



KEEPING EMOTIONS IN MIND

NORTHWESTERN ENGINEERING'S **EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE** COURSE
TEACHES STUDENTS HOW TO SUCCEED IN A STRESSFUL WORLD

Have you ever driven across town, arrived at the destination, and wondered, “How did I get here?” You can’t remember driving there—were you thinking about the presentation you need to give tomorrow? Worrying about where your kids might be? Wondering who was calling/emailing/texting you?

Such experiences are not all that uncommon. Too often we live our lives lost in thoughts and worries, unaware of the present moment.

“If people understood that mastering their attention is one of the most powerful things they can do to manage their stress, impact their level of happiness, and enable their success, the sky would be the limit to realizing their full potential,” asserts Joe Holtgreive, assistant dean for personal development at Northwestern Engineering.

Holtgreive believes so strongly in this concept that he has brought it into the classroom. His Emotional Intelligence (E.I.) 101 course, co-created and co-taught with David Shor, director of clinical services for Northwestern’s Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) program, gives Northwestern students the tools they need to master their attention. By doing so, they manage stress and improve focus, self-awareness, and empathy for others.

The class is one of many offered by the Office of Personal Development, which provides resources and opportunities for personal growth to Northwestern Engineering students. The office strives to cultivate a community of students who are more self-aware, empowered, and resilient, and who develop the required skills to become lifelong adaptive learners.

FIRST “FAILURES”

“When Northwestern students were in high school, they were all at the top of their classes,” Holtgreive says. “The norm for our entering freshmen is 98th percentile. But once they come here, the new norm is the 50th percentile. Intellectually and emotionally, many students can’t grasp that.”

While some students develop new strategies and adjust their expectations, others struggle. Some work twice as hard, forgoing food, sleep, and friends to maintain demanding study schedules. They often isolate themselves and eventually burn out, or they panic and drop classes at the first sign of trouble.

“In that first year—even in the first quarter—most students share the same experience,” Holtgreive says. “Many will encounter a perceived failure for the first time. For some that could be earning an ‘F’ or for others an ‘A-’. Either way, they panic because they’re afraid of what this grade says about them.”

Many students are so overwhelmed by stress that they “unplug” from their emotions. Instead of working through problems, they direct their attention away from their discomfort and toward distractions. Holtgreive says this is a common survival strategy for students, especially freshmen, and can cause them to lose important information held in the present moment.

TEACHING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

To help prepare students to deal with stress, Holtgreive, Shor, and Rob Durr, also from CAPS, created Emotional Intelligence 101 three years ago. Holtgreive and Shor had met 13 years prior in a Lamaze class with their wives, and after striking up a friendship, bonded over their shared interest in emotional intelligence training and mindfulness.

“I taught mindfulness to student athletes, actors, and musicians,” Shor says. “Then we came to realize that all students are performers in one way or another, and everyone can benefit from mindfulness skills.”

Based on the Bar-On Model of Emotional Intelligence, the course is divided into five topics: stress management, self-perception, self-expression, interpersonal relationships, and decision-making. The model, developed by psychologist Reuven Bar-On, trains students to conceptualize and apply emotional intelligence and social competence. At the beginning of the quarter, students undergo an E.I. self-assessment—and most score below the mean, which isn’t necessarily surprising. “Students are so focused on academics that they aren’t paying attention to emotional intelligence,” Shor says.

The students spend the quarter working to improve their E.I. by listening to guest speakers, writing papers, and completing exercises. Most students experience a significant increase in their E.I. assessment scores by the end of the quarter.

BUILDING A CALM FOCUS

Often, the students’ stress can be abated with a simple exercise: meditation. At the beginning of each class period, Shor and Holtgreive invite students to close their eyes and focus on their breathing, which brings their attention back to the present. As students’ minds naturally drift, they are instructed to non-judgmentally recognize when their attention has wandered and to steer it back to their intended focus. Staying in the moment keeps the mind away from worries about the future or regrets of the past and leads to an accurate awareness of one’s self and surroundings. “This cultivates intentional attention,” Shor says. “There are so few things in life that we can actually control. But where we offer our attention is one of them.”

Julian Munizzo (’13) took Emotional Intelligence 101 three years ago and still applies the lessons he learned to life, work, and his relationships. A materials science and engineering graduate, Munizzo is now a battery engineer at Tesla Motors, where competition is as stiff as ever. “Everyone I met in college was at the top of their class in high school,” he says. “Now, everyone I work with was at the top of their class in college. I used to always try to play it off as healthy competition, but it’s incredibly stressful.”

Munizzo still practices meditation exercises to stay grounded instead of getting caught up in stress and his heavy workload. “It’s the only class I still think about on a regular basis,” he says. “It introduced me to topics that I didn’t expect to learn in engineering.”

That, Holtgreive says, is the goal: to teach students skills they can use throughout their lives. “The best thing we can do to help our students succeed is to teach them that they possess the capacity to respond productively in the face of uncertainty. It is this capacity that empowers them to meet challenges,” Holtgreive says.

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