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15 Benefits of Negative Affective States

Antje Schmitt*

Workers can have bad days at work. Frustration, sadness, and fear are naturally occurring emotions in daily work life (Bledow, Schmitt, Frese, & Kühnel, 2011; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and they often depend on the occurrence of events at work such as frustrating interactions with customers, receiving negative feedback, or frequent interruptions (Ohly & Schmitt, 2015; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). In general, the affective repertoire of individuals is skewed toward negativity (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001): four of the six basic emotions (fear, anger, disgust, sadness) are negative (Ekman, 1992), and workers report a greater variety in their negative emotions than in their positive emotions (e.g. Dasborough, 2006). Even though positive emotions happen more frequently at work, negative ones are more easily recalled and have a stronger effect on overall affective outcomes at work (Miner, Glomb, & Hulin, 2005).

Theory and research suggest that negative affect may have detrimental consequences in the short and long term. Experiencing and dealing with negative affect at work – such as feeling sad, angered, or afraid – takes up the individual's limited regulatory resources; as a result, there are fewer resources available for pursuing work tasks (Beal, Weiss, Barros, & MacDermid, 2005; Ellis & Ashbrook, 1988; Seckler, Funken, & Gielnik, 2017). Accordingly, negative affect at work may have undesirable consequences in the form of job withdrawal, aggression, and poor performance (Barsade & Gibson, 2007; Ellis & Ashbrook, 1988; Rowe & Fitness, 2018). Moreover, some

studies that are not specifically related to the work setting report longer-term harmful consequences of negative emotions for individual health and well-being, such as weaker immune functioning, delayed wound-healing, and higher levels of morbidity and mortality (for an overview, see Kiecolt-Glaser, 2009).

Accordingly, given these potential risks and threats that are associated with negative affect, research and practice tend to draw the simplistic inference that experiencing negative affect at work needs to be avoided (Campos, 2003). However, this advice overlooks the fact that negative feelings and emotions are natural states that cannot be fully prevented; their occurrence is often beyond personal control and usually serves a purpose (Campos, 2003; Tamir, 2009). Apart from their detrimental effects, research shows that negative moods and emotions may have functional benefits for individuals at work (for overviews, see Barsade & Gibson, 2007; Lebel, 2017; Seckler et al., 2017).

One central function of negative affect is to inform individuals about their progress in relation to a goal (e.g. one might feel frustrated or sad because one was unable to complete an important project at work on time), which is the first step toward reacting to dissatisfying, threatening, or dangerous situations that need to be addressed (Frijda, 2007; Larsen, 2000). Some research suggests that people occasionally prefer to feel and express unpleasant affective states, especially when they believe these will be useful in attaining relevant goals (e.g. Tamir, 2009). Moreover, negative affective states may have an important social function. For instance, guilt helps people to reconsider previous actions that may have been harmful

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to others and it may prevent them from repeating their behavior (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007). Sadness motivates people to establish social connections (Forgas, 2017). When sadness is shared with others at work, it can provide an opportunity for openness and intimacy (Lindebaum, Geddes, & Jordan, 2018). In other words, besides the adverse consequences of negative affective states, negative affect serves an evolutionary purpose, and it might be a motivating force for positive outcomes as well.

The key goal of this chapter is to integrate the perspectives on the potential benefits of negative affective states and thereby present a more nuanced approach to their consequences. In general, assumptions about the role of negative affective states on work-related outcomes are complex. Mechanisms and boundary conditions need to be considered to answer questions such as when, how, and for whom negative affect at work may have benefits (Barsade & Gibson, 2007; Lebel, 2017; Rowe & Fitness,

2018). Specifically, the emphasis of this chapter is to review the literature on the role of cognitive, motivational, and social mechanisms that link negative affect with worker outcomes such as creativity, work engagement, proactive work behavior, and helping behavior as well as to highlight the role of affect regulation as a boundary condition. A conceptual model of these links is depicted in Figure 15.1.

