

Successfully Surmount Other's Strong Negative Emotional Responses

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Summary

- ❑ Strong negative emotional responses are about the problem, not you, even when directed at you.
- ❑ Understanding the source of other's stress and having go-to strategies can help you surmount another's emotion negative behavior.
- ❑ You can turn difficult situations into to opportunities to resolve challenges with these fourteen techniques.



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Notwithstanding jokes and clichés about lawyers, not all lawyers are comfortable in the face of strong negative emotional responses. Yes, there are those who are unflappable and undaunted by clients' or colleagues' strong negative emotional response (SNER), but many struggle. In addition to the potential for guilt that we've let down a colleague or client, even when events are out of our control, another person's SNER can make interacting unpleasant and paralyzing at worst.

SNERs are typically the result of reactive, fear-driven thinking and feelings that result in behaviors ranging from annoying impatience to bullying. This constellation of fear-based thoughts, emotions and behaviors is referred to as the "shadow." A person's shadow is embedded in the subconscious, triggered by stress and driven by negative emotions such as fear, anger and jealousy. Thus, when a person is angry, impatient or domineering, it is because they are reacting to their own fear about the situation. They are not thinking about the situation with calm, cool objectivity. Nor is it about you. The fear-driven reaction results in a fight (not flight) mode when a focus on resolving the problem would better serve. If you are interested in finding out more about your primary motivation and its shadow side, complete the short-form Actualized Leader Profile.

Most of us intellectually understand that another's SNER is not about us even when it's directed at us. Yet, the challenge of dealing with another's strong emotions remains. Not feeling capable of handling another's SNER can be anticipatorily debilitating and anxiety provoking. People lose productivity and sleep as they have negative and exaggerated fantasies about how bad the interaction with this person will be. And sometimes, unfortunately, the negative fantasy is not an exaggeration. While we intellectually know that SNERs are not directed at us, that knowledge doesn't make us impervious to effects of anticipating or enduring a SNER.

The worries about another's SNER can affect performance and well-being. And a culture in which SNER is a regular occurrence and acceptable by virtue of the absence of corrective measures for the behavior is a culture that also struggles with recruiting and retention.



The person exhibiting SNER does so because they care about the outcome, which they believe is at risk and thus push harder. Paradoxically, the SNER interferes with achieving the desired outcome; the person expends energy on upset instead of devising a solution and unintentionally alienates those needed to resolve the situation.

14 Techniques for Converting (Another's) Reactivity to Resolution

Utilize these techniques to reduce your own and other's anxiety over what is not going well as you refocus everyone's energy on resolving the stress-inducing problem.

- 1 **Objectively evaluate the situation.** Objectivity is critical--objectivity about the problem, the person and the solution. And, of course, about yourself. If you've made a mistake, own it and move on. Overexplaining just draws more attention to you and detracts from the task at hand.
- 2 **Recognize it's not about you.** When others exhibit SNERs such as anger, frustration and pessimism, it's because they care. They are concerned that the task won't be properly accomplished. Use this knowledge to help you focus in on what's important to your colleague or client. Do not make it about you, your actions or a failure to act. Remember that you are the lightning rod for their SNERs.
- 3 **Focus on solving the problem.** Focus your energy on solving the problem, not on being self-protective. Paradoxically, the more defensive you are, the more you trigger SNERs directed at you, which baits argument.
- 4 **Breathe.** Whenever you feel anxious or anticipate a stressful interaction, use four-by-four breathing, which is breathing in, holding, exhaling, emptying lungs, each on a count of four. Whether you perform the entire sequence, or merely slow your breathing, the point is to calm yourself before and during a stressful interaction.
- 5 **Detach.** Along the lines of utilizing breathing to create calm, detaching from the situation can reduce the negative impact on you while helping you focus on resolving the issue. Detaching doesn't mean you don't care. What it does mean is that you take yourself and your emotions out of the equation by focusing on resolving the issue.
- 6 **Plan your approach.** Be thoughtful about how you approach clients or colleagues who typically exhibit SNERs when confronted with real or perceived setbacks. Have a strategy for avoiding their triggers such as staying out of the weeds and presenting the big picture plan as part of resolving the issue. Have a proposed solution.
- 7 **Ignore potshots; listen for understanding.** In the face of SNERs, listen

for the concerns underlying the harangue. Ignore snarky and passive aggressive potshots so that you focus yourself and the other person on resolving the problem.

- 8 Offer tactical empathy and appreciation.** In the face of complaints about how bad the situation is, offer empathy--words such as, "I know this has been a procedural nightmare and I appreciate your time on a Friday afternoon." Agree when you can.
- 9 Be curious.** While it is unappealing to engage someone who is a SNERer, be curious and probe if you don't fully understand the problem. Engagement slows and shifts the focus to resolution.
- 10 Actively engage the SNERer.** While it is oh-so tempting to avoid the SNERer, not engaging heightens the sense of powerlessness, which is itself triggering. Avoiding the person is like throwing gasoline on a fire.
- 11 Don't defend yourself.** Seriously, limit yourself to no more than one sentence in defense of yourself, and make that a factual correction. Any more will create what you wanted to avoid, which is a discussion targeting you.
- 12 You don't have to fix it all.** Recognize that you can't fix what you don't control. Let go of what has happened and instead focus on where you can have impact. Don't let yourself get pushed into taking on more than appropriate.
- 13 Everyone doesn't have to be happy or agree with you.** You can't control another's judgment about you so let go of trying to convince them.
- 14 Set boundaries.** Only you can decide what your boundaries are. And while it's difficult to give one-size-fits-all advice, use your knowledge of where another will push your boundaries to be ready. Suggested responses include: "We won't do that," "That's outside the scope of our engagement" or simply, "No, that doesn't work for me." Note the low-drama tone.

Reduce your anticipatory stress while increasing efficacy with these tips. You may be pleasantly surprised to find that you have so successfully mitigated the strong negative emotions response to the point of the interaction being positive.

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