22 Tools to Overcome Grumpiness
How not to be grumpy at work (or in the rest of your life)

grump·y ˈgrəm-pē\: easily annoyed or angered : having a bad temper or complaining often: sulky, bad-tempered, crabby, ill-tempered, short-tempered, crotchety, tetchy, testy, waspish, prickly, touchy, irritable, irascible, crusty, cantankerous, curmudgeonly, bearish, surly, ill-natured, churlish, ill-humored, peevish, pettish, cross, fractious, disagreeable, snappish, grouchy, snappy, cranky, shirty, ornery

by David Zinger

Site: www.davidzinger.com
Email: david@davidzinger.com
Phone (204) 254-2130
Some people have told me that I’m grumpy; it’s not something that I’m aware of. It’s not like I walk around poking children in the eye…not very small ones, anyway. ~Dylan Moran

Do you find yourself being grumpy at work or grumpy with other people?

My father was an executive for a Canadian railway but as a young boy I would sit around the dinner table and hear his grumpy ramblings and rants about work and the organization. Much of it was disheartening and the cumulative effect was to cause me to lose an appetite for work if working resulted in being grumpy even when you are at home with your wife, three children, and a hearty meal of spaghetti and meatballs. Dad inadvertently convinced me never to work for someone else because you will end up being grumpy (more on this later — how you can work with an organization rather than for an organization).

Preventing or intervening in grumpiness is more important than being happy. It is important not to be grumpy at work because bad is almost 3 times as powerful as good. As Roy Baumeister, a noted researcher on psychological experiences, and others stated in a landmark article entitled Bad is Stronger than Good:

*The greater power of bad events over good ones is found in everyday events, major life events (e.g., trauma), close relationship outcomes, social network patterns, interpersonal interactions, and learning processes. Bad emotions, bad parents, and bad feedback have more impact than good ones, and bad information is processed more thoroughly than good.*

We may get more return in both relationships and results by investing more energy into the 22 tools not to be grumpy rather than striving blindly towards the elusive pursuit of eternal happiness in our daily toil. Instead of *don’t worry be happy*, we need to realize that it is okay to worry, not to be happy, but we can still avoid letting ourselves be grumpy about it. In all probability, you will encounter an equal number of blisters and blissful events at work.
I am now 60 years old and I have glimpsed the early warning signs of an aging lapse into becoming a grumpy old man. I swore I would never become one of those grumpy old guys and I am pleased to report that I am aware of being grumpy when I feel it, I don’t let grumpiness last, and I have developed 22 ways to not be grumpy while I work. By the way, I plan to work until I am 75 and I believe not being grumpy will be a major contributor to my work longevity.

I don’t promise that these ways will prevent you from every feeling grumpy at work but I do believe they will

- ensure that you are mindful of being grumpy,
- your grumpiness will not be as severe or intense,
- grumpiness will not last as long, and
- you will be equipped to prevent much of your grumpiness before it festers from an emotional state into a rigid way of being.

**An invitation.** If you know someone else at work who is grumpy I encourage you to invite them to read this article, just watch out that they don’t get even grumpier because you told them they were grumpy. It is ironic but grumpy people are often quite sensitive about being grumpy.

I think some of Bob Sutton’s bad bosses, outlined in his brilliant book, *The No Asshole Rule*, are at least partly that way because they don’t monitor, manage, master, or transform their own grumpiness.

### 22 Anti-Grumpy Tools

**(1) Know your G-spots.** Your G-spots are the spots, interactions, thoughts and triggers that make you grumpy. Perhaps it is being thwarted in an action or maybe being snubbed or not getting enough sleep. Catch these triggers before they catch you and cause you to sink into a grumpy funk. Use foresight and anticipation to avoid those triggers that are avoidable.
(2) **Be mindful of the roots of your grumpiness.** Grumpiness does something to you and it may also do something for you. What is the benefit of being grumpy? What is the source of being grumpy? Does getting to the root cause offer you insight or perspective on constructive actions you can take? In this way rather than being triggered into grumpiness you are using the experience of being grumpy as a trigger to take constructive action to address the root cause.

(3) **Assume the best intentions of other people.** Before you create a negative melodrama at work about what she said or what he did, start by assuming best intentions about the behavior of others. Just because you start with good intentions does not mean that you have to stay there but begin with good intentions and ask questions or hold a conversation to check out other people’s behavior. Assuming best intentions will stop a downward grumpy spiral and pave the pathway to more constructive action.

(4) **Hit the pause button for 90 seconds.** Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, a very engaging brain researcher who studied her own stroke from the inside out, suggested that the shelf life of an emotion is 90 seconds. Yet many of us seem to hold on to an emotion for years if not the rest of our lives. Give yourself 90 seconds from the moment you feel grumpy before you act on that emotion. Also know that you must feed your grumpiness every 90 seconds to keep it alive. We feed it with fragments of tragic stories, feelings of being wronged, and a multitude of micro, almost unconscious mechanisms, to keep being grumpy. If you remain grumpy ninety seconds after the initial emotion it may be valuable to ask yourself: “How am I feeding my grumpiness to keep it alive?”

