓ Recognising emotional triggers improves resilience.
- ✓ Physical signs often provide early clues that emotions are building.
- ✓ Emotional awareness improves communication, leadership and decision-making.
- ✓ Emotional regulation supports both workplace wellbeing and healthy relationships.
- ✓ These skills develop through practice, reflection and self-compassion.

Final Thoughts

Emotions are an essential part of being human, and they naturally influence the way we think, communicate and interact with others. Professionalism is not about suppressing emotions or pretending they do not exist, it is about understanding them and responding in ways that are constructive, respectful and aligned with our values.

By developing emotional self-awareness, we become better able to recognise our triggers, understand our responses and choose behaviours that support both our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around us. Emotional regulation helps us remain calm under pressure, navigate difficult conversations with confidence and maintain healthy relationships, even



during challenging circumstances.

Like all aspects of self-awareness, emotional intelligence is not something we achieve overnight. It is developed through curiosity, reflection and practice. Over time, these skills strengthen resilience, improve workplace communication and create a more supportive, compassionate and emotionally healthy working environment for everyone.

Chapter reflection

Think of a recent workplace moment when you felt a strong emotion. What did you notice in your thoughts or body, what triggered it, and what might help you create a pause before responding next time?