Affect: Definition, Structure, and Dimensionality

The term “affect” covers emotions, feelings, and moods, and can be anything from a short-term transient state to a more long-term stable trait (Barsade & Gibson, 2007; Parkinson, Briner, Reynolds, & Totterdell, 1995). This chapter focuses on the potential benefits of negative affective *states*, which vary among workers across different time periods such as work days, weeks, or months (Bledow et al., 2011;

Figure 15.1 Conceptual model: mechanisms and boundary conditions that link negative affect with worker outcomes

Miner et al., 2005; Zacher, Schmitt, Jimmieson, & Rudolph, 2019).

“Negative emotions” are short-lived affective states that are elicited by a particular cause (Frijda, 2007; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). For example, frustration or anger occur when a colleague has not done their part of a team task. Negative emotions have traditionally been studied in terms of discrete entities (e.g. sadness, anger, disgust) that, according to some researchers, are linked with unique action tendencies (Ekman, 1992; Frijda, 2007). While present-oriented emotions are usually caused by current events, future-oriented emotions are affective reactions to future events. Specifically, future-oriented anticipatory emotions, such as fear or hope, may be experienced in anticipation of a future event. Future-oriented anticipated emotions, such as anticipated guilt or regret, are emotions that workers expect to experience once a certain positive or negative event has or has not occurred in the future (Baumeister et al., 2007; Baumgartner, Pieters, & Bagozzi, 2008). “Negative moods” are more diffused feelings that tend to last longer and to be less intense than discrete emotions (e.g. being in a sad or bored mood across a work day) (Frijda, 2007).

Benefits of Negative Affect: How, When, and for Whom?

Most research on the consequences of negative affect at work in general, and on its positive consequences in particular, focuses on overall negative affective experiences, a category that encompasses multiple negative emotions (e.g. Bledow et al., 2011; George & Zhou, 2007). In terms of more distinct negative emotions, the activating states of anger, anxiety, and depression have frequently been studied in the field of industrial and organizational (IO) psychology (Lindebaum & Geddes, 2016; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Less is known about the potential benefits of more complex self-conscious negative emotions that are often relevant in social or interpersonal

work interactions (e.g. envy, regret, shame, guilt). For instance, some research argues that envy (i.e. the feeling of wanting something that another person has or does, which results from social comparison) may play a functional and positive role in the organizational context due to its motivational potential (Duffy, Shaw, & Schaubroeck, 2008).

Some potential benefits of negative affective states that have been discussed and investigated in the literature are decision-making, learning, negotiation success and persuasion, creativity, work engagement, proactive work behavior (especially problem identification), and helping behavior (Baumeister et al., 2007; Bledow, Rosing, & Frese, 2013; Bledow et al., 2011; De Drue, Baas, & Nijstad, 2008; Forgas, 2017; Lebel, 2017). Importantly, however, the potential benefits of negative affect for work-related outcomes are not direct, but appear to depend on a number of underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions. It is also argued that negative affect should neither be too strong nor too weak; it should be of moderate intensity in order to be functional or to trigger positive consequences (Seckler et al., 2017).

Mechanisms

Cognitive, motivational, and social factors are found or are proposed to account for the beneficial consequences of negative affect. While reviewing the literature, it becomes evident that these underlying mechanisms are frequently discussed in the domain of IO psychology, but are not often empirically tested.

Cognitive Factors

Negative emotions and mood may affect how information is processed in the brain. Specifically, negative affect influences cognitive processes such as attentional focus, memory, information evaluation, judgment, learning, and decision-making. These cognitive processes play

a role in a variety of behaviors at work such as creativity, proactivity, and helping (Baumeister et al., 2007; De Dreu et al., 2008; Lebel, 2017). Negative affect provides a signal that an individual is in an undesirable or threatening situation, and the individual can process information more accurately and carefully by keeping a focus on the details in the environment in order to respond effectively (De Dreu et al., 2008; Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003). Previous research has shown that creativity and problem-solving abilities are facilitated by negative affective states through focused and narrowed attention and systematic rather than more holistic cognitive processing (De Dreu et al., 2008; George & Zhou, 2007; Lebel, 2017). This is the case for negative emotions high in motivational orientation, such as disgust or anger, whereas negative emotions low in motivational orientation (e.g. sadness) tend to broaden attentional focus (Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2010). Presumably through enhancing systematic cognition, certain negative emotions relate to more accurate judgments. This is reflected in favorable outcomes such as lower susceptibility to cognitive biases – for example, the fundamental attribution error, halo effects, and stereotypical thinking – and greater accuracy in understanding the essence of performance feedback given at work (Lindebaum et al., 2018; Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003).

