



Charles M. Jones

WHITE PAPER

Is Emotional Victimhood Undermining Your Employees' Performance and Well-Being?

Charles M. Jones, Behavioral Scientist, Institute for Adaptive Mastery

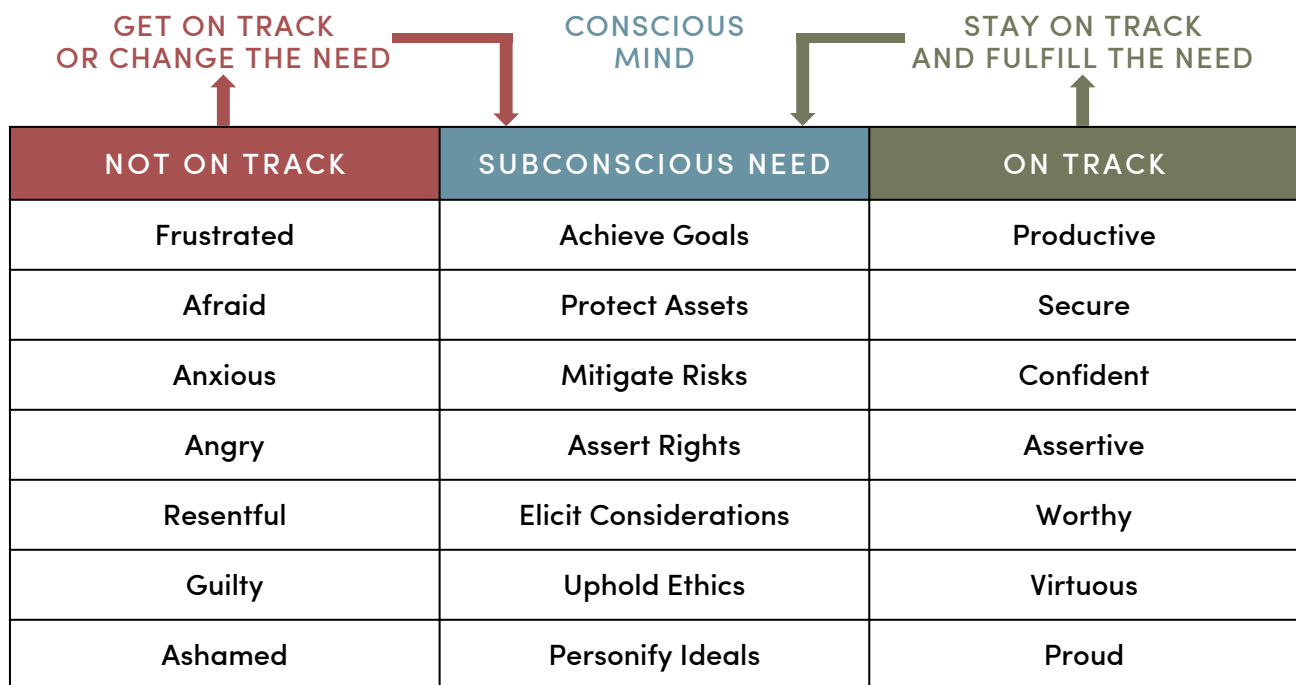
WHEN YOUR EMPLOYEES EXPERIENCE NEGATIVE EMOTIONS, DO THEY **BLAME AND COMPLAIN** OR **SOLVE AND EVOLVE**?

In this paper, I'll share my groundbreaking discovery regarding the impact of emotional attribution on job performance and emotional well-being. I'll show why thinking that the reason we feel bad is because bad things are happening to us leads to a state of "Emotional Victimhood" in which our performance and well-being suffer. In contrast, when we recognize that our negative emotions are being generated by unmet needs, we take responsibility for meeting these needs, and our performance and well-being skyrocket.

Emotions Are Feedback On Our Performance

Just as our body has physiological needs, our subconscious has psychological needs. For example, much if not most of our work is focused on achieving goals (meeting deadlines, exceeding quotas, etc.), protecting assets (safeguarding our budget, headcount, reputation), asserting rights (holding others accountable), upholding ethics (doing the right thing), and personifying ideals (being a good boss).

