



Emotional Dysregulation at Work

**A briefing for organisations on why emotions escalate...
and what actually helps**

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Important note

This resource is intended to support understanding and good practice in neuro-inclusive workplace design. It provides general guidance and does not constitute legal, medical, or clinical advice. Organisations should apply the principles in line with their own policies, regulatory obligations, and professional judgement.

Emotional incidents at work are often treated as individual failures.

Someone is “too sensitive.”

Someone “overreacted.”

Someone “couldn’t regulate themselves.”

This framing is not only inaccurate... it is costly.

Emotional escalation in the workplace is rarely about personality.

It is about **nervous system load interacting with poorly designed systems.**

This briefing explains why emotional dysregulation shows up at work, why it escalates so quickly in some environments, and what organisations can do to prevent harm while improving performance.

Emotional dysregulation is not a mood problem

In organisational contexts, emotional dysregulation is often misunderstood as:

- emotional immaturity
- lack of professionalism
- poor resilience
- inability to handle pressure

In reality, dysregulation is a **physiological state.**

It occurs when:

- cognitive load exceeds capacity
- emotional threat is detected
- sensory or relational stress accumulates
- recovery is insufficient

Once a nervous system enters a threat state, access to reasoning, language, and executive function **reduces temporarily.**

At that point, behaviour changes... not because someone chooses to react badly, but because **regulation access is compromised.**

Why emotions escalate so quickly at work

Workplaces are uniquely potent environments for nervous system activation because they combine:

- evaluation

- hierarchy
- social belonging
- time pressure
- ambiguity
- power imbalance

For neurodivergent employees... and many neurotypical ones under strain... this combination creates a **high-threat context**.

Escalation often happens when:

- expectations are unclear
- feedback is ambiguous
- tone changes without explanation
- priorities shift suddenly
- mistakes feel unsafe

These are not interpersonal issues.
They are **design issues**.

Emotional escalation follows a predictable sequence

Most workplace emotional incidents follow a similar pattern:

1. **Load builds**
Cognitive, emotional, and sensory demands accumulate quietly.
2. **Signals are missed**
Early signs of strain are subtle and often ignored... especially in cultures that reward endurance.
3. **Trigger occurs**
A comment, email, deadline change, or interaction pushes the system past capacity.
4. **Threat response activates**
Fight (defensiveness, anger), flight (withdrawal), freeze (shutdown), or appease (over-compliance).
5. **Behaviour is judged, not contextualised**
The response is treated as a character flaw rather than a state shift.
6. **Shame and risk increase**
The system remains dysregulated longer, increasing the likelihood of recurrence.

Understanding this sequence is essential for prevention.

Rejection Sensitivity & heightened social threat

Many neurodivergent employees experience **heightened sensitivity to social evaluation**, often referred to as Rejection Sensitivity.

This is not fragility.

It reflects:

- fast threat detection
- strong relational attunement
- past experiences of unpredictability or correction

In workplace contexts, this means:

- tone carries more weight than content
- brief feedback can feel global
- ambiguity increases anxiety
- silence can be interpreted as disapproval

When social threat is perceived, the nervous system responds **before logic can intervene**.

This is why reassurance after the fact often fails.

Shutdowns are not disengagement

When emotional load becomes too high, some systems shift into **shutdown**.

This may look like:

- withdrawal
- silence
- reduced responsiveness
- inability to speak or contribute
- apparent disengagement

Shutdown is often misinterpreted as:

- lack of interest
- passive resistance
- poor attitude

In reality, shutdown is a **protective energy-conservation state**.

Pushing someone in shutdown to “engage” usually increases harm and prolongs recovery.

Conflict cycles are system-maintained

Workplace conflict is often framed as interpersonal mismatch.

But many recurring conflicts are **structurally reinforced**.

Common contributors include:

- unclear roles and priorities
- inconsistent leadership responses
- feedback without safety
- unresolved sensory strain
- chronic urgency cultures

When these conditions persist, the same people are repeatedly exposed to dysregulation triggers... and the same patterns recur.

Addressing individuals without changing conditions guarantees repetition.

Regulation is environmental, not just personal

A key organisational insight is this:

People regulate better in regulated systems.

Individual coping strategies matter... but they cannot compensate for environments that constantly activate threat.

Workplace factors that support regulation include:

- clarity and predictability
- explicit expectations
- consistent leadership behaviour
- sensory-considerate environments
- psychological safety

When these are present, emotional escalation reduces *without* asking people to “be more resilient.”

What actually helps in the moment

When dysregulation occurs, the goal is not to resolve content.

It is to **support state stabilisation**.

Helpful responses include:

- slowing the interaction
- reducing audience and pressure
- postponing non-urgent discussion
- using neutral, grounding language
- removing ambiguity (“We’ll revisit this tomorrow”)

What escalates situations:

- public correction
- moral framing (“professionalism”, “attitude”)
- forcing explanations
- demanding calm

Regulation precedes resolution... always.

Leadership has disproportionate impact

Leadership behaviour shapes nervous system safety more than any policy.

Leaders increase regulation when they:

- explain decisions
- model emotional pacing
- name uncertainty honestly
- respond predictably
- separate performance from worth

Leaders increase dysregulation when they:

- change expectations without warning
- use tone instead of clarity
- reward urgency and endurance
- address behaviour without context
- rely on authority over explanation

People do not dysregulate *because* of leadership.
They dysregulate *in response to it*.

Leadership recommendations

Organisations serious about reducing emotional dysregulation should focus on:

1. Design before discipline

Fix unclear systems before addressing behaviour.

2. Clarity as default

Make expectations explicit. Remove guesswork.

3. Predictability over pressure

Urgency should be occasional, not structural.

4. Psychological safety as infrastructure

Not a value... a practice.

5. Adjustments as prevention

Not crisis response.

6. Train managers in nervous system literacy

Understanding states prevents misinterpretation.

The cost of getting this wrong

When emotional dysregulation is mishandled, organisations see:

- repeated conflict
- increased absence
- burnout and attrition
- risk escalation
- loss of trust
- legal and reputational exposure

When it is handled well, organisations gain:

- stability
- consistency
- better performance
- stronger retention
- healthier leadership cultures

This is not a wellbeing add-on.

It is **operational risk management**.

A final note

Emotions at work are not a failure of professionalism.

They are signals from nervous systems operating under load.

Organisations that understand this do not become softer.
They become **smarter, safer, and more effective.**

The question is not:
“How do we stop people being emotional?”

It is:
“How do we design work so people don’t have to defend themselves to function?”

That shift changes everything.

