



# LifeWorks Newsletter

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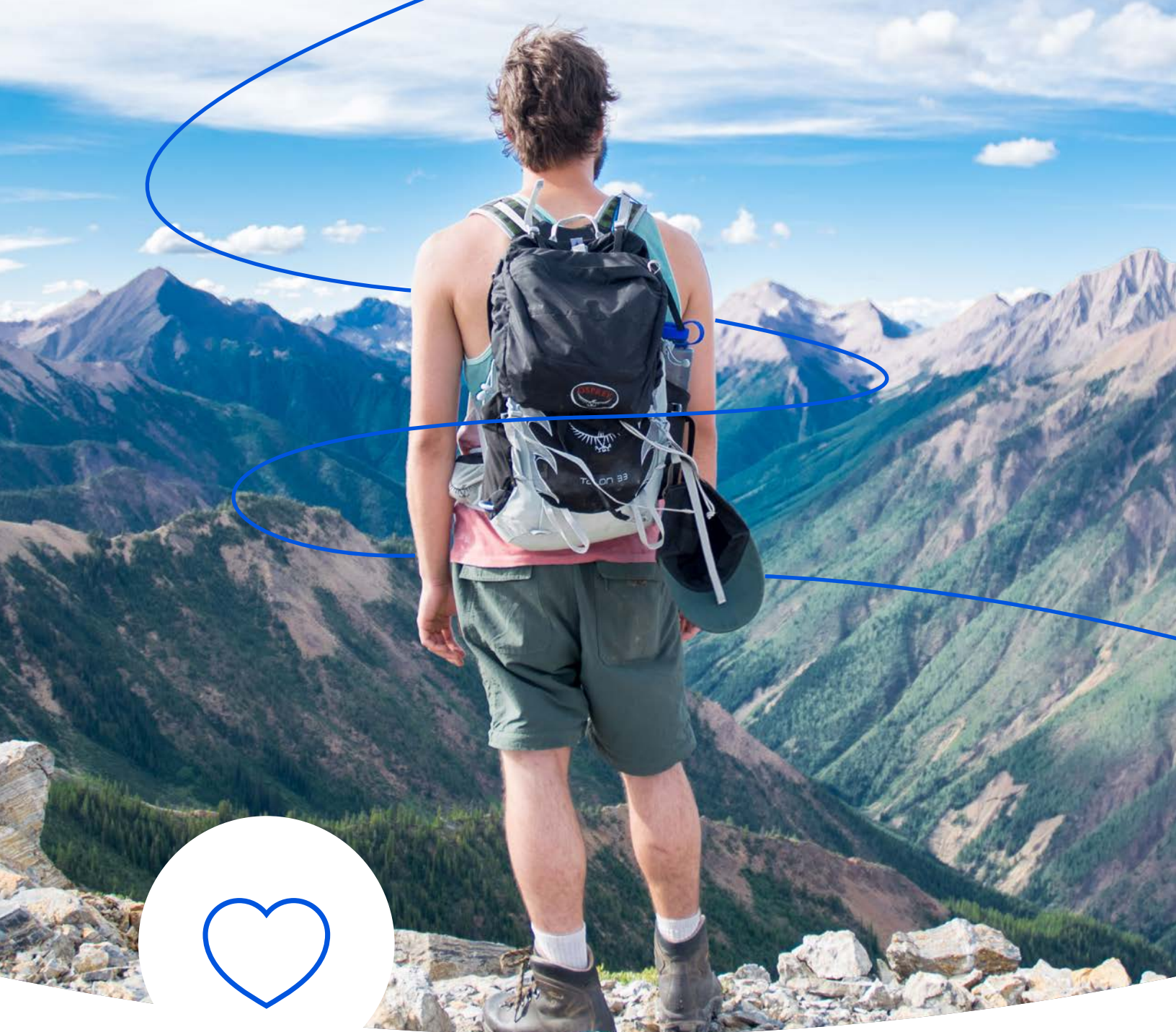
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### ● Sweet Emotion...

What are "emotions"? Do they differ from "feelings"? According to neuroscientists, **they do!**

In this edition of our quarterly newsletter, we'll explore some key human emotions and share techniques to help you manage the more difficult ones.



