

# Spinning Ourselves Around: How to Manage The Emotional Turmoil of Crises

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Research continues to draw connections between the emotional swings of entrepreneurs and both their overall well-being and their business success. It is becoming clear external events play a role in our emotions and may cause them to swing outside our comfort zones. When this happens, entrepreneurs need coping strategies. This article provides entrepreneurs with three strategies to manage their emotions during crises.

It is understandable that the emotional turmoil caused by a crisis can make you less happy, but can it also impact your business prospects? It is thought that people only have so many *psychological resources* available. Psychological resources are the attention, caring, priorities, and intellectual firepower you invest in different aspects of daily life (see Hobfoll, 2002 for a review). When emotions swing, or when you must put effort into controlling your emotions, you dip into a limited supply of psychological resources. For instance, putting on a brave face for clients and employees, though you may feel sad or scared inside, burns these resources. This leaves you psychologically depleted when faced with other demands, such as holding onto inventory with a declining customer base, complying with a law requiring business operations be shut down temporarily, raising wages to keep and retain average performers, or handling the twists and turns from your personal life.

## A Business and Personal Crisis

Societal and business challenges such as those that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic can cause emotions to spin from pleasant to agitated and back again. All of us have an emotional home base, along the continuum of pleasantness to agitation. Yet, our appraisals of external events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) may cast us into an unpleasant state nearly automatically and diminish our emotional, cognitive, physical, and social resources to address the business

problems confronting us. In this article, we'll take a look at how emotional fluctuations, or *affect spin*, affect entrepreneurs. Then we'll share three tips on how entrepreneurs can take control of affect spin while first stabilizing their businesses and then moving forward during difficult, uncertain circumstances.

A Federal Reserve report released in January of 2021 showed that 78% of surveyed businesses experienced a decline in revenue, 46% a decline in staff, 56% reduced operations, 48% modified operations and 26% had temporarily closed. Behind these sobering statistics are the personal stories of millions of entrepreneurs in crisis. To better understand, we spoke with Andrea Emmons, an entrepreneur in her thirties who runs an Illinois-based college consulting company, about her business and her emotions at the height of the COVID-19 lockdowns in the U.S. The shared pains, common challenges, and lessons to be learned from Andrea's story will resonate with every industry, market, or business model.

In February 2020, Andrea's sales pipeline was flush. Andrea describes 2019 as "a year of change for the organization, so in early 2020 everything was all starting to come together nicely." Andrea felt confident her team could achieve their 2020 sales targets. Fast forward to May 2020. Due to the COVID-19 crisis she had furloughed half of her 16 workers. May revenue plunged and she was "functioning in that part of your brain that is primal." Exercise, sleep, and even family suffered. After weeks of turmoil, Andrea took control of her emotions and identified a path forward — the company would transition to a fully online business model, even though this would wipe out their successful in-person business. With the decision made to pivot, she and her team felt they had a clear direction and moods turned from distraught to positive and action-oriented. Let's now take a deeper look at spinning emotions, their costs, and how you can, like Andrea, better manage them



during a future crisis.

## Emotional Comfort Zones Under Attack

Our emotions, or *affect*, fluctuate along a continuum from the positive end to the negative end. This phenomena, dubbed *affect spin* by researchers, may vary by the minute, hour, or day. At times, it feels as if the world is not only spinning around and around but we are too. This rushing mix of varied emotions is distracting, but for some even discomfiting or debilitating. It can constrain our ability to make decisions and cause us to “miss the beats” in relationships with our team, our customers, and our board. There is no question that the uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity facing entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 crisis can create an emotional roller-coaster of highs and lows, seemingly with no end in sight.

Researchers who have [studied](https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fa0020962) (<https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fa0020962>) affect spin believe everyone has an emotional baseline called their *affective comfort zone* (see Kuppens et al., 2010). We all hover around a comfortable range of positive and negative emotions. What is comfortable varies: Some of us are accustomed to high levels of fluctuation and others low levels. Now, throw in what are known as *agitors* and we can experience emotional swings far outside of our comfort zone. Many of these agitators are internal, such as sleep quality or quantity, but others are external, such as relationships, work demands, or worse.

Acts of God — the big events that can rock your world (think hurricanes and pandemics) -- are also external agitators. Daniel Beal and Louma Ghandour (2011) examined the effects of a hurricane on affect spin. They found the hurricane lowered the positive emotions of the technology workers they examined but didn't affect their negative emotions. In other words, positive emotions such as joy and humor declined but negative emotions such as anger and anxiety weren't affected. Beal and Ghandour also found the hurricane's impacts were more pronounced for those who had high levels of affect spin. In other words, those whose emotions tended to fluctuate more suffered the largest emotional swings from the hurricane. In short, we not only respond to what's happening outside of ourselves but also inside ourselves. As such, two people can experience the

same crisis quite differently, and can also respond quite differently depending upon what's happening internally with us from time X to time Y. Being “centered and grounded” is an expression we use to reduce high levels of affect spin by reducing the magnitude of our emotional fluctuations.

## Managing Spinning Emotions

Emotions are ubiquitous and so is affect spin. It is important to remember that emotions are outcomes of environmental adaptation. Adaptation begins with how you appraise the environmental challenge and then take stock of resources to handle the challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Hence, the goal is not to become unemotional or to eliminate affect spin. The goal is to regulate the magnitude of affect spin and decrease negative emotions (Richels et al., 2020).

