Everyone knows someone who gets emotional, or even fears getting on a plane. The person tenses up, hands turn clammy, and they become generally irritable simply by driving to the airport. Although this person may be the pillar of common sense and practicality in any other situation, when they get on a plane they morph into a completely different person; almost a Jekyll and Hyde response.

Why is this? In most cases it’s an issue of control. When getting on a plane, they have absolutely no control since control lies with the pilots. Because their control has been taken away, an irrational response of fear, irritability and even panic is exposed.

Emotional hijacking works exactly the same way. When someone is put into a stressful situation, their brain function is actually altered, and their reaction can quickly turn from reasonable and rational to primal and reactive. Emotional hijacking is a term that anyone in the workforce needs to understand, be aware of, and act to keep under control.
Defining Emotional Hijacking

Emotional hijacking is often referred to as “amygdala hijacking” since that is essentially what happens in the brain during these times of crisis. The term amygdala hijacking was first coined in Daniel Goleman’s book, Emotional Intelligence. The amygdala is the emotional part of the brain which regulates the flight or fight response. In flight or fight, our brain senses imminent danger and blasts adrenaline into our bodies to cope with the perceived danger at hand.

During emotional hijacking, the stressors that we react to actually disable the higher cortex of the brain, preventing us from making sound, rational decisions. A person suffering from emotional hijacking may become extremely reactive, defensive and lash out at the stressor. And if that stressor is another person, things can turn negative quickly. Preventing emotional hijacking from occurring in the first place is paramount to being successful in the workplace.

There are two critical things you can do to avoid an emotional hijack. The first is to increase your emotional intelligence. The second, is to identify and proactively address your triggers.

Increasing Emotional Intelligence

The level at which people control emotional hijacking, or let it control them, is typically correlated to their emotional intelligence, also known as their “emotional quotient.” The higher the emotional intelligence, the more able a person is to understand, identify and subdue an emotional hijacking situation.

According to Mark Debinski, President and Founder of Bluewater Advisory, “90% of the difference between star performers and average performers in senior leadership positions is EQ.” Leaders at successful companies tend to have very high emotional intelligence. This intelligence helps them to successfully lead and grow companies exponentially in size, while seemingly possessing the ability to always make the right decision at the right time.

So how can you increase your emotional intelligence? By being aware, making choices to take a break, and proactively empathizing.

1. **Be aware.** The first step in improving any fault is identifying the need to improve it in the first place. Be aware of your emotions at a moment in time. Look for consistent situations where you find yourself stressed or quick to anger and simply become aware.

2. **Take a break.** Once you identify triggers that have the potential to set off your emotional hijack, do anything in your power to address them so you are able to do more than just react. Take a microbreak and walk away from a tense situation by going for a walk, getting a drink or just giving yourself a minute to calm down. If the triggers are recurring and driven by a specific individual, have a respectful conversation with this person to diffuse the situation and find common ground.

3. **Practice proactive empathy.** Lead by example by acting in a manner that demonstrates the type of behavior you wish to see by those around you. Show how things should be done and with a little luck your co-workers will take a queue from your example and begin to reduce the stressors that could lead to an emotional hijack.
Identifying triggers

The good news is, just like muscles, emotional intelligence can be strengthened. Practice makes perfect and it all starts with identifying the stressors or stimuli that trigger these responses. Once the stressors are identified, the key is to diffuse the emotional outburst before it occurs. When one encounters a stressful situation and finds their heart racing, muscles tightening and mind spiraling into a reactive mode, the absolute best thing they can do is hit the “pause” button. Think of it as defensive driving in the workplace.

People are all wired differently. Those in better control of their emotions are more likely to thwart emotional hijacking than those who lack emotional control. For someone more sensitive, small things can set a person off. These stressors can surface through any of our senses and can manifest themselves physically, mentally or emotionally. Some people can be triggered by physical things such as bad smells, someone chewing with their mouth open, or a co-worker talking too loudly while another worker may be set off by emotions triggering from political or religious conversation. Have you ever gone ballistic when someone inexplicably cuts you off on the highway? Road rage is a classic example of emotional hijacking. And, it’s important to understand that emotional hijacking can take place in a highly-charged, positive situation just as easily as it can in a negative one. Think: rowdy fans celebrating a world series victory by smashing windows. Anger, fear, excitement, love, hate, disgust and frustration are all things that can trigger a potential emotional hijacking.

So what do you do when you realize you’re in the middle of an emotional hijack? Use these three tips to help you:

1. *Take a deep breath.* Before saying a word, shooting a scathing look or worse, immediately take a breath to start the calming process.
2. *Change the setting.* If at all possible, get up and move around. Do anything possible to change your environment. This serves a few purposes. By changing your environment, it makes your brain reactivate some of the pathways it had shut off to handle the emotional hijack. Secondly, it buys time to calm down and begin to think rationally.
3. *Turn a negative into a positive.* Take negative stress and use it as fuel to achieve your goals. Whatever triggered the emotional hijack may have made you mad, but you have three choices and two aren’t good. You can lash out at the person who angered you (not good), stay mad and sulk (neither good nor productive) or you can take that energy and use it as fuel to do something positive. Caffeine will only get you so far, so finding another source of fuel to get you through the day is never a bad thing, so why not take a negative and turn it into a positive?

Becoming a victim of emotional hijacking is avoidable and increasing emotional intelligence is absolutely possible. Setting your mind to doing both will help you succeed markedly in the workplace. Learn more about emotional hijacking by watching the video below.