

STRONG EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

A strong emotional response is created when an individual says or does something that makes us, as members of social groups, feel diminished, offended, threatened, stereotyped, discounted, or attacked. Organizational policies or practices can also have this effect. Strong emotional responses do not necessarily threaten our physical safety. We often feel psychologically threatened. We can also have a strong emotional response on behalf of another social group. Though we do not feel personally threatened, our sense of social justice feels violated.

Strong emotional responses are made up of many components. These may include hurt, confusion, anger, fear, surprise, or embarrassment. We react to strong emotional responses in a variety of ways, some helpful, and others not. This guide to developing a full repertoire of reactions to strong emotional responses is designed to help us take care of ourselves and then decide how to react most effectively. Some of these reactions are effective, and some are not. What reactions we choose depend on our own inner resources and the dynamics of the situation. This list is not intended to be all-inclusive, and is in no order of preference.

Leave: We physically remove ourselves from the situation

Avoidance: We avoid future encounters with and withdraw emotionally from people or situations that could elicit a strong emotional response.

Silence: We do not outwardly respond, although we feel upset. We endure without doing or saying anything.

Release: We notice the strong emotional response, but do not take it in. We choose to let it go. We do not feel the need to respond.

Attack: We respond with an intention to hurt whomever elicited the strong emotional response in us.

Internalization: We take in the content of the strong emotional response. We believe it to be true.

Rationalization: We convince ourselves that we misinterpreted the event / words we heard, that the intent was not to hurt us, and/or that we are overreacting so that we can avoid saying anything about our strong emotional response.

Confusion: We feel upset but are not clear about why we feel that way. We know we feel angry, hurt, or offended, but we just don't know what to say or do about it.

Shock: We are caught off guard, unprepared to have a strong emotional response, and have a difficult time responding.

Name: We identify what is upsetting to us to the person or organization that hurt us.

Discuss: We name the strong emotional response and invite discussion about it with the person or organization with whom we're interacting.

Confront: We name the strong emotional response and demand that the offending behavior or policy be changed.

Surprise: We react in an unexpected way. For example, we react with constructive humor that names the strong emotional response and makes people laugh.

Strategize: We work with others to develop a programmatic or political intervention to address the strong emotional response in a larger context.

Misinterpretation: We are feeling on guard and expect to experience a strong emotional response, so much so that we misinterpret something someone says and create the strong emotional response in ourselves

Discretion: Because of the dynamic in the situation (power differences, risk of physical violence or retribution, for example) we decide that it is not in our best interests to respond to the strong emotional response at that time, but choose to address it later.

Common Examples of Strong Emotional Responses

Directions: Use a 0-5 scale to rate how much of a strong emotional response the following are likely to elicit in you when you are facilitating diversity workshops or discussions:

- 0 = no emotional reaction
- 1 = very mild level of emotional reaction
- 2 = low degree of emotional reaction
- 3 = moderate degree of emotional reaction
- 4 = medium-high degree of emotional reaction
- 5 = high level of emotional reaction

When someone:

- _____ Makes an offensive comment
- _____ Demonstrate racist, sexist, homophobic, classist, etc. attitudes
- _____ Challenges the validity of the information or statistics being presented
- _____ Criticizes my style, design, or approach
- _____ Dominates the conversation and "airtime"
- _____ Interrupts me or the participants
- _____ Demonstrates domineering, threatening, or controlling behavior
- _____ Refuses to participate in the discussion or the activity
- _____ Tries to "bully" me or another participant
- _____ Is arrogant and self-righteous
- _____ Dismisses the conversation as "political correctness"
- _____ Is "set in their ways" and unwilling to shift their perspectives
- _____ Proclaims that they are "a good one" and don't own their privilege
- _____ Demonstrates disruptive behavior including joking, side conversations, and snide or sarcastic comments
- _____ Challenges some of my comments or behaviors and labels it oppressive
- _____ Is experiencing and expressing deep emotions of pain, grief, or anger
- _____ Makes oppressive comments about members of their own race, gender, etc. group
- _____ "Does not get it" as a member of a privileged group and cannot "make the connection" and use their unprivileged identities to understand another form of oppression
- _____ Tries to derail the planned format and agenda
- _____ Refuses to engage in any further dialogue
- _____ Projects their assumptions and feelings onto me or the group

B. When:

- _____ I make a mistake
- _____ I do or say something offensive or oppressive
- _____ I can't figure out how to manage a situation
- _____ Someone in the class is angry with me
- _____ There is intense conflict among participants
- _____ A participant or event reminds me of someone or reactivates
some incident from my past

Strong Emotional Responses: A Reflective Exercise

Give your thoughts to the following questions while reflecting on your experiences at Knox.

Think about a time when you felt a strong emotion because of something someone in the class said (or didn't say), wrote, or communicated non-verbally.

- **What specifically happened that elicited a strong emotional response?**
- **Why do you believe the strong emotional response occurred?**

How did you internally respond to the situation? How did you externally respond to the situation?

Looking back, do you wish that you had responded differently? How would you have responded?

What strong emotional responses do you feel most often? How do you react to them?

How do you hope to handle strong emotional responses in the future?