

WEALTHY & WISE

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The Power of Emotional Intelligence - and How to Harness It

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Emotional intelligence and success are related.
- Highly emotionally intelligent people tend to be good at adapting to challenges and leading groups of people.
- Practice deep listening and empathy to enhance your EI.

Chances are you've encountered plenty of articles, podcasts and videos that focus on how to be happier in life, more successful in life or both. Often, however, those discussions can overlook a topic that many people say is instrumental in achieving greater success and satisfaction.

That topic is emotional intelligence—and it could be one of the key stepping stones on the path to the life goals so many of us set for ourselves.

With that in mind, here's a look at emotional intelligence—what it is and its benefits in life, what it looks like, and steps to consider taking that may enhance your ability to use emotions to your benefit.

Why Does Emotional Intelligence Matter?

Emotional intelligence is a pretty easy concept to grasp: It refers to our ability to identify and manage our emotions. Specific components of emotional intelligence generally include being emotionally aware (meaning you can identify and name emotions you feel); being able to use those emotions effectively when thinking, listening, problem-solving and pursuing similar tasks; and being able to manage or control your emotions—as well as sometimes help others manage their emotions. Excel in these areas and you might be told you have a high EQ, or emotional quotient.

As the concept of emotional intelligence has become increasingly popular, numerous studies about the impact of emotional intelligence on outcomes, success levels, overall life satisfaction and other areas have been conducted. Some findings of just a few of these studies include the following:

- Emotional intelligence and project success are positively correlated. According to one study published in *iBusiness*, “having an emotionally intelligent manager is imperative as he or she can anticipate any issues and address them. Emotional intelligence also enhances the communication and leadership capabilities of the individual ... organizations should hire emotionally intelligent project managers to ensure project management success.”
- Emotional intelligence is positively correlated with subjective well-being—that is, how people experience the quality of their life. In another study out of Europe published in *Personality and Individual Differences*, people who were able to better harness their positive emotional responses reported better life satisfaction.
- Emotional intelligence can be a key factor in the social and mental health of young people. One study of Spanish teenagers found that “perceived emotional dimensions, particularly mood clarity and repair, showed positive associations with life satisfaction” and that “mood clarity and emotional repair had a significant direct and indirect link (via self-esteem) with life satisfaction in adolescents.”

The upshot: High levels of emotional intelligence have the potential to positively impact vast swaths of your life—personally and professionally—and impact the health of your children or grandchildren.

Key Traits of Emotionally Intelligent People

So what enables some people to do an especially good job of identifying, using and controlling their emotions in ways that generate the types of outcomes noted above? There are numerous traits of “high EQ” people—chief among them:

- They differentiate between empathy and sympathy. Many people have sympathy—they feel sorry—for those who are struggling. An even higher level of emotional intelligence involves empathy, which involves recognizing someone else’s emotions and “matching” those emotions yourself. This is why empathy is often described as “being able to walk in someone else’s shoes.”

- They use empathy skillfully. Empathy can enable you to “go deep” with people, but it alone doesn’t necessarily enable you to better understand or help them. Highly emotionally intelligent people use empathy, when appropriate, as the basis for creative idea generation and problem-solving. This stems from the high social awareness seen among emotionally intelligent people.
- They adapt quickly. The ability to skillfully manage your own emotions can potentially make you more agile when unexpected changes and challenges occur.
- They “accentuate the positive.” High emotional intelligence can help you be on the lookout for opportunities and possibilities rather than problems and roadblocks. Strong emotional management strengthens the ability to see the good (or the potential for good) in the people and situations around you.
- They have a high level of clarity. Being emotionally self-aware can help people better understand their own strengths and weaknesses and how they best contribute to specific situations—as well as areas where they might need help to get better outcomes.
- They are adept at leadership. Emotional control is often the foundation for superior leadership and decision-making. It can facilitate effective conflict management, build a better sense of teamwork in groups and set the overall tone in an organization for success.

Ways to Boost Your EI

The good news: There are action steps you can take that are aimed at enhancing your ability to identify, control and harness the emotional responses you have throughout the course of a typical day. Some ideas you might consider include these:

- Remind yourself of life’s transitory nature. We all know the phrase “This too shall pass.” One way to boost emotional intelligence is to remind ourselves during challenging moments that many of the issues we’re facing are most likely temporary. But it’s just as helpful to remember that same idea when times are great and we feel infallible. The bad times and the good times pass away, only to return again down the road. This type of emotional grounding can help us better regulate our responses to inevitable changes in life.

- **Look for lessons and takeaways from your experiences.** It's easy to feel like a victim when suffering a setback or feeling you've been mistreated by others. But greater emotional intelligence and resiliency can come by shifting your perspective away from "Why me?" to "What lesson can I take away from this?" Keep in mind that seeing the lessons from a bad situation can take time. Likewise, look for lessons learned from positive experiences too. It's easy to view successes as flukes. Instead, note what factors went into the good experience and how you might harness those factors in the future.
- **Highlight your gratitude every day.** One practice that's become increasingly common in recent years is to write down or say three things you're grateful for at the end of each day. Research suggests that consistently doing this may, over time, essentially rewire your brain to scan more frequently for positive things occurring around you—even in the midst of negative situations or environments. In one study, people who kept a daily "gratitude journal" reported feeling more optimistic and positive about their lives than those who didn't. The gratitude group was more physically active and reported fewer visits to a doctor.
- **Practice your listening skills.** Empathy starts with the ability to listen in ways that foster deeper understanding and fewer snap judgments about the person speaking. Active listening techniques include allowing others to get their ideas out without interrupting or immediately offering solutions, asking follow-up questions and stopping yourself from drawing conclusions about people or their situations too quickly. Keep in mind that empathy doesn't require you to agree with a person's perspective—it simply means you need to deeply understand where that person is at currently. If you're doing all the talking, that understanding can't occur.
- **Talk yourself through situations.** You might find it helpful to say and repeat certain phrases when you find yourself in need of greater emotional control or awareness. Consider them your emotional intelligence mantras. Some examples:
 - *"This really stinks, but I can get through it."* (This both acknowledges the challenge you face and aims to build your perseverance.)
 - *"I'm not going to be a victim."* (This can reframe how you view your position and place in a tough situation, giving you motivation to act instead of wallow.)
 - *"This is bad, but it could be much worse."* (This can help avoid catastrophic thinking and enable you to see positives—even small ones—in negative moments.)

- “What can I take away from this?” (This can shift your thinking from “Why me?” to “What can I learn here that will inform my future actions?”)

Conclusion

The field of emotional intelligence is one that is garnering more and more attention all the time, it seems, with new research continually being done on the issue. So it probably makes sense to keep tabs on this emerging area of social science. For now, consider adopting some of the EI strategies outlined above and assess their impact on your life.

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