## Happiness: Journey or Destination?

What is happiness? Is it a sprint... a fleeting moment of pure, unbridled joy in response to success and positive experiences? Or is it more like a marathon of low-level contentment and fulfillment? And what happens to happiness when unexplained disappointment and dissatisfaction creep in, or in the face of a tough challenge or tragedy? Can we get happiness back?

According to Carlin Flora's analysis of happiness in the *Psychology Today* article "The Pursuit of Happiness," "The most useful definition—and it's one agreed upon by neuroscientists, psychiatrists, behavioral economists, positive psychologists, and Buddhist monks — is more like satisfied or content than "happy" in its strict bursting-with-glee sense. It has depth and deliberation to it. It encompasses living a meaningful life, utilizing your gifts and your time, living with thought and purpose."

## Here are five modern-day research findings about happiness:

- 1** Russ Harris, author of *The Happiness Trap*, says that our modern-day understanding of happiness is a slippery slope because it sets us up to "struggle against reality." A rich, meaningful life includes experiences of loss, grief, anger, and frustration, and confronting those feelings is important. According to Harris, if we're prepared to acknowledge, process, and accept negative feelings without quickly banishing them, we'll gain a deeper appreciation of what we value, and lessen feelings of anxiety and depression.  
  
Giving ourselves permission to be human means allowing the experience of all emotions — the positive and the negative. "We think that if we experience anxiety, sadness, fear, or envy, that there must be something wrong with us," says Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar, positive psychologist and the author of *Happier*. "Actually, the opposite is true. There is something wrong with us if we don't, at times, experience envy, anger, disappointment, sadness, or anxiety."
- 2** **The next milestone we reach or the next asset we acquire will not bring us that exuberant feeling of joy we expect.** In fact, it's the chase that makes us happy. The pursuit of a goal or the anticipation of a special achievement... The planning, the adventure, the excitement, and the learning along the way — those are the forces that energize and nurture us, helping to create happiness.
- 3** **Money can buy happiness to some extent,** as long as it's creating comfort rather than excessive indulgence. And, research has shown that generosity — the act of giving away money to support others — generates happiness.
- 4** **Slapping on a smile is not an antidote to unhappiness.** According to Barbara Held, a professor of psychology at Bowdoin College, "looking on the bright side isn't possible for some people and is even counterproductive. When you put pressure on people to cope in a way that doesn't fit them, it not only doesn't work, it makes them feel like a failure on top of already feeling bad."
- 5** **We need to play an active part in fostering our own happiness.** According to Dr. Ben-Shahar, we should keep our lives simple, do "less rather than more," and avoid over-committing ourselves. If possible, he recommends choosing uninterrupted time and turning off distractions during times of leisure with loved ones, and during times of concentrated work. "When we can focus on a single activity without distractions, we are not only happier — we are also more effective, productive, and creative," says Dr. Ben-Shahar.

Finally, research on gratitude tells us that our happiness depends not only on what we have but also on whether we appreciate what we have. This is why a person who seems to have everything may be unhappy, whereas a person with relatively little may be living a full and happy life. By focusing on the positive and learning to be grateful for the things we have, we can achieve greater levels of happiness.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ON GRATITUDE AND OTHER WAYS TO FOSTER HAPPINESS:**

- [Gratitude Journal](#)
- [The Mindful Way to Happiness, recording](#)
- [Four Ways to Achieve Greater Happiness in Your Life](#)
- [Practice Happy Habits to Boost Your Psychological Well-being](#)





## Practicing Positivity: Neuroplasticity

The modern study of neuroplasticity has shown that how we think and behave can actually alter the structure of the brain. Positivity — positive thinking — can rewire the brain. By practicing positivity, we can train ourselves to be happier and more resilient overall, while breaking negative thought patterns.

The brain was once thought of as static — unchangeable — meaning once the brain was formed, you couldn't change it. The good news, scientists have discovered, is that the brain is not unchangeable. In fact, we change our brains every day without even realizing it. Every habit you practice, each skill you learn, causes your brain to strengthen certain connections and weaken others. Our environment, habits, emotions, behaviors, and thoughts all have an impact on our brain.

