UNC Employee Wellness Forum

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Common statements about emotions at work

- Let’s not get too excited
- You are being way too emotional about this
- We need to look at this rationally

This comes from the historical view on emotion
Passion and reason are antithetical
What I hope to argue in the next ten minutes

- Let’s get excited
- You are not being emotional enough about this
- We need to look at things emotionally

Fundamental premise of today’s session: Emotion is not just important, but absolutely necessary for us to make good decisions, take optimal action, cope with change, manage stress, succeed and achieve resilience.
COVID declared pandemic

Mental health rises as a global concern

George Floyd’s death

US Election results

COVID-19 vaccine rollout begins

Atlanta shootings

Back to work-ish

Well-being Over Time
Two frequent emotions during the pandemic

Boredom
Anxiety
Boredom is the most commonly experienced emotion at work
Working remotely can be monotonous.
Boredom starts a downward spiral, leads to mind-wandering later
Mind-wandering hurts productivity

In three studies:

Belinda, Melwani & Kapadia, 2022
ANXIETY AND ITS NEGATIVE SPIRAL

- Covid-19 Anxiety, or the apprehension about contracting Covid-19 was at an all-time high during the pandemic
- Anxiety leads to experiences of lacking control and feelings of helplessness
- Results in worse work and health outcomes

Trougakos, Chawla & Mccarthy, 2021
Why talk about these different emotions together?

Boredom (Time 1) → Mind-Wandering (Time 2) → Reduced Productivity (Time 2)

Covid-19 Anxiety (Time 1) → Lack of control (Time 2) → Reduced Goal Progress Somatic complaints (Time 3)
A common underlying mechanism

The question is WHY?

Boredom → Emotional Suppression → Mind-Wandering → Reduced Productivity

Covid-19 Anxiety (Time 1) → Emotional Suppression → Lack of control (Time 2) → Reduced Goal Progress Somatic complaints (Time 3)
Cult of positivity

Is this something we should be focusing on and believing in?
Opening ourselves up to emotional ambivalence: simultaneous positive and negative emotions
Emotional ambivalence may have developed as an affective mechanism to enable individuals to flexibly respond and adapt to complex and changing circumstances.

—Rothman & Melwani, 2017
Mixed Emotions Enable Flexibility

- Cognitive Flexibility
  - Draw attention to divergent perspectives
  - Motivate a balanced consideration of multiple different perspectives

- Behavioral Flexibility
  - Increases problem solving, and integrative negotiation outcomes
Leadership

Creativity

Negotiations

Relationships

Decision-Making

Health & Well-Being
Ambivalence and Resilience: Parents in the Pandemic

Melwani, Tedder-King & Rothman, working paper
Mothers versus fathers

Multitasking

Mixed Emotions

Goal Reengagement

Role Renegotiation

Resilience Outcomes

Mixed Emotions

- Mother: 4.5
- Father: 3.5
2. Emotional Exhaustion
Zoom Fatigue
But return to work fatigue as well

- Emotional labor or pressures to fake emotions and identities
- Change fatigue
- Emotional contagion, the automatic process by which people rapidly “catch” each other’s emotions occurs in a two-stage process
  - From in-person interactions with others feeling the same way
Solution: build an emotional culture of love

The degree of affection, caring, and compassion that employees feel and express toward one another.
What are the psychological consequences of mega-threats?

[Graph showing well-being over time with key events such as COVID declaration, George Floyd's death, mental health rise, and vaccine rollout.]
Jewish leaders urge 'wake-up call' after Poway synagogue shooting

Saturday's attack came six months after a man fatally shot 11 people at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh – the deadliest attack against Jews in American history.

Trayvon Martin's death sparked a movement that lives on five years later
Mega-Threats

Large scale, negative, identity-related episodes that receive significant media attention

Leigh and Melwani, 2019
Embodied threat: heightened awareness of the increased likelihood of personally experiencing harm because of one’s identity.

This could happen to me!

“If I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon Martin. When I think about this boy, I think about my own kids.”
The Effects of Mega-Threats on Individuals at Work

Mega-Threat + Embodied threat

Shared Group Membership

Reduced Task Engagement

Reduced Social Engagement
Solutions: Breaking the cycle through positive deviance

● What is positive deviance?
● Can we encourage and reward positive deviance?
  ○ Pro-group voice
  ○ Speaking openly about mega-threats
Emotions— and recognizing them help us thrive— and inspire others