

# There's no crying in the workplace

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After getting reprimanded by her supervisor for arriving late to work again, Marissa Garza felt her eyes brimming with tears.

"My boss told me I wasn't trying hard enough, and that hurt because I really had my heart in the job. It made me very emotional," said Garza, who served as the assistant center director for Language Stars, a Chicago-area company that tutors children in foreign languages. "I kept telling myself that I needed to get it together, but I was so frustrated because the traffic hiccup was completely out of my control."

So she started crying and made a beeline for the ladies' room.

It's an age-old office dilemma: What do you do when the waterworks are threatening to unleash and you're trapped in your cubicle, boss' office or the conference room? According to WomensMedia.com, an online forum for working women, the issue is one of the top problems queried by users in the 1,200 e-mails submitted daily.

Although it's hard — sometimes impossible — to prevent the release valve from blowing open, corporate culture frowns upon uncontrollable sobbing. And employers, who by and large expect nothing short of professionalism, aren't impressed with histrionics. So shedding tears during the hours of 9 to 5 has been considered taboo and is an infraction that can have a negative impact on your career trajectory.

"Crying connotes an inability to keep your emotions in check, and that undermines your position in the company," said Amy Webber, executive director of Community Career Center near Chicago. "Both male and female bosses don't want that kind of volatility in the workplace. It diminishes the respect for you as a worker in your superior's eyes."

Garza, who is in the midst of moving, knew her episodes were inappropriate, but she couldn't seem to control them.

"It's not something I'm proud of. It's time spent away from working productively at your desk. And it's not something you can hide or disguise because there are telltale signs — your eyes get all red and puffy," she said. "Plus, you're conscious of how others are going to perceive you after you break down like that."

With several center teachers under her, Garza hated losing her composure because the behavior was far from the model of good leadership. She worried she'd develop a reputation for "flying off the handle."

Whether the cause is a bad performance review, a botched project, public criticism, a personal issue with a colleague or an overwhelming workload, bursting into tears is a bad knee-jerk reaction to a difficulty that arises, experts say.

"You shouldn't be getting caught up in the moment and exposing your vulnerability to co-workers like that," said Candy Gellineau, a Cook County-based executive-level career coach and past Career Professionals International board member. "Others read that as a sign of weakness and a lack of good business judgment."

Although it might be harsh, welling up at work often is associated with failure to handle a curveball or problem-solve during a tough predicament, incapacity to manage your workload, oversensitivity, irrationality and even incompetence. It can be detrimental to your chances of climbing up the ladder toward an executive presence.

"Whether it's fair or not, I'm not going to give (the crier) that big project because I'm going to think she can't handle the pressure. And she will not be thought of for that promotion," Webber said. "So even though it's not the end of the world if it happens, it ultimately is going to hamper you."

Scott Andersohn, a career coach at Water's Edge Coaching near Chicago, said managers often ask him how to handle overly emotional employees.

"There's a mini silver lining in that crying shows me passion, and I'd sure rather have people that are passionate and invested in their job than people who are ambivalent," he said. "But you have to take action on the mistake because otherwise, you're setting the stage for it to happen again. You have to demonstrate to your boss that you're being proactive in addressing whatever underlying problem there was."

Andersohn encourages weepy employees to identify the root causes of their tears and figure out why they're having such a strong response. A trusted ally can provide an objective assessment of the situation and tips on how to rebuild your professional image.

For more ways to avoid succumbing to your emotions, here are additional tips from the experts:

### Damage control

\* Don't look down. It makes the tears come on faster, said Nancy Clark, chief executive officer of [WomensMedia.com](http://WomensMedia.com).

\* When emotions get the better of you, say as little as possible and leave the premises.

"Excuse yourself and say, 'I'd like to continue talking about this topic at 3 p.m. tomorrow,' which will give you some time to cool down before you revisit it," Clark said.

\* At some point, acknowledge and apologize for your tears. Admitting that you were overtaken with emotion and asking your colleagues to understand is a mature move that can help you save face.

"You say, 'As you can tell, I feel very strongly about this. I realize I took this personally and that I need to learn how to separate business from my feelings,' " Clark said. "By articulating the fact that you regret the lump in your throat and have identified ways to deal with your emotions next time around, it makes your co-workers more confident that you aren't going to make a habit out of it."

\* Don't blame it on your period, women. Any reference to menstrual cycles makes male bosses uncomfortable. And it can be viewed as a convenient default excuse.

## Preventative measures

\* Understand and accept the personality quirks of those in your office. If you work for a yeller, don't be surprised if that's the way he or she communicates with you.

\* Compartmentalize. The best advice is to not take things personally, Webber said. While you're being reamed out, mentally repeat positive affirmations and remind yourself that in hindsight, that particular moment will carry little weight in the grand scheme of things. Keep things in perspective.

\* Separate content from emotionally loaded phrases that can sound like a personal attack. It helps to translate comments as "Let's work on time management" rather than "You're too slow," Andersohn said.

"In your head, rework the criticism to be statements of fact or observations rather than accusations," he added.

\* Check your personal baggage at the door. Home life issues don't have a place in the office, and residual anger, sadness or anxiety carried over from when you're off the clock can spill into workplace relations.

"There's a ripple effect for everyone around you, and you're more likely to get choked up about something insignificant if you're replaying a fight with your spouse or child over and over in your head all day," Webber said. "By the same token, don't rehash on your cell phone and get riled up. That needs to be turned off when you walk in."

\* Rehearse bad scenarios and your reaction. This won't work with daily bumps in the road. But anticipating emotionally charged encounters can do wonders for situations with the potential for negative feedback, disappointment or butting heads. That way, if your worst fears are realized, you aren't blindsided.

"For something like an evaluation, you have to brace yourself, steel yourself for the worst possible outcome," Webber said. "You might still get a little emotional, but you're not as taken

aback. You will have the foresight to respond with, 'I will make the necessary changes.' "

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