(5) **Drop your sense of entitlement.** You are not entitled. When you think you are entitled and you do not receive the expected entitlements it tends to create grumpiness. I don’t care if you have been working 30 years or you have a big office or you are a new hire with exaggerated expectations…just drop the sense of entitlement and watch your grumpy meter also drop.

(6) **Steer clear of energy suckers.** Grumpiness can be a staff infection. Avoid Debbie Downer, Nellie Negative, Peter Pouty, and
Arty Angry. Who you hang out with can kindle and ignite your grumpiness or add fuel to the fire of your negative state. In addition, ensure that you don’t become one of those energy suckers, when you are inflicted with the grumpy staff infection it is advisable to experience and express it in isolation to lessen the spread of contamination to others.

(7) Do something for someone else. Grumpiness tends to be a very self-absorbed state of mind and emotions. Get out of your self-focused shell and do something for someone else even if you don't feel like it. Often emotions and attitudes follow behavior so don’t wait to feel altruistic to act altruistically. You just might find that your grumpiness is diminished after an act of kindness or caring.

(8) Know that you work with an organization not for an organization. We often feel impotent and useless when we believe we are at the bottom of the pyramid or at the mercy of someone else's whims about work. Our words and metaphors around upper management, front lines, and report up, create and sustain a sense of being subservient when you are an employee. We are equal in our humanity within the organization and there is no “real” up or down, top or bottom. Stop believing that you work for someone or for an organization. Turn yourself into a partner by knowing and acting in ways that demonstrate that you work with others not for them. Your sense of competence and confidence can be a great antidote to grumpiness and may also improve your working relationships.

(9) Fixate on a specific task for the next 15 minutes. Stop all the internal chatter and external negative behavior that swirls around being grumpy. Find a task and work with your full focus on it for the next 15 minutes. Set a timer on your phone or watch for 15 minutes. When the timer chimes after 15 minutes of time check back into your grumpiness...you might be amazed how often it has dissipated if not completely disappeared.

(10) Cease your shallow or simplistic characterizations of others and even yourself. Avoid the miserable mental gymnastics of seeing people as good guys or bad guys, or helpless pawns. You are not a
victim, there are very few real villains at work, and stop pretending there is nothing you can do about your situation beyond feeling grumpy and ranting incessantly about how bad it is.

(11) Seize the next moment. Ask yourself what you can do in the next moment to stop being so grumpy, you don’t have to be happy just shift from reverse into neutral.

(12) Neutralize the neural almond brothers with a question. The amygdalae are the two small almond shaped parts of the brain that are the source of much emotion and drive towards action. When you are grouchy there is a good chance the amygdalae are running the brain – these “almond brothers” are not good drivers for your life or your work. Because the amygdala is not a language center you can remove them from the driver’s seat by asking yourself a question. When you transform your judgement into curiosity with a good question it can transform your grumpiness. By the way, there are good questions and bad questions. A bad question for a person who is grouchy is a judgemental, “what’s wrong with those people?” A good question is: “how can I look at this differently to short circuit my grouchiness?”

(13) Expect setbacks and unfairness. Teresa Amabile and her husband, Steven Kramer, demonstrated that the single biggest source of daily disengagement for knowledge workers is setbacks. We need to expect the inevitability of setbacks while not sinking into grouchiness when they occur. A setback does not in and of itself create upset. We can learn from setbacks, we can experience the loss without getting grumpy, we can bond with others, and we can have resolve to keep going. I love watching professional tennis players like Serena Williams or Novak Djokovic bounce back after a bad call or a double fault. It is inspiring to watch a figure skater fall in a major program at the Olympics and get right back on their feet and land a quad. You maintain your edge when you stay sharp and avoid becoming edgy when things don’t go right.

(14) Grow out of a fixed mindset. The gestalt of grumpiness is based on our mindset. Carol Dweck encourages us to distinguish between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. Know that being right all the time
is wrong even if you are right. In the fixed mindset, every situation calls for a confirmation of your intelligence, personality, or character. The growth mindset focuses on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts and you can change and grow through effort and experience. If you want to fix a grumpy mindset you need to believe you can grow out of it.

(15) Just see what you can do. You don’t have to be part of the mass of people who live lives of quiet desperation or be over the top brimming with positivity. I am not a fan of the positive thinking that is similar to putting a coat of paint on a wall to hide a broken foundation. Bad things happen. I have had more than my fill of positivity and at times of struggle or strain it can be okay just to shift into neutral. When my youngest son was an 8-year old hockey goalie, he aced the idea of being neutral. He knew he would get scored on and it would never bother him or be a source of post game grumpiness. I asked him how he mentally prepared to go into the net before each game and he told me he just said to himself, “I will see what I can do.” I loved his statement; it was neutral, open, curious, and constructive. Tomorrow when you go to work I encourage you to just go in to “see what you can do.” Of course, watch out if someone shoots a puck at you!