Neuroplasticity makes the brain resilient because our brains learn, adapt, and grow based on our actions and experiences. The brain's neuroplasticity is what makes all permanent learning possible — for example when you learn to play a musical instrument or speak a foreign language. It's also how we overcome and recover from medical issues such as a stroke or other brain injury, depression, and many other illnesses.

Being able to change our brains in positive ways — to learn, to recover and heal — is a wonderful thing. However, on the flip side, our brains are also vulnerable to our external environment and even internal influences. This means that in the same way that we can heal, grow, and improve our brains and thoughts, we can also injure our brains and stay stuck in negative thoughts and behaviors.

As humans, we naturally focus on the negative — we are hardwired that way to keep ourselves safe from threats. In fact, when confronted with negativity or a potential threat, our brains activate more intensely than they do when an equally intense good or positive situation presents itself.

Interestingly, even just *thinking* about negativity activates the same parts in the brain as a real active threat to our safety or well-being. And while a negative thought or situation can “stick” in our brains after a split second, it takes 10 or more seconds of focusing on a positive thought for our brain to translate that positivity from our active memory to short-term memory and eventually to long-term memory.

Although it's necessary for our brains to let us know when we are in danger or there is a threat, we need to be careful not to let negative thoughts take over. The more our thought patterns tend to be negative, the easier it becomes to return to these automatic negative thought patterns. In fact, rumination (constantly turning over a situation in one's mind and focusing on its negative aspects) can damage structures and connections in the brain that regulate emotions, memory, and feelings. As we focus more on the negative, over time, it becomes more difficult to create positive memories.

## **THERE ARE ALSO PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, AND BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS TYPICALLY ASSOCIATED WITH NEGATIVE THINKING AND WORRY:**

### **Physical symptoms:**

- Muscle tension and muscle pain
- Headaches
- Digestive problems
- Chest pain
- Reduced libido or sex drive
- Sleep problems
- Fatigue

### **Emotional symptoms:**

- Anxiety
- Mood changes
- Restlessness
- Irritability and anger
- Depression or sadness
- Lack of focus or motivation









### **Behavioral symptoms:**

- Changes in appetite (either over or undereating)
- Abuse of alcohol and/or drugs
- Social withdrawal
- Outbursts of anger
- Tobacco/nicotine use

Not only is positive thinking a helpful way to reduce automatic negative reactions, but there are also many associated physical and emotional health benefits. Physical health benefits include boosted immunity, improved heart health, lowered hypertension (high blood pressure), and lower stress levels.

The emotional health benefits of positive thinking include an improved ability to handle problems effectively, increased life enjoyment, better self-esteem, and a greater capacity to form healthy, positive relationships. (It's easier to see the good in others when you're looking at your world through a positive lens.)

If you're struggling with depression, the following tips aren't a substitute for professional treatment, but they can work when done together with therapy and/or medication to help you feel better.

-  **Engage in an activity that fully occupies the mind**, such as doing a crossword puzzle, to break out of ruminative thought patterns.
-  **Practice mindfulness or meditation, or yoga.** Focusing on the here and now and being present is a valuable way to change negative thought patterns and brain activity. Meditating regularly can help shift negative thought patterns, help the brain focus, and even slow the loss of brain cells. These apps can help you get started with meditating: [Buddhify](#), [Calm](#), [Headspace](#), [The Mindfulness App](#), and [Sattva](#).
-  **Help someone else solve a problem.** Take a break from thinking about yourself and do what you can to help someone else. It can bring a sense of accomplishment and can help you gain a new perspective on your own problems.
-  **Consciously replace your thoughts.** Make it a point to change your negative thinking by replacing a negative thought with a positive one.
-  **Smile or sing.** Smiling has been proven to improve your mood and thought patterns by sending positive thoughts to the brain. Singing has been scientifically proven to boost mood and fight depression.
-  **Make a list of things you're worried or stressed about to get your worries out of your head.** Then make another list of things you feel positive or grateful for. Keeping a gratitude journal can help increase psychological well-being. Next, make an effort to shift the focus of your brain from negative to positive thoughts.
-  **Read something positive** to boost your mood and give you a mental break.
-  **Be around positive thinkers.** Your attitude will tend to follow that of your friends.

It's tough to start, but as you work at it and intentionally take steps to improve yourself, you'll build stronger connections between positive thinking and challenges, and you'll be on your way to a more positive outlook.



