

- Intellect

Our emotional intelligence is key

Geelong Advertiser · 6 Jun 2022 · 24 · CHRIS MACKEY Chris Mackey is a principal psychologist at Chris Mackey and Associates, Geelong. Tips about mental health and wellbeing can be found at www.chrismackey.com.au/resources

WHAT is emotional intelligence and how is it relevant to everyday life?

Daniel Goleman, the psychologist and author of the 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence*, reminded us of the importance of this concept at the recent national College of Clinical Psychologists' conference in Brisbane.

People with a high level of emotional intelligence benefit considerably in their mental health, relationships, work performance, job satisfaction and leadership skills. Fortunately, the component skills of emotional intelligence can be developed further with practice.

A core component of emotional intelligence is self-awareness. This includes an understanding of your own emotions, of your personal strengths and weaknesses, and of how your actions affect others. By being attuned to our inner signals we are more aware of what matters the most to us.

Emotionally intelligent individuals are more likely to seek out and consider feedback, which may include seeking out a mentor. Their bent toward reflective self-awareness helps them learn better from constructive criticism.

Another core component of emotional intelligence is self-regulation. Emotionally intelligent people will experience a full range of emotions, but are better at managing uncomfortable emotions, such as anxiety and anger. This partly results from being able to recognise and reflect on anxious and angry thoughts more objectively rather than suddenly reacting to them in a form of "emotional hijack".

We can better manage our arousal levels and uncomfortable emotions by learning breathing or relaxation techniques, including mindfulness exercises or meditation. Studies have shown spending 10 minutes on a simple breathing exercise in the morning, such as repeatedly breathing in to a count of three and breathing out to a count of three, can have benefits well outweighing the effort.

It is a technique that helps to reduce intrusive thoughts and to return to the task at hand. Other strategies that help to curb impulsive fight-flight reactions include taking pause in the situation and engaging in calming self-talk. It can also help to take some brief time out before reacting in challenging situations. In practice, this involves using our prefrontal cortex, the most highly evolved part of our brain, to help temper the potentially impulsive reactions associated with the brain's limbic system activity. This concept can even be

explained to children in terms of encouraging the wise owl part of themselves to talk to their guard dog.

This helps build one's tolerance for frustration.

Another core skill is social awareness or empathy. It involves being attuned to one's own as well as other people's feelings. This includes having an interest in capacity to consider other people's needs and motives and being able to respond genuinely to others' concerns. Empathy comes in various forms, including having a cognitive understanding of how the other person sees things, actually feeling something similar to what the other person might feel, and showing empathetic concern.

A fourth component of emotional intelligence relates to social skills, or how we manage our relationships. This includes having appropriate ways for expressing our frustrations or anger when this is justified, as well as having adaptive ways of resolving tensions.

Emotionally intelligent people tend to be highly invested in maintaining healthy relationships and helping those around them to succeed as well as themselves. In situations of conflict, it makes a great difference to show others that you have appreciated their concerns and are genuinely responding to them. It largely comes down to treating others with kindness and compassion.

Our emotions are contagious. In work groups our wellbeing and performance will improve as more people express positive as opposed to negative emotions. We can make a deliberate attempt to send out positive messages to others, as the person sending out emotions is the most influential in a social setting.

Drawing on these insights can help our families, friendship groups and workplaces flourish.

Emotional intelligence may be particularly important for those in leadership positions. There are many signs that we are rightfully expecting more from our political leaders in this regard.

PEOPLE WITH A HIGH LEVEL OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE BENEFIT CONSIDERABLY IN THEIR MENTAL HEALTH, RELATIONSHIPS, WORK PERFORMANCE, JOB SATISFACTION AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS.