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4 Ways To Bounce Back When You're Treated Unfairly At Work

You can get even, or you can take the high road—where the outlook's much better for your health and career.



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BY DAVID MAYER

Depending on how you see it, there's more than just death and taxes on the short list of things life throws at pretty much everybody. There's also unfairness (which cynics might even see as the umbrella term for both death *and* taxes), as many a parent has informed a 5-year-old who's too young to know what taxes are but has no trouble grasping what's not fair.

But simply accepting that life isn't fair doesn't mean we respond to its injustices with perfect equanimity—especially where our careers are

concerned. Maybe you've been passed up for a promotion you deserved. Or management made a big decision impacting your job without you having a say. Maybe you were just disrespected by a colleague.

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Organizational researchers like the University of Georgia's [Jason Colquitt](#) call these types of offenses "distributive," "procedural," and "interpersonal" injustice, respectively. And they've [been linked](#) to lower levels of self-esteem, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance.

That may not come as a shock—it's just about impossible to avoid feeling mistreated at some point or another at work. Georgetown professor [Chris Porath](#) estimates that 98% of the thousands of workers she's surveyed have experienced incivility at work firsthand, and 99% have seen it take place.

But the good news is that while work, like life, isn't always fair, you don't have to stew in your sense of being wronged. In fact, you can even use the experience to become a little more resilient for the next time you're slighted. Here's how.

WHY UNFAIR TREATMENT STINGS

You may feel hurt that you've been mistreated while at the same time wondering whether it's petty of you to take offense. But psychologically, unfairness communicates a lot more than the act itself. Being treated unfairly violates [basic human needs](#) for autonomy, belonging, and morality. It thwarts our agency, makes us feel like we aren't valued, and tramples on the basic social principles that bind people together.

So it's no surprise that violating these mores [reliably leads to](#) feelings of anger, outrage, and contempt—emotions that lead us to act in ways that both harm our careers and are typically inconsistent with our *own* values: When we're wronged at work, many of us isolate ourselves or retaliate. And while that may lead to short-term reprieve or catharsis, the longer-term consequences are rarely good.

Instead, we need better ways to respond to mistreatment at work—strategies that can actually improve how others see us and how we see ourselves—so we can minimize the likelihood of it happening again.

1. WALK BACK FROM THE CONCLUSIONS YOU'VE JUMPED TO

Leadership gurus Chris Argyris and Peter Senge are known for introducing the [“ladder of inference,”](#) the process by which people make a sequence of assumptions about others’ intentions. It’s important to remember that injustice is in the eye of the beholder, so it’s critical to make sure you’re seeing the situation accurately.

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And to do that, there’s no substitute for perspective. Talk to a trusted friend or colleague to get their point of view before taking any action. Whatever they say, the simple act of [confiding in others](#) can strengthen your relationships around the office and mitigate the negative feelings you’re experiencing.

2. TAKE THE MORAL HIGH GROUND

Sometimes it’s actually okay to get up on your high horse and stay there. In fact, refusing to match slight for slight can help you sidestep the indignity you’re feeling and avoid boiling in anger. From that vantage point, you may even be able to look at the situation more critically and learn something about your coworker, your organization, or even yourself—to understand what’s happened in a more detached way.

3. LOOK FOR WHAT'S STILL GOOD, FAIR, AND RIGHT

Sure, you’ve just been treated unfairly in one context, but there are certainly others where you’re still clearly valued and respected at work. And [one principle](#) long familiar to psychologists is our tendency to focus on the negative at the expense of the positive. So make sure you’re considering this recent mistreatment in light of other good things at work, which will help you put it into perspective.

It may be the last thing you’re inclined to do while you’re feeling upset, but consider making a list of the positive aspects of your job—the upsides that *haven’t* been affected by this incident—so you don’t act rashly.

4. FORGIVE WHOEVER'S RESPONSIBLE

This may be the hardest one yet, but it might pay off. Research [suggests](#) that forgiveness is critical for mental and physical health in the aftermath of being mistreated. You don’t need to excuse the incident or convince yourself you’re

being dramatic, you just need to acknowledge that the bad thing they did to you is something you can live with—that, as Whitney Houston [memorably put it](#), “It’s not right, but it’s okay.” Forgiveness, at any rate, can be a surprisingly powerful way of moving on without carrying a chip on your shoulder.

Let’s be real—being treated unfairly at work can be painful, upsetting, and frustrating. But it can also be an opportunity to build resilience—not just to others, but to your own, less-than-productive knee-jerk responses. So take the high road. The view is much better from there anyway.

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