

Emotional Agility

To remain *emotionally stable*, negative and difficult thoughts arising both at workplace and home are to be replaced by value-driven thoughts and actions through continued efforts.

Cynthia, a senior corporate lawyer with two young children always used to feel intense guilt about missed opportunities—both at the office, where her peers worked 80 hours a week while she worked 50, and at home, where she was often too distracted or tired to fully engage with her husband and children. She used to feel guilty in both aspects and wanted to be a good worker in the office and also a good mother.

Jeffrey, a rising-star executive at a leading consumer goods company, though intelligent, talented, and ambitious, was often angry—at bosses who disregarded his views, subordinates who didn't follow orders, or colleagues. He used to lose his temper several times at work and was being warned to get it under control.

In both the cases, they were feeling discomfort which they wanted to avoid. They were being controlled by their inner experience, attempting to control it, or switching between the two.

Negative and difficult thoughts and feelings are to have no place in any office. Executives, and particularly leaders, should be either stoic or cheerful; they must show emotional stability. But that is not possible always. All human beings have feelings, expressions and inner stream of thoughts that include criticism, doubt, and fear. The common problem with executives is that they face recurring emotional challenges at work—*anxiety about priorities, jealousy of others' success, fear of rejection, distress over perceived slights*—and have devised techniques to “fix” them: positive affirmations, prioritized to-do lists, total involvement in certain tasks.

David and Congleton have worked with leaders in various industries to analyze emotional agility, which enables people to approach their inner experiences in a mindful, values-driven, and productive way rather than buying into or trying to suppress them.

The author's offer four practices (adapted from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT) designed to help the two cases and also, in general, to develop emotional agility:

- **Recognize your patterns-** The first step in developing emotional agility is to notice when you've been hooked by your thoughts and feelings.
- **Label your thoughts and emotions-** Labeling allows you to see them as transient sources of data that may or may not prove helpful.
- **Accept them-** Respond to your ideas and emotions with an open attitude, the important thing is to show yourself (and others) some compassion and examine the reality of the situation.
- **Act on your values-** You can decide to act in a way that aligns with your values.

Developing emotional agility is no quick fix- but over time, leaders who become increasingly adept at it are the ones most likely to thrive.

Emotionally Stable people can endure stressful situations. They tend to feel emotionally secure. Such people can overcome tensions and perform their jobs effectively even under severe pressure. Emotional stability leads to emotional agility, which is 'the ability to manage one's thoughts and feelings'.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you understand by emotional agility?
(*Hints:* ability to manage one's thoughts and feelings- emotional stability-driving away negative thoughts –imbibing value-driven thoughts)
2. What are the practices offered in the case to develop emotional agility?
(*Hints:* recognition of negative thoughts quickly- labeling those thoughts- accepting them- acting on them)

Source: Susan David and Christina Congleton, *Emotional Agility*, Harvard Business Review, November, 2013