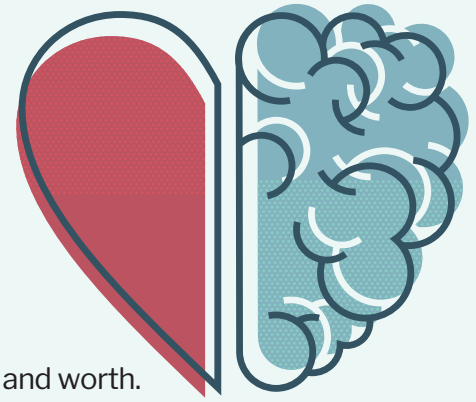


GIVE YOURSELF A BREAK: The Power of Self-Empathy and Emotional Intelligence at Work

By Roberta Moore, founder of EQ-i Coach and author of
Emotion at Work: Unleashing the Secret Power of Emotional Intelligence



Critical feedback can feel traumatic because it threatens our sense of safety and worth. When it happens at work, an environment where we often feel pressure to remain perfectly poised at all times, it can be even more anxiety-inducing. Through emotional intelligence skills, however, you can learn to respond to workplace stress productively by practicing self-empathy. In other words: learn how to give yourself a break once in a while!

What is Self-Empathy?

Also known as self-compassion, it's important not to confuse self-empathy with the familiar concept of self-esteem. Self-esteem deals with the way we perceive ourselves internally, while self-empathy relates to the way we soothe and take care of ourselves. In other words:

- **Self-esteem** is the way we *think about* ourselves
- **Self-empathy** is the way we *treat* ourselves

Although they are not one in the same, self-empathy certainly has an impact on self-esteem. Whether we'd like to admit it or not, we all know that the way others treat us can impact our self-esteem, so it stands to reason that the way we treat ourselves can, too.

You might already be familiar with the concept of self-care, which has seen a major U.S. surge in the past few years. More than ever before, we are hearing about the importance of carving out chunks of our personal time to decompress from the stress of the outside world. When it comes to the office, though, it's unlikely you'll have the luxury of a relaxing bubble bath to wash away the stress of a tense meeting, negative review, or challenging feedback. To deal with tension, criticism, and stress in real-time at work, you need to take a different approach—one that leverages your emotional intelligence to develop and practice self-empathy.

The Power of Self-Empathy

In order to harness the full power of self-empathy at work, you first have to understand the relationship between anxiety and control. When confronted with criticism or tension, our reptile brains (the primitive part of our brain that

triggers the fight-or-flight sensation) interpret it through the lens of two of our most basic needs: safety (perceived physical, social, and material security) and worth (a sense of self-respect, self-regard, or self-confidence). Though we may be able to logically reason that a tough performance review, for example, doesn't threaten our literal physical safety, it's the lack of control that ramps up our anxiety and makes us lash out, shut down, or otherwise react in counterproductive ways. Reclaiming a sense of control over stressful situations is the key to handling things like criticism and tension in the workplace. We can't control others' behavior, but we can control ourselves.

EQ Tips for Practicing Self-Empathy

Since anxiety often soars when we feel out of control, you can empower yourself in difficult situations by taking control of your own thoughts. While you have no direct power over how others are reacting to a workplace situation, you can control what happens internally. Here are 5 tips for exercising self-empathy at work:

- **Put someone else in your shoes.** You're probably used to hearing it the other way around, but the old adage of "putting yourself in someone else's shoes" can be effective if you flip it on yourself, too. Before you start to criticize yourself internally, imagine that it's a close friend who is facing this situation instead of you. How would you speak to them about it? Would you pile additional anxieties onto an already stressful situation, or would you offer them words of encouragement?



- **Gather more information.** One of the classic antidotes to calming the over-reactive reptile brain is to gather more information and devise a plan. You've already begun this step simply by reading this article. Understanding what triggers stressful emotions, and learning tactics to confront them in the moment, will help you feel more prepared next time you are faced with criticism or tension at work. By working one-on-one with an EQ coach, you can further develop personalized exercises to help you react productively to challenging work situations.
- **Breathe and detach from the negative energy while grounding yourself.** It may sound simple but taking three deep breaths while counting to ten will help reset your autonomic nervous system and calm you down. If you are still agitated, start counting backwards from 100 by 3: 100, 97, 94, etc. Using an activity that accesses the logic part of your brain makes you less likely to be hijacked by strong emotions.
- **Respond, don't react.** Once you've accessed the logic side of your brain, your reptile brain will let go of the fight-or-flight reaction and you can respond to workplace stress rationally. Access your assertiveness skills and speak up by asking for more information. Make sure you have a clear understanding of what the other person is telling you so you can better empathize with their perspective. Then, respond by speaking up for yourself in a non-offensive way.
- **Remember that no one has perfect EQ.** No one (not even we EQ coaches!) has perfect EQ. Emotional intelligence is a skillset that you build, practice, and can continue improving over your entire lifetime. You won't react perfectly to every stressful situation you encounter, and that's okay. Once you have a calm, clear, and rational understanding of what went wrong, assess your behavior to see if you made a mistake. If you did, see it as an opportunity to learn something new

for next time. Remember the rule of putting someone else in your shoes: rather than berating yourself, be self-compassionate by understanding that everyone faces criticism, stress, and tension, both in and out of the workplace.

Final Thoughts

At some point in our careers, we've all faced harsh criticism that left us feeling small, angry, or misunderstood. It's how we respond to these stressors, not the stressors themselves, that we should be taking to heart. As with all EQ skills, the benefits of practicing self-empathy extend far beyond the walls of your workplace:

- Reacting to stress in self-compassionate and emotionally intelligent ways helps you to control your own emotions and prevent escalation of tense situations.
- Practicing self-empathy improves your ability to interpret and address your own emotions, which in turn makes you better at interpreting and addressing others' emotions as well.
- The skills you build by practicing self-empathy—like honesty, fair-mindedness, and compassion—are also the traits that make good leaders.
- Understanding and addressing your emotions makes you better equipped to communicate them to others in a productive way.
- Recognizing how your own feelings affect your reactions and interactions with others helps you determine how your emotions can and do affect your job performance.

By learning to handle your own anxieties and emotions with more compassion, you'll become a better communicator, more effective leader, and more successful person both in and out of the office.

About Roberta Moore



Roberta Moore, founder of EQ-i Coach and author of *Emotion at Work: Unleashing the Secret Power of Emotional Intelligence*, utilizes her extensive background as an accomplished business executive and licensed therapist to help executives, business teams, and sales teams become more professionally and personally fulfilled. Moore's work has made her a sought-after speaker across the country and earned her a spot on the Forbes Coaches Council, where she regularly shares insights about emotional intelligence and its vital role in business and leadership. By using specific, practiced skills, individuals learn from Moore the EQ skills needed to inspire, engage, relate, and ultimately increase productivity and profitability.

For more information, please visit www.eqicoach.com.