(16) Don’t let being skeptical lapse into being cynical. I love working with skeptics. They are the best people to conduct experiments with. But there is a fine line between being a healthy skeptic and a grumpy cynic. I believe that a cynic is often locked into a negative view and is not open to having their grouchy beliefs and declarations disputed and challenged. Here is the short test to determine if you have moved from skeptic to cynic: Can you be skeptical about your cynical beliefs and thoughts? If you can, skepticism can be a primary pathway out of grumpiness.

(17) Drop your grouchy security blanket and face your fears. Being grouchy for an extended period of time begins to feel like a toxic security blanket. It feels familiar and it may even feel safe. But what this toxic security blanket often covers are your fears. Fear may be one of the primary root causes of grumpiness. Start to examine your grumpiness as a mask for fear and see what is behind it. Do you fear being wrong,
being left behind, not belonging, unable to handle setbacks and challenges, your future at work, being successful, failing at your work, interacting with someone in authority, or a host of other potential fears masked by grumpiness. It might be helpful to have a friend, family member, coach, or counsellor create a safe relationships as you hold a conversation to uncover and move through the fears masked by grumpiness. Dr. David Martin from the University of Manitoba, one of my counselling educators, helped me learn that the only way to overcome a fear is to experience it while also feeling safe and that the safety found in a supportive and understanding relationship was the mechanism that extinguished the fear.

(18) Transform engagement in grumpiness into engaged working. It takes a lot of energy to be grumpy. Unfortunately it is a constant energy drain for yourself and others. Energy is the raw material of employee engagement. If you let go of some of the grumpiness you may be left with energy to engage more fully in your work. This use of energy often results in an energy gain as opposed to an energy drain and as you learn to fully engage in work you may also fully experience how work makes us well.

(19) Discover empathy as an antidote to grumpiness. Empathy is our ability to understand others, to see the world from their perspective, to walk in their shoes. It is not just an expression of mushy emotion, it is the courage to leave our own views and perspectives behind as we fully understand another person. For many people who are grumpy, empathy is a rare commodity. Empathy can crack the hard and brittle shell of grumpiness. And as Leonard Cohen sang, there is a crack, a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.

(20) Challenge yourself towards gritty, real and authentic optimism. We too often confuse optimism as shallow positive thinking. Martin Seligman taught me that optimists see bad events, they are not naive and superficial thinkers. After a bad event, rather than gravitate towards grumpy, optimistic people view the bad event as temporary, specific, and they don’t blame themselves or others for what occurred. They recover, they are resilient, they bounce back and they
are less grumpy. Embrace a sense of impermanence after a bad event and you will move away from grumpiness towards equanimity.

(21) **Give yourself fully to one grumpy day.** Take one day a year to get fully into your inner grumpiness. Exaggerate it. Maybe you can find and wear an Oscar the Grouch costume and let your expressions of grumpiness permeate each moment and every relationship for the entire day. Or you could be Grumpy, one of the seven dwarfs in Snow White. I bet you will find it a difficult challenge to be grumpy all day as you wear one of those costumes and you get exhausted continually cursing others and your fate. You might even end up seeing the humor of it. Those who laugh have a hard time making grumpiness last. A Chinese beatitude points the way: *blessed are those who can laugh at themselves they shall never cease to be entertained.*

![Oscar the Grouch](image.png)

(22) **Anticipate the benefits of being grumpy-free.** Other people will not avoid you by ducking into the nearest cubicle when they see you walking towards them. You will have stronger relationships at work and at home. Your team will probably be stronger and accomplish more. You may look forward to work with anticipation rather than dread. You will probably show up to each moment with more energy, awareness, connection, and caring. There is a good chance work will be an energy gain not merely an exhausting energy drain. You won’t bring the nastiness of work home with you, and you and your family can truly be nourished by a hearty meal of spaghetti and meatballs topped with caring conversations.
A bigger okay. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross who knew more about death and dying and how to live than anyone else I know once offered a short mantra on how to be okay even when things are not okay:

*I am not okay, you are not okay, and that is okay.*

Let your harrumph become a heartfelt hurrah. If you choose to dwell in grumpiness know that you will never fully experience the possibility that work can make you well. When you decide to stop being grumpy you will experience more space in your life for real joy, happiness, and well-being. Bad does not have to trump good when we get good at 22 tools to overcome, manage, or master grumpiness. Overcoming grumpiness can transform your last harrumph into your next hurrah!

…

David Zinger is an employee engagement speaker and expert from Canada who works around the world on leadership, management, engagement, well-being, and work. He has encountered many grumpy people during his sixty years.

David is firm in his resolve to not become a grumpy old man while also helping others use the 22 uplifting tools and levity to overcome their downward gravitational pull towards grumpiness.

If you would like David’s assistance on employee engagement, engaged well-being or overcoming grumpiness contact him by email (david@davidzinger.com) or phone 204 254 2130