Motivational Factors

Negative affect can signal a discrepancy between the desired state and the present state of affairs. This perceived discrepancy implies the need to improve the status quo through stimulating action depending on the specific motivational tendencies of the emotion (Carver, 2006; Forgas, 2017; Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2010; Lebel, 2017). For instance, anger is an emotion with a high motivational tendency or impulse to act that elicits a narrow attentional focus and generates approach-oriented behavior (Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2010),

which may in turn be used to act against the anger-eliciting source (e.g. directly approaching a colleague and letting them know that their behavior triggered the anger) (Lebel, 2017). Specifically, effort and persistence, as two of the main characteristics of human motivation (Kanfer, Chen, & Pritchard, 2008), are proposed as mediators in the relationship between negative affect and organizational behavior. For instance, Foo and colleagues (2009) demonstrated in a sample of entrepreneurs that negative affect predicts entrepreneurial efforts on tasks that require immediate attention. In experimental studies, De Dreu and colleagues (2008) found that the induction of negative affect enlarged the number of new ideas that participants generated through increased persistence on the task.

In contrast, the theory of emotion as feedback (Baumeister et al., 2007) argues that it is not the key function of currently experienced emotions to cause behaviors in the present moment; rather, anticipated emotions are the drivers of behavior and decision-making. Individuals may engage in behaviors based on the anticipation of how they would feel if they behaved in that particular way. An anticipated negative emotion (e.g. anger) that is experienced at work may have positive motivational consequences (e.g. increasing effort to resolve a problem that has caused the feeling of anger) given that workers expect to improve their feelings and to avoid or prevent increasing anger in the future (Baumeister et al., 2007; Grant & Ashford, 2008). Hence, learning about potential negative affective outcomes of one's decisions and actions influences individual behavior in the present with the aim of minimizing or avoiding the occurrence of negative emotions and improving one's affective state. Research argues that anticipating negative affective consequences may have beneficial effects, as it may help workers take better decisions and engage in more favorable, socially valued, and desirable behaviors (Baumeister et al., 2007; Grant &

Wrzesniewski, 2010). For instance, Grant and Wrzesniewski (2010) argued that workers who are concerned about the welfare of others are more likely to anticipate guilt when they fail to treat others with kindness and respect and, thus, tend to try to prevent situations that may make them feel guilty. Accordingly, they found that other-oriented workers high in core self-evaluations (i.e. who are confident in and feel positive about their abilities) increased their level of effort and performance at work to avoid feeling guilty and to protect their view of themselves as being responsible and reliable (see Bagger, Reb, & Li, 2014, for another example of the role of negative anticipated emotions at work). Overall, however, more research on the role of anticipated negative affect in the work context and consequences for workers' behavior and decision-making is needed.

Social Factors

Some research reveals that negative affect might have positive consequences on the interpersonal life. However, social mechanisms have mostly been studied in experimental laboratory settings outside of the workplace (Forgas, 2017). For instance, negative affect such as anger has been found to increase attention to issues of injustice and violations of fairness norms; and it can relate to less selfish decisions and actions (Lindebaum et al., 2018; Morris & Keltner, 2000). Furthermore, negative affect such as frustration or sadness may signal to others that social support is needed for building or strengthening social connectedness between interaction partners by verbalizing and sharing emotional experiences (Lindebaum & Geddes, 2016). Consequently, support from colleagues, supervisors, and mentors at work – through listening, advice-giving, or instrumental assistance – may help workers to down-regulate negative affect, develop self-efficacy in their abilities to manage difficult experiences, and increase workers' motivation

to engage in constructive responses such as initiating change to improve the work situation (e.g. by speaking up with concerns and suggestions) (Lebel, 2017; Lindebaum et al., 2018).

Boundary Conditions

Personal and contextual boundary conditions determine when and for whom negative affect results in positive consequences (for an overview, see also Barsade & Gibson, 2007; Seckler et al., 2017). This section of the chapter focuses on the personal factors of affect regulation: specifically, regulation strategies and regulation flexibility as proximal or more immediate boundary conditions, as well as distal personal factors (i.e. age, emotional intelligence, action–state orientation, and mindfulness). The role of external factors at the societal and organizational levels, such as the sociocultural context and the organizational climate and culture will also be discussed (see Figure 15.1).

