

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## "Frustrating, Isn't It?" \*

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\*Life is full of frustrations – big ones and small ones. Essentially, **frustration** can be defined in one of two ways. First, frustration is the *blocking of a goal*. It can be as minor as not being able to think of a word you want to use in conversation. On the other hand, it could involve a stroke, which leaves you unable to walk or talk. Second, people often use the term frustration to describe the *emotional state* that occurs when a goal is blocked. Typically that emotion involves *anxiety*.

The **obstacles** that block your way to a goal can be classified into several categories. Some obstacles are **external** – outside us. Some external obstacles are **social** – they involve the actions of other people. One example often mentioned is slow drivers in a "no passing" zone – especially when you are in a hurry to get somewhere. Another is asking someone for help, and they do not comply. Social obstacles are caused by

what *people* do – or do not do.

Another type of external obstacle is **nonsocial** or **environmental**. These are things in your environment (beside people) that can frustrate you. A locked door, a machine that doesn't work adequately, ants ruining a picnic, and the floods in the Eastern United States all fit into this category.

In contrast to external obstacles, some obstacles are internal. They are **personal** – involving deficiencies in oneself.

As we develop, we may not be able to run as fast, jump as high, or sing as well as others. Some personal obstacles are merely the limitations of life. When we age, our abilities wane. We can no longer, see, hear or remember as well as we once did.

We can compare the effect of these types of obstacles by asking people what their "pet peeve" is. Stop right now and think of your "pet peeve." What happens that is most upsetting to you? What really "ticks you off"?

If you are like most other people, you will describe some social obstacle – what someone has done or failed to do. In contrast to nonsocial or personal obstacles, most people attribute something special to social obstacles. This is **intent**. When other people frustrate us, we tend to think that they did it "on purpose."

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### What frustrates people most is "other people."

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Few of us think that a door locks itself or rain clouds gather intentionally. In contrast, the actions of others are likely to be perceived as intentional. Have you ever had something repaired – only to have another problem develop a few days after you get it back? If you view it as another fault in the device, you are upset. However, if you think the repair person is at fault – whether this is true or not – you are more likely to be *very* angry. Why? You tend to view the actions of other people as intentional.

When a goal is blocked, other factors in the situation (beside the type of obstacle) influence our emotional response. The same situation may cause various levels of emotion depending on the circumstances.

The **importance of the goal** is one of these variables. For example, a sprained ankle is frustrating. Even so, we can tolerate the discomfort, limp along and meet most of our goals. However, what if an athlete – on the eve of a crucial athletic event – sprained an ankle? I'm sure the feelings of frustration would be much greater.

**Minimal distance** to the goal is another factor. Suppose a student missed a desired grade on a test. Have you ever heard a student scream this in anguish? *"I'm so upset! I only missed an 'A' by 87 points!"* It is very unlikely. However, many have heard that anguish expressed by students who have missed a grade by 1 or 2 points. More extreme feelings are felt by players that lose a very close game than those who are "swamped" by the opposing team. This is probably because the closeness of the goal gives us a higher expectation of actually obtaining it.

If obstacles are **multiple**, this increases our emotional response. We can endure many small frustrations without becoming emotional. However, when the frustrations are many – or they come too close together – one more trivial frustration might become the *"straw that broke the camel's back."* If people become very upset at something that typically doesn't bother them, it is very likely that this most recent event was the *"last straw."* Rather than yelling back at them, you could try to discover the other frustrations that lead to this unexpected emotional outburst. *"You aren't usually bothered by this. Has anything else happened to upset you?"* (Don't do this, unless you are ready to listen to a long story.)



If your frustration is **relatively greater than others** around you, your emotional reaction will be greater. Many of us believe that we are not being paid what we deserve (or want) at our job. That is a common frustration. However, what if you find that coworkers – with the same experience and training – are being paid significantly more than you? I'm sure you are going to be more upset with your level of pay. Likewise, the person who has lost a shoe is upset, at least until they see another person who has no foot.

People who have been frustrated take some comfort, when they realize that they are among many who are being frustrated. When your lottery numbers do not win, it is some comfort to know that there are a multitude of losers. (Wouldn't it be terrible, if your numbers were the only ones that did not win?) I'm sure you have heard the saying, *"Misery loves company."* However, to be more accurate, it needs to be changed to *"Misery loves miserable company."*

In another article, we will discuss ways of dealing with frustration. (I hope this will not be too frustrating.)

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