And, just as our body generates painful sensations (such as hunger and thirst) when we are not on track to meet our physiological needs, our subconscious generates negative emotions when we are not on track to meet our psychological needs. Like the warning lights on the dashboard of our car, negative emotions serve as signals from our subconscious, indicating areas where we need to focus our attention. For instance, feelings of frustration serve as alerts that we are not on track to achieving our goals, anxiety signals that we are not adequately addressing risks, and anger highlights areas where we are not successfully asserting our rights. As such, it's imperative that we embrace our negative emotions as prompts from our subconscious, urging us to realign our actions to meet our needs or adjust our needs accordingly.



The Jones Theory of Emotional Causation

To illustrate this concept, consider this scenario: Imagine you are scheduled to give a presentation at a meeting scheduled for tomorrow and you've just asked a colleague for crucial data needed to complete your report. Historically, this colleague has provided the required data within minutes of your request. However, today, your colleague informs you that she won't be able to supply the data until the end of the day tomorrow. Your subconscious, (which processes information thousands of times faster than your conscious mind), begins generating feelings of frustration.

If you're interpreting your frustration correctly, you'll recognize that the reason you feel frustrated is that you were counting on getting the data from your coworker today and, now that you are not, your subconscious has concluded that you are no longer on track to achieve your goal of getting your report done on time. With your attention focused on getting yourself back on track to deliver your report on time, you start exploring potential solutions:

1. "Is there a way to persuade my colleague to reconsider? Can I assist her with tasks to free up her time so she can provide the data today? Should I discuss this with her manager?"
2. "Are there other colleagues from whom I can obtain the necessary data?"
3. "How quickly can I acquire the skills to use the software and retrieve the data myself?"
4. "Considering that this data is not the main focus of tomorrow's meeting, can I omit it from my report?"
5. "Is it feasible to reschedule tomorrow's meeting for the following day?"

In contrast, if you've made the mistake of attributing your frustration to your colleague's refusal to provide the data today, you will assume that changing your colleague's stance (option #1) is the only way to resolve your frustration. In this case, you may overlook the possibilities of altering your approach to achieving your goal (options #2 and #3) or modifying the goal itself (options #4 and #5). Instead, you'll start searching for someone or something to blame and label your colleague as "difficult to work with."

When employees believe that their negative emotions are the result of what's happening to them, they become negative and powerless - a state I call "Emotional Victimhood." But, when they recognize that their negative emotions are being generated by subconscious needs that they are not effectively addressing, they become accountable and resourceful - a state I call "Emotional Response-Ability." Which way your employees relate to their emotions has a profound impact on how they behave and their resulting performance.

NEGATIVE EMOTION	EMOTIONAL VICTIMHOOD I feel bad because something bad is happening to me.	EMOTIONAL RESPONSE-ABILITY I feel bad because I'm not on track to meet a subconscious need.
Frustrated	Push harder against the people or things that aren't cooperating with me.	Look for another way to achieve my goal or pivot to achieving a different goal.
Afraid	Fight, flee, freeze, or appease.	Protect the assets I value most in this situation.
Anxious	Fret over things I can't change.	Make a contingency plan for the worst-case scenario.
Angry	Intimidate this person into doing the right thing or punish them for doing the wrong thing.	Ask myself whether others would agree I have this right. If yes, find a way to assert my rights while respecting the other person's rights.
Resentful	Simmer while I wait for the other person to apologize and make amends.	Ask for the considerations I want and deserve.
Guilty	Punish myself.	Apologize and make amends.
Ashamed	Hide the parts of me that aren't "good enough."	Decide if this is an ideal I am committed to personifying. If yes, up my game.

Emotional Victimhood Leads to Emotional Distress

When employees view themselves as being victimized by their negative emotions, they assume an adversarial posture toward these emotions - with detrimental consequences to their well-being.

Procrastination

When employees believe that external events are the cause of their negative emotions, they will tend to steer clear of situations and tasks that trigger these emotions. This avoidance behavior results in procrastination and a failure to follow through on their commitments.

Stress

When employees believe that negative emotions lead to negative outcomes (which, as outlined in the table above, only happens case when someone is misinterpreting their negative emotions through the Emotional Victimhood lens), they will try to hold their negative emotions at bay by tensing the muscles through which these emotions express themselves. For example, they may clench their jaws to suppress awareness of their frustration or hunch their shoulders to suppress awareness of their anxiety. Their subconscious reacts to this suppression by increasing the levels of adrenaline, cortisol, and norepinephrine in their bloodstream until it succeeds in getting this person's attention. The resulting hormonal imbalances, along with the muscular tension, are what we commonly refer to as "stress" and are entirely self-inflicted.

