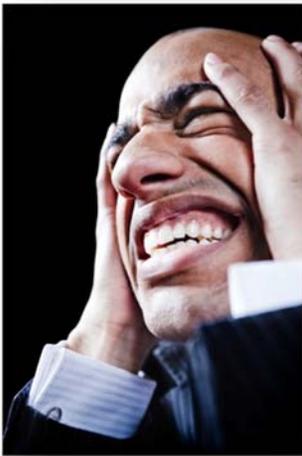


Loss of Emotional Management

Sandra L. Bloom, M.D.



A core difficulty for clients served by human services is the ability to manage distressing emotions, while at the same time being able to extend empathy to their clients and not become emotionally anesthetized. Emotions are contagious and under any conditions, human service delivery environments demand the highest levels of emotional labor from workers. Stress and trauma exacerbate those demands. Atmospheres of recurrent or constant crisis severely constrain the ability of staff to manage their own emotions and this makes it difficult to provide healing environments for their clients. Atmospheres of chronic crisis and fear contribute negatively to poor services. Under these circumstances, conflict escalates and both relationships and problem-solving suffers.

One group of investigators has argued that *“emotions are among the primary determinants of behavior at work and profoundly influence both the social climate and the productivity of companies and organizations”* (p. 154) [1]. Under normal conditions, an organization manages and contains the emotional contagion that is an inevitable part of human group functioning through the normal problem-solving, decision making, and conflict resolution methods and group norms that must exist for any organization to operate effectively. These are the norms that enable the group to: tolerate the normal amount of anxiety that exists among people working on a task; tolerate uncertainty long enough for creative problem solutions to emerge; promote balanced and integrated decision making so that all essential points of view are synthesized; contain and resolve the inevitable conflicts that arise between members of a group; and complete its tasks [2].

In organizations under chronic, relentless stress, however, this healthier level of function is likely to be sacrificed in service of facing repetitive emergency situations and entire organizations may begin to look like highly stressed individuals. Traumatized people often develop “chronic hyperarousal” as the central nervous system adapts to the constancy of threat. Similarly, organizations may become chronically hyperaroused so that everything becomes a crisis. When this happens the capacity to triage what is important and must be immediately attended to and what can be postponed is lost. Stress levels universally increase for everyone and as one manager has said, *“It’s like managing with your hair on fire”*. Under conditions of chronic crisis, emotional distress escalates, tempers grow short, decision making becomes impaired and driven by impulse, while pressures to conform reduce individual and group effectiveness [3-4].

Excerpt from Bloom, S. L. (2011). Trauma-organized Systems and Parallel Process. In N. Tehrani (Ed.), *Managing Trauma in the Workplace: Supporting Workers and Organizations* (pp. 139-153). London: Routledge.

- [Link to Emotional Labor](#)
- [Link to Emotional Contagion](#)
- [Link to Commitment to Emotional Intelligence](#)
- [Link to Terror Management Theory](#)

References

1. Pekrun, R. and M. Frese, *Emotions in work and achievement*. International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 1992. **7**: p. 153-200.
2. Bloom, S.L., *Neither Liberty Nor Safety: The Impact Of Fear On Individuals, Institutions, And Societies, Part I I*. Psychotherapy and Politics International, 2004. **2**(3): p. 212-228.
3. Ryan, K. and D. Oestreich, *Driving Fear out of the Workplace: Creating the High Trust, High Performance Organization*. 1998, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
4. Bloom, S.L. and B. Farragher, *Destroying Sanctuary: The Crisis in Human Service Delivery Systems*. 2010, New York: Oxford University Press.