

Psychological benefit from reframing work distress as passion for the project

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Imagine you're about to give a high-profile presentation at work. You've been working on it for weeks. Your boss and the company's CEO are sitting right across from you. Crucial funding for the company – and your possible promotion – hang in the balance. Suddenly, your presentation images become garbled. Then your computer crashes. You feel panicked, disappointed and defeated.

Now what?

Sunita Sah, assistant professor of management and organizations at Cornell University, and her colleagues have a novel strategy to save your professional reputation: Reframe your distress as passion for the project.

Their new study suggests people who reframe a display of distress as passion, rather than emotionality, are seen as more competent and are more likely to be hired and chosen as a collaborator. "You can take some control of the situation after the event by reframing it to others as, 'I was upset because I'm very passionate about this project,'" said Sah. "Our studies show that reframing distress as passion changes how other people assess your competence."

"Being passionate is often stated as an important attribute for employees; passion is associated with determination, motivation and having a high degree of self-control. Being [emotional](#), however, has almost a negative mirror effect and is associated with irrationality, instability, ineptitude and a low degree of self-control," said Sah.

Prior research in [emotion regulation](#) examined "[cognitive reappraisal](#)" – that is, changing how one thinks about a situation to feel differently about it. For example, someone who is anxious about a performance can reappraise the anxiety as excitement, and thus feel more positively about the performance. This new research is the first to examine what Sah, and her colleagues, term "emotion reframing" – a public reframing of the emotion to influence observers' perceptions rather than a private cognitive reappraisal.

The researchers conducted five experiments to assess how people viewed others' responses to stressful situations. The first two experiments revealed that participants who heard others say, "I was very passionate" versus "I was very emotional" about a stressful incident perceived the person expressing distress to be more competent. The next study asked study participants to think about a time when a coworker expressed distress and then describe how it showed the coworker was either emotional or passionate. "Just by asking people to reframe their coworkers' distress altered perceptions of their coworkers' competence," Sah said.

The final two studies demonstrated that emotion reframing can influence interpersonal decisions. Reframing [distress](#) as passion rather than emotion led to higher perceptions of competence which led participants to say they would be more likely to hire the passionate job candidates or choose them as collaborators on a project.

Sah explains "Emotion reframing appears to work because emotionality tends to be associated with negative attributes, such as an inability to act and think rationally and make sound decisions."

More information: Elizabeth Baily Wolf et al. Managing perceptions of distress at work: Reframing emotion as passion, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2016). [DOI](#):

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