Reactivity

When employees don't understand that their negative emotions are alerting them to subconscious needs that require their attention, they tend to ignore them. If the underlying need decides that it cannot wait for the employee to turn their conscious attention to it, this need will have no choice but to take matters into its own hands and enact a fight, flight, freeze, or appease response - an unfortunate reaction that could have been avoided had the employee turned their attention to the underlying need as soon as this need began generating a negative emotion.

Negativity

When employees project responsibility for their negative emotions onto the world around them, they become judgmental (complain) and adversarial (blame) - creating a toxic work environment for themselves and the people around them.

Rumination

If an employee has misinterpreted a negative emotion as being caused by what's happening to them and they don't see a way to change what's happening to them, they will (erroneously) believe that there is no way for them to resolve this negative emotion. They will then look for ways to numb this negative emotion through the use of substances, distraction, positive self-talk, mindful breathing, or any number of other "emotional regulation" techniques. Since these techniques do nothing to resolve the underlying need, the employee's subconscious keeps generating the negative emotion, the employee keeps interpreting this emotion as being caused by what's happening to them, and the employee spirals down into cyclical negative thoughts. Psychologists call this "brooding rumination" and it's been implicated in 70% of behavioral health issues including depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse, eating disorders, and self-harm.



Emotional Response-Ability Leads to Emotional Well-Being

When employees recognize that their negative emotions are alerting them to subconscious needs that they are not on track to meet, they view their negative emotions as valuable feedback regarding their own performance and embrace them in ways that lead to emotional well-being.

Motivation

When employees view their negative emotions as helpful guides to improving their performance, they welcome them into their conscious awareness. Although the employee might not like the fact that they are not on track to meet their needs, this awareness motivates them to reflect on their performance and get themselves back on track.

Focus

When employees understand that feeling their negative emotions primes their body and mind to meet the underlying needs, they are more willing to allow their negative emotions to flow through their bodies. For example, when employees allow themselves to feel frustrated, they enter a cognitive state conducive to finding creative solutions and thinking outside the box. Similarly, allowing themselves to feel anxious equips them with the mental framework they need to evaluate worst-case scenarios and formulate contingency plans. Their focus and performance improve.

Composure

When employees realize that their negative emotions are distress calls from their subconscious that they would do well to pay attention to, they make the effort to acquire the emotional literacy required to accurately name their emotions. Once they succeed in naming a negative emotion correctly, their subconscious takes this as a sign that the employee has heard its distress call and it dials down the intensity of the negative emotion so the employee can think clearly and strategically. This is known as the “name it to tame it” phenomenon and it allows the employee to remain composed even in the midst of strong negative emotions such as fear and anger.

Creativity

Once employees have decoded their negative emotions into needs, they realize that there are many ways to meet these needs and that they have the power to change their needs. This realization leads to creative and resourceful solutions.

Progress

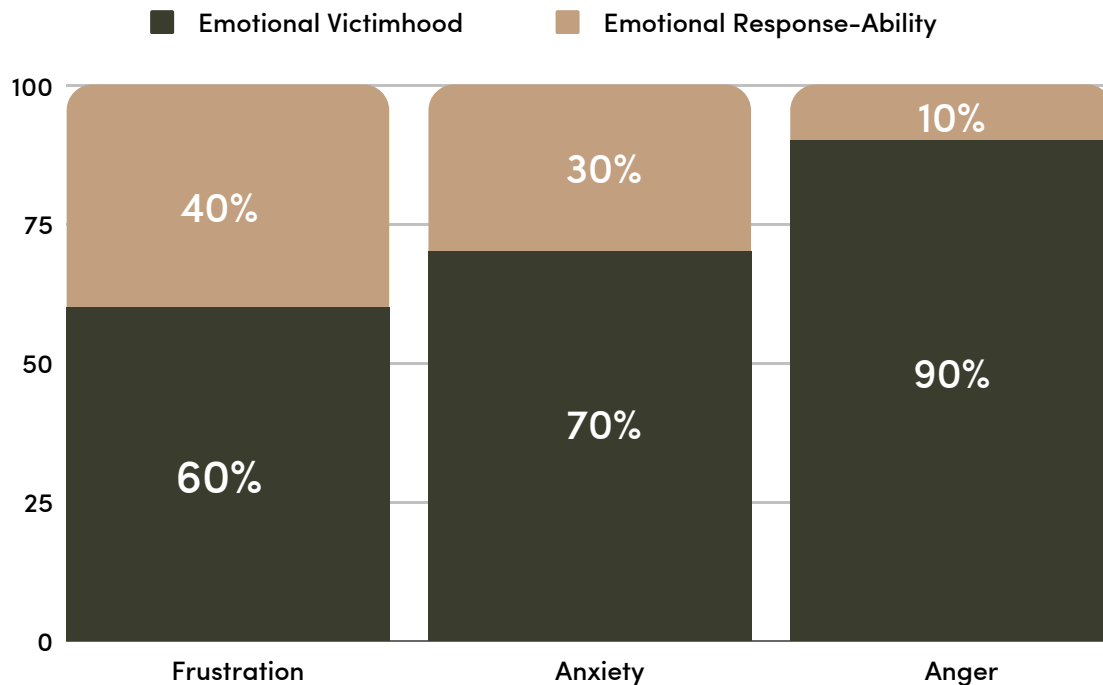
Whether the employee resolves their negative emotion by getting back on track to meet the original need (solve), or by changing the need to one they can fulfill (evolve), the employee will continue moving forward.