Proximal Moderator: Regulation of Negative Affect

People's sensitivity to negative affective states must be differentiated from their ability to regulate those states (Doerwald, Scheibe, Zacher, & Van Yperen, 2016; Kuhl, Quirin, & Koole, 2015). Research argues that the experience of negative affect can be turned into an advantage when it is paired with affect regulation skills. Being able to successfully regulate one's own negative moods and emotions plays an important role in learning and personal development (Kuhl et al., 2015) and it is especially important at work, where individuals have to meet occupational goals (Barsade & Gibson, 2007; Forgas, 2017). Workers may have various motives for regulating their negative feelings, such as social motives (e.g. adapting to socially appropriate or organizationally relevant norms; influencing others' behaviors at work; not wanting to harm others) or hedonic motives (e.g. aspiring to feel

better or to feel the emotion that one yearns for) (Baumeister et al., 2007; Tamir, 2009, 2016). Some research suggests that people do not necessarily want to feel positive, but prefer functional and useful emotions depending on the goal that a person aims to attain in a certain situation (Tamir, 2009, 2016). Negative feelings can be useful and functional, especially in some professions (e.g. police officers or security personnel) or in certain situations at work. For example, expressing the anger or frustration that a person feels may help them to think about and implement solutions to a long-standing problem that caused the emotion.

The question of how individuals regulate their affective states has been examined within different lines of research (Bledow et al., 2013; Grandey, 2000; Gross, 2015; Koole, 2009; Mayer & Salovey, 1995). Much research in IO psychology is based on Gross's (1998) process model of emotion regulation (for an extension, see Gross, 2015). This model describes various cognitive-behavioral strategies, such as seeing a situation in a different light or seeking help from others, which people may use to modify the conditions in which affect occurs, the experience of emotions (including their intensity, frequency, and duration), or the way in which emotions are expressed (Doerwald et al., 2016; Gross, 1998; Naragon-Gainey, McMahon, & Chacko, 2017). Another stream of research is based on the concept of emotional labor, which assumes that emotions are regulated and controlled in line with prescribed display rules of the organization or job (Grandey, 2000; Hülsheger, Lang, Schewe, & Zijlstra, 2015). Individuals may adapt their inner feelings to meet organizational requirements by using "deep acting strategies," whereas they do not modify their true inner emotions but only change their emotional expressions when using "surface acting strategies."

Adaptive and maladaptive cognitive-behavioral regulation strategies. Several studies in IO, social, experimental, and clinical

psychology have identified regulation strategies that are more effective or functional in managing negative affect than others. Such strategies might include trying to resolve a problematic situation; acceptance (i.e. acknowledging negative emotions); reappraisal (i.e. cognitive reframing of an unpleasant situation); distracting from the affective state; relaxation; actively forgetting (Gross, 2015; Larsen, 2000; Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017); and social strategies such as interpersonal sharing of negative affect, socializing, and using social feedback for affect regulation (Côté, 2005; Lindebaum et al., 2018). For instance, reappraisal could help workers to channel the energy of an unpleasant situation and the respective emotional state (e.g. anger due to an unfair customer) and turn it into a positive outcome (Grant, 2013). Similarly, deep acting that aims at changing workers' inner feelings has been shown to be more effective in managing negative moods and emotions than surface acting strategies (Grandey, 2000). Also, acceptance was found to buffer the adverse impact of negative work events on indicators of daily well-being. Kuba and Scheibe (2017) showed that in times when workers were able to accept negative emotions, they experienced a lower increase in negative emotions and less reduction in work engagement on days when negative work events happened. Moreover, generating action plans may help workers to guide their behavior and better focus on their work goals instead of ruminating on a situation that caused negative emotions at work (Lebel, 2017; Schmitt, Gielnik, & Seibel, 2019). Cognitive strategies that have commonly been identified as maladaptive are rumination, suppression, and avoidance of thoughts about negative events, negative feelings, or physical sensations (Hülsheger et al., 2015; Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017).