## Dealing with Anger

Anger, like love or sadness, is a normal human emotion. Anger can propel us to protect ourselves and others and to speak out against injustice. But when anger gets out of control — when it's expressed as abuse or humiliation of other people — or turns inward, it can lead to serious problems. Your relationships with others, including those you love, can suffer, and so can your own emotional and physical health. But it is possible to learn how to control your anger, and to take steps to express anger in a calm and constructive way.



We all feel angry, irritated, or inconvenienced sometimes, but for most people the feeling comes and goes quickly. They are able to express their anger by saying calmly, "It upsets me when you don't call to say you'll be late. I feel like you're taking me for granted."

For some people, however, feelings of annoyance don't just go away. Their emotions may lead to an angry outburst that is hard to control. And some people — women more often than men, according to one study — turn their anger inward, against themselves.

### Being unable to manage your anger can affect your life in many ways. It can:

- Hurt your relationships with spouses or partners, friends, family members, and co-workers.
- Affect your job performance.
- Lead to physical and emotional harm to others.
- Affect your physical health. Studies show that people who have angry outbursts — or who bottle up their anger — are more likely to develop heart disease.
- Affect your emotional health. Unmanaged anger can also lead to sleeplessness and depression.



## Techniques to Help You Manage Your Anger

Understanding what makes you angry can help you begin to manage this strong emotion. Anger can sometimes mask other emotions, such as sadness or fear, which you may need to address. Some people find that they can develop a better understanding of the causes of their anger just by spending some time thinking about them. Others find that it helps to do the following:

- ✓ **Keep a notebook.** Keeping a notebook or log of the times during the day when you've become angry can help you identify what triggers your emotions. (For some people, simply the act of writing things down makes them feel calmer.) Look for patterns. When do you get angry? Do you tend to be angry when you get home from work? Near the end of the workday? It will also help to note who was there, what the situation was, and specific details about how you were feeling at the time, for example, hurt, fearful, or unappreciated.
- ✓ **Think about your everyday health routines.** Research has shown that people are more likely to have difficulty managing anger when they're very tired or hungry. If you often find it hard to control your anger, think about whether you need to get more sleep, eat regular meals, or take better overall care of your health.
- ✓ **Often, talking with another person about your anger can help.** A trusted friend, leader in your faith community, counselor, or therapist can help you gain perspective on your feelings.



**Learn to be aware of signs that you may be about to go out of control.** You may clench your fists, feel increasingly irritated or frustrated, or become so tense that your breathing becomes shallow and fast. If you feel an angry outburst coming on, it's possible to take measures to stop it. Here are some techniques:

- **Count.** Count to 10 or 20, or even to 100 if that's what it takes to get you feeling calm again.
- **Do deep breathing.** To relax yourself, you need to breathe from your diaphragm, not your chest. Breathe in to a slow count of five, and then breathe out as you reverse the count. Repeat until you are feeling more relaxed. (If you are prone to irritability, make a point of doing this several times a day.)
- **Try progressive relaxation.** Start with deep breathing — inhaling for five counts, exhaling for 10. Sit or lie down. Then tense and relax each of your muscle groups to a slow count of five, alternating the sides of your body: Make a fist with your right hand, then release; make a fist with your left hand, then release; tense your right arm, then release; tense your left arm, and so on. Continue with your legs, stomach, backside, shoulders, neck, and face. After you've finished, tense your entire body, then relax. End with deep breathing.
- **If you are a spiritual person, draw on the teachings of your faith.** Some people find that it's helpful to say a prayer or read a short, inspirational passage.
- **Look at a picture that makes you feel calm and happy.** Keep in your wallet or purse a small photograph, postcard, or picture that makes you feel good. Look at it for a few moments when you begin to feel upset.
- **Go somewhere else.** Differences cannot be resolved when anyone is in an angry state. Remove yourself from the situation that is making you angry. Let the other person know that you need to take a break and will be back in a few minutes. If possible, try taking a short walk.

Once you've calmed down, it's important to express your anger, but in a way that doesn't frighten, hurt, or humiliate others and that isn't harmful to yourself. Pretending that you aren't angry may keep the feeling bottled up inside you and, in the long run, make you feel worse.