By studying the ways in which entrepreneurs can effectively cope with affect spin, we can provide evidence-based recommendations to those who continue to deal with the ongoing strain of COVID-19 and its economic aftermath. In our work with fellow entrepreneurs, fellow investors, corporate colleagues, and coaching clients, we have observed how different leaders first interpret and then respond to seemingly similar environmental challenges, such as a governmental decision to shut down businesses. We offer the following three tips for anyone seeking to better manage affect spin, whether you are an entrepreneur or corporate executive.

### 1. Know and Mindfully Modify Your Comfort Zone

For anyone who has tried to lose weight, you know that success comes in bursts. You drop a few pounds relatively easily and then you just stay at the same weight regardless of what you do. This is your body adapting to a new set point. Recall the *affective comfort zone* that describes someone's natural emotional range. Are you more “tightly wrapped” than others? Do others say that you are “intense to be around” or maybe more “laid back?” Do your emotions tend to fluctuate between positive (happy, enthusiastic, hopeful) and negative (angry, sad, dejected)? Asking these questions can help you understand your comfort zone.

Once you know your comfort zone, learn to take control. Engaging in mindfulness is a proven approach to adjusting your comfort zone by decreasing your reactivity to external agitators. Living and working in a

state of “awareness that emerges through paying attention to purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145) is the heart of mindfulness. Mindfulness enables you to experience the space between what happens outside of yourself and your internal reaction. Over time and with deliberate practice, you will know the difference between reacting versus responding to the vicissitudes of life. Another benefit is that you learn to know further in advance what triggers you to throw yourself from one emotion to an opposite emotion.

Mindfulness is a way to reduce emotional reactivity when experiencing negative affect. In fact, “emotional repair (p. 477)” is one of the benefits of mindfulness (Roche et al., 2014). Staying attuned to how others react and respond to you while you’re spinning is essential. In effect, you’re tempering your over-the-top reactions to affectively charged events.

## 2. Set the Reset Button Using Cognitive Reappraisal

Be intentional about setting the reset button in response to negative events to promote recovery. Andrea, the college consultant introduced earlier, described one of her survival strategies in the early days of COVID-19, “I realized we could not continue in this mode of reaction and needed to refocus ... we began to look at things through a positive lens and create strategies that can move us forward.” This is an example of what we call setting the reset button.

The skill known as *cognitive reappraisal* is one powerful way of skillfully setting the reset button by nudging your emotions back toward your baseline. Cognitive reappraisal involves recognizing the negative pattern your thoughts have fallen into and changing that pattern to one that is more effective. Changing the course of your thoughts, or how you’re making sense of things, can change the course of your emotions and allow you to view your situation with fewer emotional influences.

To change the course of your thoughts, you need to shift your self-talk. Stress appraisal self-talk focuses on what entrepreneurs “tell themselves before, during, and after a stressful event” (Neck et al., 2013, p. 471). It is important to recognize that this first appraisal is whether the event is stressful, and the second appraisal is how to cope with the event if indeed it is perceived as stressful.

## 3. Inoculate Yourself with a Stress Vaccine

Stress Inoculation Training (SIT) is often the umbrella term used to represent a collection of coping strategies. Often thought of as mental armor, SIT helps to inoculate, or shield, individuals from future potentially traumatizing stressors, teaching them to deal more effectively with the stressors psychologically (Meichenbaum, 2017).

Our work with entrepreneurs and corporate executives with direct reports has taught us that leaders benefit when they accept the reality that their teams are reacting and responding to them as individual leaders and the climate created by these leaders. Given this reality, we recommend that leaders consider the following three approaches to sanitizing the work environment of toxic organizational pathogens and intentionally decreasing transmission of negative emotions.

- **Accept Your Role as a Thermostat.** Leaders engage in many activities related to the role of a thermostat. Thermostats serve dual functions, both measuring and regulating temperature. Is the temperature too hot? Too cold? Just right? Listening tours, employee surveys, focus groups, and pulse surveys are examples of checking the temperature of the work environment. This is an important first step, but it must be followed by clear action to positively influence your team’s emotions and morale through calm and confident leadership. Andrea recounts during her company’s COVID-19 transition, “as a leader you have to remain calm in all situations. We know that fear won’t help solve problems.” Recognize that, as a leader, you both measure and set the temperature for each direct report and the overall work environment.
- **Embrace All of You.** Recognize that you are more than a mind. When you show up to lead, all of you presents itself to others. How do you show up? In one of the authors’ clinical work with leaders, he finds that far too many leaders underinvest in the adequate sleep, deliberate rest, balanced nutrition, and physical activity that help them show up as alert, attentive, refreshed, cognitively sharp, interpersonally engaged, emotionally resilient, and physically energized.

- **Warm Up Compassion for Self and Others.** The pandemic has reminded us of the uncertain nature of small businesses. Yet, an entrepreneur who embraces a Darwinian outlook on their business will trigger a scarcity mindset, a primal set of emotions, and perhaps even trigger a chronic flight, fight, or freeze reaction from teams put on edge. We know from our experience that being on edge works in the short run but not the long run. Be bold enough as a leader to show self-compassion and compassion to others, while continuing to hold yourself and others accountable.

## Building Personal Resilience

Even in the best of times we all experience emotional fluctuations. Entrepreneurs' livelihoods and financial security depend on their ability to manage, and even thrive, during emotionally charged events. The COVID-19 pandemic — the worst external agitator most Americans have faced — eviscerated if not destroyed many small businesses. Andrea, the college consultant, set her reset button and transitioned her team from apprehension to action plan. She acted as a thermostat, helping her team to regulate their emotions and successfully pursue a new plan. Though you cannot control external events, you can control your reaction to those events, lead your team forward, and in so doing, improve your prospects for weathering whatever crises you face.

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