Emotion regulation flexibility. Some recent research shifts away from treating any strategy as generally adaptive or maladaptive and argues that

there is not a single strategy that would be consistently effective to regulate negative affective states (the “fallacy of uniform efficacy”: Bonanno & Burton, 2013). Instead, some research focuses on the concept of emotion regulation flexibility, which refers to people’s ability to adjust or match their regulatory strategy to the environmental requirements. In other words, according to this approach, regulation strategies should be chosen based on situational circumstances (Bonanno & Burton, 2013; Rowe & Fitness, 2018). For instance, in opposition to the overall premise that reappraisal is always adaptive, it is found to be a maladaptive strategy for managing negative emotions in situations involving high emotional intensity (Cheng, Lau, & Chan, 2014). Emotional suppression seems to be a more appropriate strategy for regulating negative emotions of high intensity (Bonanno & Burton, 2013). Emotional suppression can also be functional for regulating negative emotions, such as anxiety, that appear in achievement- or performance-related contexts such as examinations (Rottweiler, Taxer, & Nett, 2018). Also, while previous research has mostly focused on the maladaptive consequences of suppression for *experiencing* negative affect, it has been found that suppressing the *expression* of negative affect can be functional in the workplace (see Bonanno & Burton, 2013). However, there is a lack of systematic research on worker flexibility in connection with emotion regulation strategies and on how flexibility may result in individual benefits.

Intuitive affect regulation. The regulation of affect can be conscious and initiated by deliberate cognitive or behavioral regulation strategies, but it may also occur without self-awareness on an unconscious or even subconscious level (Koole, 2009). Accordingly, some research on the regulation of negative affect does not focus on deliberate cognitive action regulation strategies but claims that affect regulation is an intuitive process that does not necessarily need any conscious

action or effort (Gross, 2015; Koole & Jostmann, 2004; Quirin, Bode, & Kuhl, 2011). Bledow and colleagues (2013; 2011) argued that the interplay of negative and positive affect in terms of dynamic shifts (i.e. up-regulation of positive affect and down-regulation of negative affect) is important for effective affect regulation and outcomes such as creativity and work engagement. High creativity was found when workers initially experienced negative affect that provided a basis for developing ideas by triggering high attention to discrepancies and detailed information processing, followed by a decrease in negative affect and the up-regulation of positive affect. While down-regulating negative affect helps to come up with new cognitive associations, the up-regulation of positive affect enables behavioral initiation and engagement in an activity (Bledow et al., 2011; Quirin et al., 2011). Similar results were found for the outcome of organizational citizenship behavior in workers (Yang, Simon, Wang, & Zheng, 2016). Interestingly, however, the study by Yang and colleagues (2016) showed that task-related performance was highest when individuals up-regulated their positive affect across the work day while also up-regulating their negative affect. This implies that different affect regulation patterns have distinct consequences for work-related outcomes (Yang et al., 2016).

Distal Personal Factors as Determinants of Negative Affect Regulation

Research has identified person factors that indicate individual differences in the extent to which people respond to negative emotions and in the way they regulate their affective states.

Age. Research suggests that older workers seem to be as competent as or at times even slightly more effective than younger workers in managing their own affective states. Older workers bring

more knowledge and competencies on how to regulate emotions; they also tend to control their emotional reactions better (for an overview, see Doerwald et al., 2016; Scheibe, Yeung, & Doerwald, 2019). Since much of the research on the affect regulation advantages of older individuals is based on general population samples, additional research is needed to examine whether the findings also apply to the more specific group of older people in the workplace (Doerwald et al., 2016; Scheibe et al., 2019).

Emotional intelligence. Individual differences in the regulation of one's own negative affect are an integral part of the emotional intelligence concept (Joseph & Newman, 2010; Mayer & Salovey, 1995). Empirical evidence shows that when confronted with negative experiences, people with high emotional intelligence are more likely to use adaptive regulation strategies to regulate their emotions. People high in emotional intelligence report suppressing affective states to a lesser extent and are more likely to seek for support from close others (MacCann, Fogarty, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2011; Schutte, Manes, & Malouff, 2009). Research on emotional intelligence in IO psychology has increased within the last two decades (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008) and the concept has inspired strong interest among practitioners. Yet the concept of emotional intelligence is, in fact, sometimes criticized for its lack of theoretical clarity and scientific rigor (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2005; Joseph & Newman, 2010).

