

Caffeine: The Silent Emotional Intelligence Killer

By Travis Bradberry, Ph.D.

This month's tip for increasing your emotional intelligence is the most simple and straightforward method I've provided thus far. For many people, this tip has the potential to have a bigger impact upon their emotional intelligence than any other. The catch? You have to cut down on caffeine, and as any caffeine drinker can attest, this is easier said than done.

If increasing your emotional intelligence is proving difficult, or you'd simply like an extra jolt to take your emotional intelligence to the next level, reducing your caffeine intake is a great way to turbo-charge your efforts.



Click on the image to view this clip.

The Good: Isn't Really Good

Most people start drinking caffeine because it makes them feel more alert and improves their mood. Many studies suggest that caffeine actually improves cognitive task performance (memory, attention span, etc.) in the

short-term. Unfortunately, these studies fail to consider the participants' caffeine habits. New research from Johns Hopkins Medical School shows that performance increases due to caffeine intake are the result of caffeine drinkers experiencing a short-term reversal of caffeine withdrawal. By controlling for caffeine use in study participants, John Hopkins researchers found that caffeine-related performance improvement is nonexistent without caffeine withdrawal. In essence, coming off caffeine reduces your cognitive performance and has a negative impact on your mood. The only way to get back to normal is to drink caffeine, and when you do drink it, you feel like it's taking you to new heights. In reality, the caffeine is just taking your performance back to normal for a short period.

The Bad: Adrenaline

Drinking caffeine triggers the release of adrenaline. Adrenaline is the source of the "fight or flight" response, a survival mechanism that forces you to stand up and fight or run for the hills when faced with a threat. The fight-or-flight mechanism sidesteps rational thinking in favor of a faster response. This is great when a bear is chasing you, but not so great when you're responding to a curt email. When caffeine puts your brain and body into this hyper-aroused state, your emotions overrun your behavior. Irritability and anxiety are the most commonly seen emotional effects of caffeine, but caffeine enables all of your emotions to take charge.

The negative effects of a caffeine-generated adrenaline surge are not just behavioral. Researchers at Carnegie Mellon University found that large doses of caffeine raise blood pressure, stimulate the heart, and produce rapid shallow breathing, which readers of *Emotional*

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Intelligence 2.0 know deprives the brain of the oxygen needed to keep your thinking calm and rational.

The Ugly: Sleep

When you sleep, your brain literally recharges, shuffling through the day's memories and storing or discarding them (which causes dreams), so that you wake up alert and clear-headed. Your self-control, attention, and memory are all reduced when you don't get enough—or the right kind—of sleep. Your brain is very fickle when it comes to sleep. For you to wake up feeling rested, your brain needs to move through an elaborate series of cycles. You can help this process along and improve the quality of your sleep by reducing your caffeine intake.

Here's why you'll want to: caffeine has a six-hour half-life, which means it takes a full twenty-four hours to work its way out of your system. Have a cup of joe at eight a.m., and you'll still have 25% of the caffeine in your body at eight p.m. Anything you drink after noon will still be at 50% strength at bedtime. Any caffeine in your bloodstream—with the negative effects increasing with the dose—makes it harder to fall asleep.

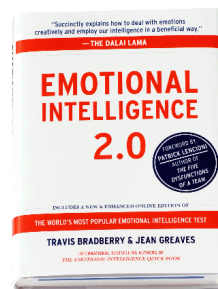
When you do finally fall asleep, the worst is yet to come. Caffeine disrupts the quality of your sleep by reducing rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, the deep sleep when your body recuperates and processes emotions. When caffeine disrupts your sleep, you wake up the next day with an emotional handicap. You're naturally going to be inclined to grab a cup of coffee or an energy drink to try to make yourself feel better. The caffeine produces surges of adrenaline, which further your emotional handicap. Caffeine and lack of sleep leave you feeling tired in the afternoon, so you drink more caffeine, which leaves even

more of it in your bloodstream at bedtime. Caffeine very quickly creates a vicious cycle.

Withdrawal

Like any stimulant, caffeine is physiologically and psychologically addictive. If you do choose to lower your caffeine intake, you should do so slowly under the guidance of a qualified medical professional. The researchers at Johns Hopkins found that caffeine withdrawal causes headache, fatigue, sleepiness, and difficulty concentrating. Some people report feeling flu-like symptoms, depression, and anxiety after reducing intake by as little as one cup a day. Slowly tapering your caffeine dosage each day can greatly reduce these withdrawal symptoms.

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Dr. Travis Bradberry is the award-winning co-author of *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* and the cofounder of TalentSmart, the world's leading provider of emotional intelligence tests and training serving more than 75% of Fortune 500 companies. His bestselling books have been translated into 25 languages and are available in more than 150 countries. Dr. Bradberry has written for, or been covered by, *Newsweek*, *BusinessWeek*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Fast Company*, *Inc.*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Harvard Business Review*.