



## Understanding Sadness in the Workplace

Sadness (or hurt) is an emotion that makes us feel low, down or “blue”. In the extreme, we may feel hopelessness or despair. Sadness is often tied to a sense of loss of something dear to us. We may, for example, grieve over the death of someone special, or over the loss of physical abilities as we age. Sadness may also involve an overwhelming feeling of disappointment when our hopes or wishes are dashed. Finally, sadness can take the form of feelings of loneliness or isolation – a sense that we are disconnected from others. We can experience sadness physically through a slowing of our nervous system, lethargy, fatigue, and an urge to cry. We may also have decreased appetite and trouble sleeping. Some people experience aches and pains in their body.

Thoughts associated with sadness tend to be negative and self-critical (*“I am so inadequate”*). We may also experience sadness in conjunction with negative predictions about our future (*“I won’t do well as a manager”*), causing us to feel less hopeful. Negative thoughts about other people (*“People will always see me as a weak person”*) or about the world (*“The corporate world is a cold, hostile place”*) can also dampen our mood. Mental images, furthermore, can elicit sadness. For example, we might recall a disapproving look on a teacher’s face. When negative thoughts are extreme (e.g., *“I have nothing good to offer,” “No one will ever give me a chance again”*), feelings of sadness tend to intensify.

When we feel sad, we likely feel less energetic. Often, sadness involves withdrawing from others and becoming quiet and inactive. We may also express our feelings outwardly through crying or sighing. Because we are thinking sad thoughts and feeling blue, our talking might also become pessimistic and self-deprecating. All of these factors can make sadness in the workplace particularly challenging.

The table below contains examples of situations that may involve sad (or hurt) feelings, thoughts and behaviours while at work. Notice how actions could or would be different if the thoughts were different.

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Situation	Sadness-Provoking Thoughts	Sadness-Driven Actions	Sadness-Moderating Thoughts
A manager receives a very negative performance review.	<i>"I'm terrible at what I do. I'm not cut out to be a manager. I don't belong in this department."</i>	Stay inside office, withdraw from interactions with workers.	<i>"The feedback is hard to hear but is fair...as much as I hate to admit it, it will help me in my career development."</i>
A manager needs to lay off several workers due to budget issues; some of these workers have been around for decades.	<i>"What a terrible situation. I will never see these people again."</i>	Try to continue working, but struggle with a slow pace. Maintain a somber facial expression. Remain quiet and do not socialize.	<i>"Feeling sad is normal and means I care; I will miss these workers but will find ways to maintain contact over time. Expressing to them how I feel is important for them to know they were valued."</i>
A manager gets left out of a non-work social event organized by a few people in the department.	<i>"They don't enjoy my company. People here can't stand me."</i>	Avoid socializing with workers in the department. Seek isolation. Try to look "too busy" to socialize.	<i>"It's natural to feel left out but I can understand it may be hard for people to feel themselves if the manager is around...I've been on the other side of this situation before. It's not personal."</i>

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A manager has had some of her more challenging responsibilities shifted to another manager, who has completed the duties with no problems.	<i>"I'm being replaced. Soon I will not have much of a role here."</i>	Speak in a less authoritative tone. Become less motivated at work. Lounge around in the office, procrastinating on work.	<i>"I know I wasn't as strong in those skills but I excel in others; the decision was the best for the organization."</i>
A manager was passed up for a career opportunity after working hard on applying for it.	<i>"What's the point of trying? I might as well give up and accept my status quo. I've missed my chance to advance. I'm stuck in this position for life."</i>	Give up trying to improve. Do work that is just "good enough." Do not seek new opportunities.	<i>"I can't let myself be discouraged; there have been a lot of times in the past when I've not achieved what I wanted, but with hard work and time I will reap the rewards of my efforts."</i>

As you may have noticed based upon the examples, sad feelings can be more complex when other types of feelings and motivations are also involved. For example, the feeling of emotional pain and hurt can result when you have experienced or perceived an interpersonal betrayal. Sympathy is experienced when the sadness relates to feeling badly for another person. We can have regret when the sadness pertains to something that has been done or not done in the past.

When sadness sets in, a natural response is to withdraw from others and to dwell on the cause of the sadness. This can impact workplace performance. Unfortunately, when others see this behaviour they may perceive us as less confident about our abilities as managers. They might respond to us in an uninterested, apathetic manner, causing us to feel even more down. It can be useful, therefore, to recognize feelings of sadness and to be mindful of our actions despite how we're feeling. It is important not to ignore sadness, and to seek support if you believe it is necessary.