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How to (Finally) Stop Taking Things So Personally, According to a Psychotherapist



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"It's not personal. It's just business." How many times have you heard those words when you were smarting over a job you didn't get or a pitch that got rejected, or a professional setback (<https://www.inc.com/minda-zetlin/7-amazing-ways-smart-leaders-turn-failure-into-an-asset.html>) or slight? And how often have you found them unhelpful? Maybe it wasn't meant personally but it feels very personal to you.

But the fact is, we all have to learn not to take things personally if we're going to be successful (https://www.inc.com/minda-zetlin/13-things-smart-leaders-do-to-boost-their-own-confidence.html) in work and in life. And the more we can let disappointments and disparagement roll off our backs rather than letting them pierce us to the heart, the happier and more resilient we'll be.

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How do you get there? In a wise post (https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/your-emotional-meter/201802/how-stop-taking-things-personally) on the *Psychology Today* website, psychotherapist Ilene Strauss Cohen offers some great insights into why we take things personally and how to stop. You'll have to read the full piece to get all her great advice, but here are my favorites among her tips:

1. Know your own worth.

The more confidence (https://www.inc.com/minda-zetlin/13-things-smart-leaders-do-to-boost-their-own-confidence.html) you have in yourself and the value of your work, the less likely you are to feel crushed if someone criticizes what you've done or undervalues you or your work. Developing that kind of confidence is difficult and can take time. But it might help you to remember that our brains are wired to focus on the negative, and that you're probably harder on yourself than you deserve.

So take a moment to think about your own accomplishments. Compare where you were and what you were doing a year ago (or five years ago) to what you're doing now. This won't work for everyone, but for many people it's a useful way to see just how far you've come. Have a conversation with someone who likes and respects you, and let them remind you of how awesome you are. Understanding your own value is your best defense when someone makes you feel small.

2. Recognize your own triggers.

All of us have some things that push our buttons and set off reactions that may be out of proportion to reality. Try to be aware of those triggers and how you react to them. I tend to hate feeling like an outsider in a group--probably a leftover from being an only child--so when I feel excluded that makes me particularly crazy. Knowing I have this trigger doesn't stop me from having those feelings, but I can sometimes catch myself and say, "Wait a second, you're reacting to the past, not the present." That gives me a chance to put things into proportion.

3. Set boundaries.

Cohen makes an interesting point: If you set proper boundaries for yourself in both your professional and personal life, you won't feel as wounded when others reject you or say no to your requests. "Doing too much to please others can lead you to feel overly sensitive when they do something that upsets you," she writes.

She has a point. I realize it's when I've put myself out for someone else that I feel most infuriated if they won't do the same. But kindness isn't a quid pro quo. You should never do a favor for anyone unless you're willing to do it with no hope of reward. Or else, if you do want a quid pro quo, then

state that up front. Sure, you'll be happy to stay late to help an important customer, so long as you can have the afternoon off to get your hair done. You can't have it both ways.

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4. Use logic.

Often, if you can look at a situation calmly and rationally, you won't mind the slight or insult that upset you wasn't really such a big deal, or has an easy explanation. Our rational minds, usually associated with our prefrontal cortex, can often overcome our runaway emotions, especially if the situation doesn't really warrant them.

So engage your prefrontal cortex by setting yourself a logical task, such as sitting down to work, or planning a project, or even solving a logic puzzle. When I do this, I can often feel the black cloud of rage and hurt simply melt away. It can be a temporary fix--when you stop working you may start feeling upset again. But you can use that time when your rational mind is in control to objectively assess the situation and decide if your reaction is appropriate. You can decide what, if anything, you should do about it.

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