

Understanding Frustration

By Tamara Mitchell
Edited by Sally Longyear



Chances are you have some frustrations or pet peeves that are bothering you. We want to help you understand the underlying nature of frustration, discuss common responses to frustration, share some research that's been done, and provide information about dealing with frustration. Why should ergonomists be concerned about this issue? Because frustration is one of many psychological factors which contribute to physical problems. We can help you organize your work area, but unless you tackle the mental “thorns in your side”, you will continue to be at risk for strain injuries. We hope you will enjoy and learn from this next series of articles.

Behavior theorists define frustration as an obstacle blocking satisfaction of a need or goal. Typically, the emotion associated with frustration involves *anxiety*. There are several characteristics of frustration, which appear in psychology literature: ^{1,2}

- The obstacles preventing us from a goal can be external or internal. External obstacles can be social - involving the actions of other people - or they can be environmental, such as a locked door. Internal obstacles involve deficiencies in ourselves, such as waning abilities to see, hear, or remember. Interestingly, when people are asked what really peeves them most, they describe a social obstacle - what someone has done or failed to do. There is a special attribute in social obstacles that is lacking in other types of obstacles. That attribute is *intent*. The other person is perceived to have “done it on purpose”. So it is no surprise that research has found "*What frustrates people most is other people*". ²
- Level of frustration is relative to the importance of the goal. If the goal is not important to an individual, the obstacle and resulting frustration will be less.
- Distance to the goal is a factor in frustration. Frustration is generally greater if a goal is narrowly missed than if it was "missed by a mile". ³ For example, it is known that silver medallists are generally a lot less happy than bronze medallists.
- The emotional reaction to frustration inhibits the ability to deal with the frustrating event. As a result, the individual must cope with anger and frustration in addition to the original problem. Often the emotion of frustration is a larger obstacle than the problem itself.
- Managing emotions is a full-time job. Success depends on the situation, personal temperament, emotion-management skills, and the management approach. In many cases we have minimal control over the situation or our temperament, so managing our emotional response is key to coping with the frustrating event.

- Frustration is generally proportional in context with other people. This can be dependent upon whether things seem to be fair relative to others, whether others are also frustrated, or whether someone feels singled out.
- Similarly, frustration is often related to the amount of control that someone feels they have in the situation. If there is little sense of control, the person usually feels powerless to change the situation. This is also a common source of stress.
- Frustration is cumulative. Tolerance to frustrating situations increases or decreases based on preceding incidences. If someone has had to deal with several frustrating situations, the next small frustration may put them over the edge, even when the last obstacle would not have bothered them in an isolated instance.
- It takes minutes, hours, or days for the body to recover from a stressful event. The recovery time is dependent upon the obstacle and level of frustration (i.e., the individual's response to the event). Recovery is facilitated by removing the person from the frustrating environment.

Our next article covers common responses to frustration and why the risk of injury increases due to these responses. The final article will discuss what has been found to help, and what does not appear to help, in dealing with frustration.

1. Klein, Jonathan. *Computer Response to User Frustration*. MIT Media Laboratory, Vision and Modeling Group, Tech Report TR#480, Feb. 1999.
2. Gershaw, David A. *Frustrating, Isn't It?* Arizona Western College, Psychology Department. <http://virgil.azwestern.edu/~dag/lol/Frustration1.html>
3. Gershaw, David A. *I almost made it!* Arizona Western College, Psychology Department. <http://virgil.azwestern.edu/~dag/lol/AlmostMadeIt.html>