Action–state orientation describes individual differences in implicit or intuitive regulation competencies that affect the way people regulate their negative emotions, thoughts, and behaviors at work (Diefendorff, Hall, Lord, & Streat, 2000; Koole & Jostmann, 2004; Wanberg, Zhu, & Van Hooft, 2010). People high in action orientation tend to stay focused on working toward their goals and to detach from thoughts that interfere with their goals. While action-oriented individuals are more likely to down-regulate negative

affect in stressful conditions, state-oriented people tend to ruminate on negative emotional states and past failures, resulting in a lower ability to stay focused on their occupational tasks and activities. Action-oriented people may find negative affect functional for personal development and learning. They have better access to their selves such that they may activate knowledge of favorable personal experiences (e.g. the mastery of challenging situations in the past) which helps them to down-regulate negative affect (Koole & Jostmann, 2004; Kuhl et al., 2015).

Mindfulness is another attribute that determines whether negative affect may have beneficial consequences (Hülshager, Alberts, Feinholdt, & Lang, 2013). Mindfulness means that individuals are open-minded to ongoing experiences and approaching events in a non-judgmental way. Mindfulness can be conceptualized as a trait as well as a psychological state that fluctuates across time (Glomb, Duffy, Bono, & Yang, 2011). It has been found to affect mental health in workers and their satisfaction and performance outcomes through improved emotion regulation (Glomb et al., 2011; Hülshager et al., 2013). For instance, Hülshager and colleagues (2013) showed that for individuals high in trait mindfulness and on days when individuals are in a mindful state, mindfulness was positively related to daily job satisfaction and negatively related to worker exhaustion. These relationships were mediated by surface acting, such that mindfulness helps terminate negative thoughts and reduces people's impulse to counter them which, in turn, improves job satisfaction and reduces emotional exhaustion (Hülshager et al., 2013).

Contextual Factors: Culture and Organizational Climate

Characteristics of the sociocultural context, such as cultural value differences, determine how

individuals appraise and regulate negative affect and whether negative feelings may have beneficial effects (Grandey, Foo, Groth, & Goodwin, 2012; Matsumoto, Yoo, & Nakagawa, 2008; Tamir, 2016). Compared to individuals from collectivistic cultures such as those from Asia, people raised in Western cultures tend to prefer decreasing their negative feelings and maximizing positive feelings. Moreover, while suppression as a single strategy to regulate negative affect is widely considered to be less functional in individualistic cultures, it is seen as a more adaptive strategy in collectivist cultures (Koopmann-Holm & Tsai, 2014).

Research highlights the importance of psychological safety as an organizational- or team-level climate factor for regulating negative feelings such as those resulting from failures at work (Baer & Frese, 2003; Edmondson, 1999). “Psychological safety” refers to individuals’ shared evaluation that their team or organization is a safe place, that risks can be taken, and that problems can be shared without being afraid of the negative consequences for the individual. Psychological safety creates an atmosphere of openness, as it enables workers to feel welcome to address their problems openly, to admit errors and failures, and to speak up (Edmondson, 1999). Working in a climate of psychological safety has, therefore, the potential to buffer the detrimental consequences of negative affective states and maladaptive affect regulation for work outcomes. It may also amplify the relationships between negative affect and individual consequences such as voicing concerns and proactively engaging in behavior to change an unfavorable situation.

General Discussion and Implications

Negative affect can have detrimental effects on worker health- and performance-related outcomes as well as on their social lives. Yet the relationships between negative affective states and outcomes are

usually more complex. Negative feelings might be beneficial for achieving work-related goals in that such feelings may stimulate analytical thinking processes and increase the individual’s persistence in working toward the goal, but negative feelings can also reduce persistence and goal achievement because they require a considerable amount of regulatory resources that may interfere with a person’s work tasks (Beal et al., 2005). Moreover, negative feelings may have benefits for some outcomes (e.g. creativity), but they may prove to be disadvantageous for other outcomes (e.g. task accomplishment). Also, whether or not personal consequences arise from negative affect depends on the distinct emotion that is felt in a certain situation at work or in anticipation of future events at work (Baumeister et al., 2007; Baumgartner et al., 2008), and on the level of motivational intensity (Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2010).

