Anxiety, Work, and Coping

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Using the backdrop of the uncertainty and anxiety triggered by the recent recession, this article briefly summarizes the research into the connections between elevated normal anxiety and various work outcomes. Anxiety’s particular relationships to work habits and attitudes, work relationships, and performance are described. Findings for senior executives also are presented in summary. The weight of evidence clearly indicates that chronic anxiety can have many disastrous outcomes for employees, leaders, and their organizations. The author proposes a number of potential practical strategies that could be provided by a manager or a consultant for addressing both employees’ and managers’ anxiety. Specific suggestions include perspective taking, communication strategies, anxiety relief tactics, diversions, self-reflection and self-help, and reviewing possible scenarios. The author ends on an optimistic note without minimizing the possible consequences of chronic anxiety.

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Particularly in the postrecession world, many of us are face-to-face with a number of unpredictable and frightening issues: high unemployment, underemployment, reorganizations, downsizing, shaky job security, and the prospects of a slow climb back to prosperity. Besides having to work harder without an obvious and clear payback, we have to live with higher levels of anxiety. We feel a bit panicky: our hearts race, we fret, lie awake late at night in a sweat, second-guess ourselves, imagine what could be, and scan our work worlds for clues about what is going to happen.

All of those symptoms are markers of anxiety. Anxiety arises when we feel a strong sense of threat to a value that we hold dear (May, 1977). It may
involve our beliefs in self-effectiveness, being successful, having a good lifestyle or a productive career, among other things. Although anxiety’s symptoms closely resemble outright fear, there is a key difference. Anxiety originates inside of us because our very sense of self becomes threatened. Unlike facing an armed terrorist or a careening, out-of-control automobile, we cannot identify a single external source as we desperately seek a way to avoid or deal with the threat. We feel the dimensions of fear without being able to focus on a particular person or situation. Anxiety lives inside of us.

On the other hand, we know that a certain base level of normal anxiety actually helps us perform. The edginess, alertness, and unsettled feeling can give us energy. We also know, as Rollo May (1977) said, that “anxiety is essential to the human condition” (p. xx). Some anxiety is normal and inescapable. The critical question is how much anxiety we feel, or our clients and their employees feel, and what we do about it as managers and consultants.

So how does anxiety affect us at work?

**ANXIETY AND WORK HABITS AND ATTITUDES**

Large scale research (Mortensen, 2014) says that elevated levels of even normal, nonclinical anxiety can warp employees’ attitudes, behavior and even performance. Anxious people often are dissatisfied with their jobs. If it lasts, that dissatisfaction can spur people to look for another job and ultimately to leave.

We know, too, that anxiety impedes how we tackle our work. Anxious people tend to be less confident that they have effective skills. They are more pessimistic about whether what they do will make a difference. And, even more importantly, they are less likely to do productive things like set goals and measure themselves against them. The possible outcomes are tragic. People may give up. They can fail to do the right things because they believe it doesn’t matter. And, their discouragement can put them on the path to underperforming, and possibly to losing their jobs. Chronic anxiety can create a downward spiral.

**ANXIETY AND WORK RELATIONSHIPS**

Anxious people frequently have poor relationships with their coworkers. They can be unpleasant to be around. Bosses and teammates often rate anxious people as less socially skilled than other people. They see anxious employees as less personally likable than their more even-keeled peers. Fellow employees may describe anxious colleagues as poorer team players,
too. A consistently anxious person may become isolated and in job jeopardy because coworkers see them negatively.

Anxiety can strike at all job levels. Anxious, emotionally unstable executives are prone to have less cohesive teams than their calmer, more settled leadership peers. Their personal drama and moodiness has a way of infiltrating the minds and hearts of the people who report to them. Like many other things in organizational life, senior management’s volatility and disruptive anxiety can flow downward to other levels, too. Anxiety can be contagious.

**ANXIOUS AND PERFORMANCE**

Chronic anxiety is tied to lower job performance regardless of job category or industry. In fact, it goes all the way to the top. Just like at lower levels, anxious executives are reluctant to take risks. They are more likely to be plateaued in their careers. They spend less effort thinking about the future. They avoid innovation. Instead, they circle the organizational wagons as if their competition and environments are too threatening and dangerous to face. There even is evidence that organizations with emotionally unstable top executives are more likely to perform poorly, or to go bankrupt.

**WHAT TO DO**

Especially today, you, your clients, or your employees may feel that we are living in very uncertain, anxiety-provoking times. We may fear that things probably will be bad for employees, leaders, and the entire organization. What are some practical remedies that you can offer as a manager or as a consultant?

First of all, remember that we all will face some anxiety. Too many unpredictable things happen in our work and personal lives to avoid it. Adult life simply will not be steady and certain all of the time. So accept that we will feel unsettled on some days yet may have difficulty identifying why.

Second, recognize how chronically feeling uncertain and helpless—the hallmarks of anxiety—can hijack employee attitudes, damage relationships, and prevent people for making their best efforts. The worst part is people’s tendencies to suffer in silence.

If you are a manager, encourage questions from your team. Spread whatever realistic information you can about what is happening and what is likely to happen. Paint as accurate a picture as possible. Most employees will not expect guarantees from you. But having a better sense of the future can help them sleep a little better at night.
If you are an employee, ask the questions you may be afraid to ask. Get what information you can to help you think about your job situation, your organization, and your future.

Third, minimize your time around groups of anxious people. Emotional contagion can make it easy to slip into a negative, woe-is-me mindset. That can set you up to give up, with the inevitable result.

Fourth, look for practical anxiety relievers. Taking a lighter tone at times can ease some of the angst and pressure that people feel. A brief moment of fun or frivolity can take people’s minds off of their concerns for a little while. Look for things to smile about or for laughter that you can share. Or think about ways to create a little space, such as time away from the normal workplace for meetings. Share a meal away from your work area. Have outdoors walking meetings in good weather. A change of scene can be refreshing and can take all of us out of an emotional rut.

Fifth, take advantage of off-the-job diversions like family, friends, hobbies, and exercise for a nice change and mood booster. Put your nervous energy into pleasant, positive things. And use those opportunities to reflect about the good things in your career and in your life.

Sixth, look in the mirror. If you honestly can say that you’re feeling more than a twinge of panic about today and tomorrow, look for resources to help you. Maybe a trusted advisor, friend, or coworker will be willing to talk through the things that most concern you. That independent point of view may help you gain a better sense of perspective. At the very least, an interested, sympathetic ear can help you feel more settled and less isolated.

Finally, give yourself some time and space to refocus, too. Try to take the long view about your doubts and fears. What’s the worst that can happen? What’s the best? Last, what’s most likely? Hang your hat on that third possibility. It will help you focus realistically and to take appropriate action.

Anxiety in today’s turbulent work world, or even in better times, can put each of us into an emotional and behavioral tailspin. But with some space, thought, and preemptive action, it does not have to.

REFERENCES