When employees are relating to their negative emotions from this state of Emotional Response-Ability, they flow through work in a state of optimal performance and well-being - while inspiring those around them to do the same.



Unfortunately, Emotional Victimhood Is the Norm

In a study conducted with thousands of employees across multiple companies, we found that most employees misinterpret most of their negative emotions as being caused by what's happening to them.



When we parsed the data by role, we found some intriguing correlations.

Executives were far more likely than managers and individual contributors to interpret their frustration in terms of goals they were not on track to achieve (85% for executives, versus 60% for middle managers, and 35% for individual contributors).

Executives were also more likely to attribute their anxiety to not being on track to mitigate potential risks (35% for executives, versus 30% for managers and individual contributors).

But, when it came to anger, executives were no more likely to realize that the real reason they were angry was that they were not on track to assert their rights (10% for executives, managers, and individual contributors). In contrast, attorneys were significantly more likely to interpret their anger in terms of rights (35%).

Given that executives are paid to achieve goals and mitigate risks, and attorneys are retained to assert rights, it should come as no surprise that these employees were more likely to interpret these particular emotions correctly. What is surprising is just how often employees, at all levels, fall into Emotional Victimhood.

Training employees to respond to negative emotions from a state of Emotional Response-Ability represents a huge untapped opportunity to improve performance and well-being.

The Challenge of Training Employees to Be More Emotionally Response–Able

Getting employees to embrace Emotional Response–Ability is straightforward in concept, but challenging in practice.

The idea that negative emotions serve as signals alerting us to unmet subconscious needs intuitively resonates with employees. This realization, coupled with the sense of empowerment that comes from decoding negative emotions into actionable needs, motivates employees to embrace these concepts and associated techniques.

What’s challenging is that Emotional Victimhood is so deeply ingrained in our culture that it takes more than an intellectual understanding that negative emotions are being generated by unmet needs to change the way employees habitually interpret and respond to their negative emotions. It takes training and practice.

To address this challenge, my colleagues and I have developed a comprehensive approach for training employees how to remain in a state of Emotional Response–Ability - raising their engagement, leadership effectiveness, and emotional well-being.

What Leaders Are Saying

“This was by far the most useful training I’ve received in my 35-year career.”

“I didn't understand my emotions and I didn't trust them. Through this course, I've learned to trust my emotions to help me understand what I need.”

“It’s so empowering to know that I can turn any negative emotion into a positive outcome.”

“When I examine my negative emotions using this framework, the stress just melts away.”

“I'm more productive, I feel empowered, and I get better sleep at night.”

“The workshop has dramatically improved how we relate to each other.”

“When I’m in meetings, I’ve started listening for people’s needs instead of listening to their judgments - and the meeting goes a lot smoother.”

“I've taken lots of leadership development and emotional intelligence courses, and they were great! But when I got home, I put the course materials on a shelf. Not this time! I'm going to practice this stuff every day until it's second nature.”

“This course should be called ‘Being Human 101’.”




Charles M. Jones

GET IN TOUCH

For more information:

To receive a demo of Emotional Response-Ability™ or explore what it can do for your organization, please contact Charles M. Jones.

 +1 (914) 263-0823

 charles@charlesmjones.com

 www.charlesmjones.com