Overall, the research reviewed in this chapter reveals that under certain conditions, when it is effectively regulated, negative affect may result in positive outcomes for workers through cognitive, motivational, and social processes. This perspective is in line with previous arguments that negative affective states are not inherently good or bad only because of their valence, but rather that they are more or less functional and valuable under varying conditions (Lindebaum & Jordan, 2014; Tamir, 2009).

Implications for Future Research

Future research should focus on a more systematic examination of distinct negative affective states in relation to different action tendencies when studying the consequences of negative affect (Baumeister et al., 2007; Frijda, 2007). Action tendencies direct and coordinate behavior, prepare a person to take action whenever necessary, and help address problems in social interactions. While there is some research on the consequences of negative activating affect such as anger at work,

research on the potential positive outcomes of more complex or social emotions such as guilt, jealousy, or shame is widely lacking. Research in IO psychology is further needed on the consequences of anticipatory emotions (i.e. experienced at present in anticipation of an event that might occur in the future) and anticipated emotions (i.e. expected to be experienced once a certain event has occurred in the future) (Baumeister et al., 2007; Baumgartner et al., 2008).

Some of the processes and boundary conditions discussed in this chapter are based on theory and research in fundamental cognitive and emotional psychology and social, developmental, and clinical psychology. These processes and conditions have not been comprehensively tested in the work context. More research is needed to extend our limited knowledge of the individual differences that may moderate the relationships between negative affect and work outcomes such as mindfulness or action–state orientation in the workplace. Moreover, there are only a few studies on the role of the broader cultural context, sociocultural values, and the organizational and team-related aspects that might determine whether and when workers may benefit from negative feelings at work.

Finally, future research is also needed to disentangle shorter- and longer-term consequences of negative affect and affect regulation strategies at work. For example, consequences differ depending on whether certain emotions (e.g. anger, guilt, or fear) occur rarely or more frequently. Similarly, with regard to the consequences of certain affect regulation strategies, Naragon-Gainey and colleagues (2017) state that any distraction may function as an adaptive regulation strategy in the short term but eventually results in negative health consequences when used more frequently in the longer term.

Practical Implications

Negative emotions and feelings resulting from unfavorable events appear in our daily work life

and cannot be completely eliminated (Bledow et al., 2011; Grandey et al., 2012). The current chapter emphasizes the role of boundary conditions such as affect regulation skills and strategies, personal attributes, and contextual factors that need to be considered in practice so that negative affective experiences at work can be turned into positive outcomes such as creativity, work engagement, task engagement, or proactive work behavior.

This review indicates that organizations should offer support, guidance, and assistance so that workers can develop the competencies that are needed to manage and regulate negative affect at work. Individuals should benefit from learning strategies to keep a balance between positive and negative affective states at work; they should be able to down-regulate negative affect at work when it is experienced while up-regulating positive emotions (Bledow et al., 2013). Research on emotion regulation flexibility suggests that it is useful for individual well-being and performance to have a broad repertoire of affect regulation strategies. Strategies such as acceptance of negative emotions, reappraisal, or suppression of the expression of negative emotions at work can then be applied depending on the requirements of the context (Bonanno & Burton, 2013). Results based on existing research further indicate that it is promising to learn skills such as mindfulness. It has been shown that mindfulness can positively affect individual health- and performance-related outcomes through improved emotion regulation (Glomb et al., 2011; Hülshager et al., 2013). Providing external support (e.g. through training or coaching) should be especially relevant for workers with low intuitive affect regulation skills (i.e. state-oriented individuals) who have problems in down-regulating negative experiences internally.

Furthermore, it is certainly important that organizations create an open and authentic culture of trust, support, and safety where individuals can show the emotions they feel (Edmondson, 1999;

Grandey et al., 2012). Also, a climate where errors that create negative emotions are seen as positive – so that workers learn from them – has been shown to play an important role in enhancing worker performance, proactivity (i.e. self-initiated change and future-oriented work behavior), and innovative behavior at work (Frese & Keith, 2015; Keith & Frese, 2005).

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