

Small Moments, Big Impact



A demanding shift ends with a tense exchange. Minutes later, you find yourself sounding impatient with a colleague. Sound familiar?



Similar moments can happen after a difficult encounter with a member of public, during a meeting, or even over a call. Sometimes, how we feel after one interaction can carry into the next. Why does this happen?

One process that helps explain this is **emotional contagion** – how we can pick up emotions from others through their facial expression, voice, tone or behaviour¹.

Why does this matter at work?

Research shows that emotions within a group can affect how people work together. In one study, positive emotions spreading within a group were linked to more cooperation, less conflict and better perceived task performance².



This does not mean that we automatically pick up every emotion around us. How much others affect us can depend on the situation, who we are with and what we are paying attention to³.

It also does not mean we should hide frustrations or avoid difficult conversations. Sometimes, difficult conversations need to happen. What matters is noticing how we express ourselves and how it may affect what happens next.



Think about a recent interaction at work. How might the other person have felt afterwards – reassured, supported, uncertain or tense? When you are under pressure, what changes in the way you speak or respond?



From the Researcher

Hello! I've always been curious about the little bits of science behind the things we do every day. That curiosity often sparks ideas for these issues—and I hope this issue leaves you with something new to think about!

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Pause - Attend - Respond

Our emotions can show up in many everyday interactions – during briefings, handovers, public-facing encounters, meetings, calls or messages. Here are three simple things we can try:

Pause



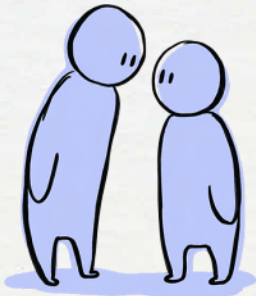
"Am I still carrying frustrations from what just happened?"

Notice how you are feeling before you respond.

After a difficult encounter, take a short moment to reset before speaking to the next person.

For an important message, read it once for what you are saying and once for how it might sound.

Attend



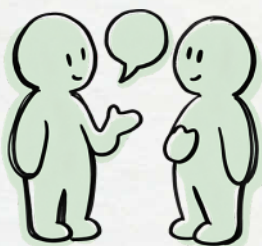
"Let me check if I have understood you correctly..."

Give the other person your attention.

Listen to what they are saying before deciding how to respond.

Where possible, reduce distractions, ask a follow-up question and check that you have understood them, correctly⁴.

Respond



"I see it differently. Can I explain why?"

Think about how you respond.

When someone raises a concern, makes a mistake or has different view, try to keep the conversation constructive.

You do not have to agree. You can disagree while still listening and responding respectfully.

Small interactions can leave a ripple. We may not control every emotion around us, but we can be intentional about our response. More importantly, we can help create conditions in which respect and voice are easier.

Taking Action

Individual effort is only part of the picture. The way we interact is also shaped by the people and environment around us. Over time, repeated interactions can become part of “how we do things around here”.

Leaders also play an important role. How they respond when someone raises a concern, makes a mistake or has a different view can affect what people feel comfortable doing next time⁵.



FOR ME

What is it like to work with me when things get stressful?

Do I carry the tension forward, or help calm things down?



FOR OUR TEAM

What has become “normal” in the way we treat one another?

What happens when someone disagrees or raises a concern?



FOR LEADERS

How do people experience me when things get difficult?

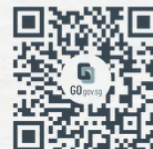
Does the way I respond make it easier or harder for them to speak to me again?

Think back to the moment you had in mind at the start. If a similar situation happened again, what might you do differently?

Small interactions can have a bigger impact than we realise. We cannot control every difficult situation or how other people feel, but we can be more intentional about what happens next – how we *pause, listen and respond*.

Share your thoughts, experiences or ideas for future issues:

go.gov.sg/thementalmusings



References

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3. Wróbel, M., & Imbir, K. K. (2019). Broadening the Perspective on Emotional Contagion and Emotional Mimicry: The Correction Hypothesis. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 14(3), 437–451. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691618808523>
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