



How Unfair!
Depression and Perceptions of Justice and Fairness

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We all want to be treated fairly. Fairness at work has been described as the “glue” that holds together workplace relationships, especially relationships between employees and employers. Researchers suggest that we think about fairness in three ways:

Distributive justice refers to the fairness of the outcomes of decisions such as who gets raises and promotions.

Procedural justice is about the way in which the decisions were made such as were the policies fair and equally applied to everyone.

Interactional justice includes the interpersonal treatment around the procedure or change such as information provided and respectful treatment.



All forms of justice are important, but sometimes one type can compensate for the other. For example, your anger at feeling that you should have received a pay raise might be reduced if the decision-maker gave you adequate information and treated you with respect. Workplaces that are perceived to be fair and just benefit from increased job performance, helping behaviors among co-workers, job satisfaction, and loyalty. Injustices, on the other hand, can erode trust and damage relationships.

It makes sense that anxiety and depression might arise from being treated unfairly at work. But an interesting recent study in the U.S. Army entitled “Work Gets Unfair for the Depressed” found that the arrow may point in the opposite direction. In other words, depressive symptoms lead to perceptions of injustice more strongly than the other way around. This means that depressed employees are more likely to experience their workplace as being unfair than their non-depressed counterparts.

There are two “nuggets” to take away from this article. It is important to make sure your workplace policies and practices are fair and just, but also to consider how employees perceive them.

- First, we must consider how we are treating depressed employees. There may be a tendency to treat employees with depressive symptoms in ways that lead the depressed employee to experience unfairness and injustice. Are we treating our employees who suffer with depression in unfair ways?
- Secondly, as depression may influence how people interpret policies, procedures, and treatment, it is an additional motivation for employers to consider the emotional and physical well-being of their employees. Efforts and programs to improve the employee well-being may also consequently improve perceptions of fairness in the organization.

All the best for creating a fair and just workplace for all!

Lang, J., Bliese, P. D., & Lang, J.W.B. (2011). Work gets unfair for the depressed: Cross-lagged relations between organizational justice perceptions and depressive symptoms. Journal of Applied Psychology, 96, 602-618.