Sometimes people suggest that someone who is feeling angry should vent the anger in an aggressive, physical way — by hitting a punching bag, for example. But recent research shows that venting actually makes angry people feel angrier. You're more likely to ease the tension if you do something physical, which will burn off some energy, but less aggressive, such as walking or running.

When you feel more relaxed and in control — this could be 10 minutes later or, for some people, the next day — describe to a friend what upset you or write it down in a journal. If you were angry with an individual, if you think that you can have a conversation without losing control, do that. But take a few precautions to keep your anger from flaring up again.

To help you feel more confident, plan what you are going to say in advance and write it down. Then talk slowly and listen to what the other person has to say without interrupting. If you find yourself losing control, apologize. Then explain to the person that you need to take some time to calm down and that you will let him or her know when you can resume the conversation.

## Develop a new approach to handling problems

Some people get angry about everyday inconveniences because it's the only way they know how to respond. But it is possible to teach yourself new approaches. Many problems, even troubling ones, can be managed calmly if you have a plan for dealing with them. Here are some tips:

- ✔ **Break down frustrating challenges into small steps.** Ask yourself, what small first step could I take to resolve this situation? Then get started, and you'll likely start to feel more in control.
- ✔ **Seek help.** Talk with others who have faced similar problems, or talk with your doctor, a leader in your faith community, or a counselor. They can provide you with a safe and supportive environment to express concerns, or offer advice on dealing with difficult emotions.
- ✔ **Consider taking an anger-management course.** Anger-management classes may help if you are having trouble dealing with your anger on your own. These classes are offered by many hospitals, community organizations, and health maintenance/management organizations (HMOs), as well as online. They typically focus on communication skills and new ways of dealing with anger through a combination of physical and mental techniques and workbook exercises.
- ✔ **Work on your communication skills.** Interactions with other people are less likely to turn into confrontations if you listen intently to what the other person is saying, rather than thinking about your response. Avoid interrupting, and briefly restate what you heard the other person say to prevent misunderstandings. Avoid starting sentences with "You never..." or "You always..." because this tends to put people on the defensive. Finally, try to always be civil. Use simple words like "Please," "Thank you," and "You're welcome," even when you feel annoyed, to keep conversations calm and respectful.

If you feel that you can't control your anger or you are afraid you might hurt someone else, seek help immediately. Ask your doctor or your EAP for a referral to a counselor who can help you learn to manage your anger.



### LOG IN TO THE PLATFORM ANY TIME TO ACCESS HELPFUL RESOURCES RELATED TO ANGER AND OTHER NEGATIVE EMOTIONS, SUCH AS:

- [Anger Resolution Tips](#) (podcast)
- [Dealing with Conflict in Your Work and Personal Life: Handling and Resolving Conflict](#)
- [Emotional Intelligence at Work: Dealing with Hard-to-Handle Emotions](#)
- [Helping Your Child Learn to Manage Anger](#)
- [Quick Tips for Handling an Upset or Angry Customer](#)
- [Safely De-escalating Anger at Work](#)



## Emotions vs. Feelings

In "Feeling Our Emotions" by Manuela Lenzen in Scientific American, Antonio R. Damasio, chair of the University of Iowa's neurology department, says that "feelings are what arise as the brain interprets emotions, which are themselves purely physical signals of the body reacting to external stimuli."

In other words, emotions are a deeply-rooted physiological response that we do not control. For instance, when we are afraid of something, our hearts race, our mouths become dry, our skin turns pale, and our muscles contract.

"This emotional reaction occurs automatically and unconsciously. Feelings occur after we become aware in our brain of such physical changes; only then do we experience the feeling of fear," says Damasio.

## We're here for you, 24/7.

If you're looking for information and resources to help you deal with many of life's changes or challenges — and the difficult emotions that may go along with those significant events — log in to the platform to discover hundreds of online well-being resources.

**On our Toolkits landing page, you'll find the following, many of which are new in 2018:**

- [Addiction and Recovery](#)
- [Addiction in the Workplace: Toolkit for Managers](#)
- [Critical Incidents](#)
- [Emergency Preparedness](#)
- [Natural Disasters](#)
- [Raising a Child with Special Needs](#)
- [Working Parents](#)



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