

Elizabeth Baily Wolf

Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD.

Key Finding

People who attribute their negative emotional expressions to passion seem more competent than those who just apologise or attribute their outburst to being emotional.

Business Application

you get visibly upset about your work, instead of apologising or talking about how emotional you are, talk about what is causing that emotion: the fact that you care passionately about your work.

Most people avoid expressing distress at work because it goes against what is considered appropriate. Crying or shaking with nervousness can make you come across as less competent than if you keep a calm demeanour. But people often feel distressed at work, which is unsurprising given that many common events are likely to cause distress (lack of control over important outcomes, conflict, ambiguity in expectations, evaluations, etc.). It can be very difficult for people to hide when they feel distressed. So what can they do if they end up expressing their distress instead of hiding it? Nico Frijda, a prominent emotions scholar, noted that emotions only “arise in response to events that are important to the individual’s goals, motives, or concerns” (The Laws of Emotion, 1988: 351). In other words, individuals only feel emotional about things that they feel passionate about. Although most workplaces discourage the expression of negative emotion, they simultaneously value employee passion and commitment. For example, McKinsey & Company lists “passion, dedication, and energy” as the first criteria it seeks in new hires and Boston Consulting Group lists a commitment to “succeeding together with passion” in its mission statement.

In a series of experiments, my collaborators and I find that when people say their distress expressions (crying, showing anxiety or frustration) are caused by their passion for their work, their colleagues perceive them as more competent than if they do not say anything, apologise, or say their distress is caused by their emotionality. Further, observers were more likely to hire and choose to work with expressers who attributed their distress to passion (as opposed to emotionality). People only feel emotional about things they care about. Reframing emotion as passion allows employees to communicate about their emotional expressions while maintaining a positive image.

Read more:

Wolf, E. B., Lee, J. J., Sah, S., and Brooks, A. W. (2016). “Managing perceptions of distress at work: Reframing emotion as passion.” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 137: 1–12. Available at <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2016.07.003>

Elizabeth Baily Wolf is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. Her research focuses on how people subjectively evaluate their own and others’ performance, competence and potential. To know more, visit her [website](#).



Research interests: social perception, emotion, nonverbal behavior, stereotyping, prejudice, gender, national culture, performance feedback, self-assessment, evaluative concerns, social comparison