

My ADHD Got Me FIRED!



... AND HOW THE RIGHT TOOLS CAN PREVENT THAT OUTCOME

by Kathleen G. Nadeau, PhD

INTERACTIONS IN THE WORKPLACE can be daunting for many people—difficult supervisors, impossible expectations, toxic work environments that doesn't foster support and cooperation between coworkers—the list is long. ADHD brings its own set of challenges in the workplace: having difficulty prioritizing tasks, lagging motivation when tasks are boring, work that is not a good match for your strengths. If you feel under stress from the moment you start work in the morning, your emotions will run high and even small frustrations can seem major.

Having ADHD doesn't just mean being distractible or forgetful. It can also mean that you have interpersonal challenges. After living a lifetime with ADHD, it's easy to become extra sensitive to comments that are perceived as critical—when these feelings are intense we call it “rejection dysphoria,” a tendency to become deeply hurt when you feel rejected. Frustration can be more intense when you live with ADHD, which can lead to impulsive outbursts on the job.

In recent years, we have focused much more on the emotional challenges of living with ADHD. ADHD is not just about distractibility and forgetfulness; it also brings with it a lot of emotional challenges. People with ADHD tend to have more difficulty with “emotional regulation skills,” our ability to stay in control of our feelings and our reactions to those feelings, even when our feelings are intense.

To gain better control over our feelings, our prefrontal lobes

need to be in charge—that's the part of our brains that uses logic and reason, that plans for the future that thinks about the consequences of our actions. And the prefrontal lobes of our brain tend to underfunction when we have ADHD. Instead, our thoughts can be hijacked by our feelings—intense feelings that are triggered in our limbic system—the emotional center of our brain.

When we struggle to regulate and manage our emotions this can lead to impulsive emotional reactions at work. Do your emotions “get the best of you” sometimes? Do you say things that you later regret? Even very bright, capable people with ADHD can get fired or overlooked for promotions at work because they have poor emotional control. Strong emotional reactions can lead us to misinterpret interactions at work. They can lead us to feel resentful and competitive. We can have intense feelings of anger when we see others getting the best assignments, the bonuses, and the promotions. And they can lead us to sometimes “tell someone off” because we have such strong feelings about something we disagree with.

If you find that you sometimes cry at work, lose your temper, walk out angrily from a difficult discussion with your supervisor, or, even worse, tell people off angrily when something seems unfair to you, it's time to build a toolkit of emotional regulation skills. Building these emotional regulation skills will serve you well when your ADHD heads you in the wrong direction of making emotion-based decisions.

Practice mindfulness.

Mindfulness is an exercise in which you focus completely on one thing, and take your thoughts away from anything that may be troubling or distracting you. Did you know that even a three-minute mindfulness exercise can calm you down and reduce your anger or anxiety? Go to a quiet place, sit comfortably, close your eyes, and focus only on your breath—breathing in and out slowly. If your thoughts drift back to your upset, simply bring your thoughts back to your breath. Try it! You'll be amazed at how well it works. And the more often you practice three-minute mindfulness the better it will help you to feel calm.

Practice using your "wise mind."

Your wise mind pays attention to both your feelings and your thoughts. When you are operating only from your "emotion mind," your thoughts are driven by your feelings and you make poor decisions—decisions such as "take this job and shove it." Wise mind incorporates your "thinking mind" into your decision-making. Using your wise mind, you can have a dialogue with yourself that could go something like this: "Yes, I am really angry about the way my boss spoke to me. He completely dismissed my ideas and I felt insulted. But if I respond in anger, all I will accomplish is to become unemployed. Instead, I need to calm down. Perhaps I can find a way to approach my boss calmly and discuss our differences. If I decide that I don't want to continue working here, I know that it is much easier to find a new job while I am still employed. Maybe I should look online and see if there are other jobs that sound like a better match for me. Meanwhile, I should keep my cool."

Practice being nonjudgmental.

Judging others, only seeing the negative, leads us to operate from our emotion mind and become increasingly upset at others. When we don't judge others, we are more open to seeing others' points of views and reaching a reasonable compromise.

Distress tolerance.

Everyone experiences distress. Learning that we can tolerate distress helps us to calm down and think with our wise mind about how to respond to the distressing situation. It can help to practice dealing with distress, so that we can avoid overreacting. We can build our distress tolerance over time. It's a "muscle" that we can strengthen. When we know that we can tolerate distress we can avoid telling ourselves "I can't stand it!" and making a self-destructive decision based on our belief that a situation is intolerable. Distress tolerance doesn't mean putting up with harmful behavior because we are weak; it means that we are in control and will make a good decision when we are no longer feeling intensely distressed.

Use STOP skills when you are super-upset.

The STOP skill goes like this:

- Stop! Visualize a STOP sign and freeze in your tracks. Don't react when your emotions are filled with energy. Don't let your emotions control you.
- Take a step back (physically or mentally) and notice how you are breathing. Take a few slow, deep breaths.
- Observe what is going on both inside of you and around you. If there are people around you, notice what they are doing and saying. When someone is upset, often they only focus on one small thing. By observing, you are taking in the big picture and can make a better decision about what to do.
- Proceed mindfully. Reacting impulsively won't get you what you want in the long-run. Use your wise mind skills to make a good decision.

Distract yourself.

Another good tool for managing your emotions at work is to learn ways to distract yourself from your anger and upset. Your goal is to calm down so that you can use your wise mind.

Use TIPP skills.

These are ways to rapidly calm yourself down to avoid an overreaction.

- Tip your temperature down by splashing cold water on your face
- Intense aerobic exercise for five minutes
- Paced breathing—slow, deep breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation—repeatedly tighten and then relax tense muscles.

Stay out of the "danger zone."

We are in danger of losing control when:

- We have high stress levels—look for ways to reduce your stress at the moment
- We have not had enough sleep
- We are hungry
- We don't have emotional support from others
- We ruminate and don't distract ourselves from our upset.

When you are afraid you might lose it at work, think about what factors may be putting you in the danger zone, and then try to do something about those factors. Talk to a friend, grab a bite to eat, distract yourself from the issue, go home, and get some rest. 🎧

Kathleen Nadeau, PhD, is the founder and clinical director of the Chesapeake ADHD Center of Maryland, one of the largest and oldest ADHD specialty clinics in the United States. An internationally recognized authority on ADHD, she is a frequent lecturer both in the United States and abroad. She has served on the professional advisory boards of both CHADD and ADDA, and joined the CHADD Hall of Fame in 1999 for her groundbreaking work on women and girls with ADHD. Dr. Nadeau is the author or coauthor of over a dozen books that address ADHD issues across the lifespan, from her bestselling book for children, *Learning to Slow Down and Pay Attention*, to her current research and writing project on older adults, to be titled *Still Distracted After All These Years*.