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Anxiety can creep into our lives in many forms, from the subtle dread that sets in as the weekend winds down to the unnoticed tension that only becomes clear once it starts affecting our behaviour. The author explores how anxiety shows up in the workplace, how to recognize it, and practical techniques to manage it and thrive in spite of it.

orkplace Anxiety: Strategies for Success

by | **Anne C. Barrett**



We Are Living in Interesting Times

There are so many reasons to feel anxious right now. Maybe you're worried about the state of the world, your health, your relationships or your finances. Whatever it is that's weighing on you, it's likely showing up in how you're functioning at work. I know this not just from professional experience but from personal experience too.

I've dealt with my own workplace anxiety. At one point, stress became so overwhelming that I had to take a break and step away from everything to figure out what was going on and how to heal. That journey helped me learn what anxiety looks like, how to name it and how to begin working with it instead of against it. And it's what led me to start helping others do the same.

Anxiety doesn't always show up as a full-blown crisis. Often, it's more subtle—a tightness in the chest before a meeting, the sense that you're always behind or that low-level dread creeping in on Sunday night. This kind of anxiety can become so common that it starts to feel normal, like just part of the job. But it doesn't have to be that way.

This article is about naming what's going on; understanding what anxiety can look like at work; and finding real, human ways to deal with it—whether that means managing your anxiety symptoms, supporting your team or your peers, or recognizing when it's time to ask for help. We'll talk about what workplace anxiety is, proactive strategies to manage it, how to support those around us and when professional support can be a game-changer.

Takeaways

- Anxiety doesn't always present itself as a full-blown crisis or take the form of crippling panic attacks. The symptoms can be subtle, such as muscle tension, an elevated heart rate and racing thoughts, among others.
- Before we can effectively manage anxiety, learning how to identify the physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioural symptoms is essential.
- One of the key contributors to workplace anxiety is an overwhelming workload. Managing your workload and setting clear boundaries are crucial components for maintaining well-being.
- Establishing daily rituals and routines can foster a sense of control and gradually ease anxiety. Consistency brings stability, making it easier to manage stress before it becomes overwhelming.

Recognizing Anxiety in the Workplace

Before we can manage anxiety, we first need to recognize it. Workplace anxiety often manifests in subtle ways, which can make it difficult to identify right away. It doesn't always look like a panic attack but can still affect performance and well-being.

Anxiety in the workplace can present through:

- **Physical symptoms:** Increased heart rate, shallow breathing, muscle tension, headaches or a general sense of restlessness
- **Cognitive symptoms:** Racing thoughts, excessive worrying about performance, feeling mentally scattered or foggy, and struggling to focus
- **Emotional symptoms:** Feelings of irritability, frustration, dread or being easily overwhelmed
- **Behavioural symptoms:** Avoiding certain tasks, procrastination, disengagement from meetings or social activities, and a general decline in motivation.

The key to managing anxiety is identifying it early so that you can take action. If you notice these signs in yourself, it's important to address them before they interfere with your work or overall well-being. If you notice them in a colleague, it might be time to offer support.

Proactive Strategies for Managing Anxiety

Proactive strategies are the most effective way to manage anxiety before it becomes overwhelming. In this section, we'll explore practical approaches to help you cope with anxiety and create a healthier work environment.

Self-Awareness: Identifying Your Anxiety

The first step to managing anxiety is becoming self-aware. We often don't realize when we're anxious until it's already affecting our behaviour. Taking time to check in with yourself throughout the day can help you identify anxiety before it gets out of hand. Ask yourself questions like:

- How am I feeling right now? Am I tense or restless?
- Are my thoughts racing? Do I feel scattered or unable to focus?
- Is there something specific I'm avoiding?
- Do I feel irritable or frustrated for no apparent reason?

Building self-awareness can help you recognize anxiety early so you can take steps to calm your mind and body before it takes over.

Cultivating a Healthier Mindset

Managing anxiety also requires cultivating a mindset that reduces stress and promotes calmness. This starts with shifting your internal dialogue and embracing a healthier perspective.

- **Reframing Negative Thoughts:** Anxiety often stems from negative thought patterns. When you think, “I can’t handle this,” try reframing it to something more balanced, like, “This is challenging, but I can approach it step-by-step.” Changing how you view stress can make a significant difference in how you cope with it.
- **Practicing Self-Compassion:** It’s easy to be hard on ourselves when we’re anxious, but self-compassion can reduce anxiety. Treat yourself with the same kindness you would offer a struggling colleague. Recognize that you’re doing your best, and credit yourself for that.
- **Challenging Perfectionism:** Perfectionism is often a root cause of workplace anxiety. It’s important to recognize that you don’t need to be perfect. Letting go of unrealistic expectations allows you to approach work with more flexibility and less pressure.

Calming Techniques: Mindfulness and Breathing

Once you recognize anxiety, it’s essential to calm both your mind and body. Mindfulness and breathing techniques are simple but powerful tools for reducing anxiety in the moment.

- **Mindful Breathing:** A quick way to calm yourself is through mindful breathing. Try the two-four-six breathing technique: Inhale for a count of four, hold for two counts and exhale slowly for six counts. Repeat this a few times to slow down your nervous system and promote relaxation.
- **Mindfulness Practice:** Take moments throughout your day to pause and check in with yourself. Close your eyes, breathe deeply, and notice and soften any tension in your body. You can prevent anxiety from escalating by staying present and observing your thoughts and feelings without judgment.

Rituals and Routines to Manage Anxiety

Creating daily rituals and routines can help you build a sense of control and reduce anxiety over time. Consistent routines create stability and can help prevent stress from feeling overwhelming.

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- **Morning Rituals:** Start your day with something that grounds you. This can include mindful breathing, a short walk or a brief meditation. These activities help you start the day feeling calm and centered, even before you face the workday’s stress.
- **Evening Rituals:** Just as a morning ritual sets the tone for your day, an evening ritual can help signal to your body that it’s time to wind down. Turn off electronics, do some light stretching or read a calming book. Create a routine that signals the end of the workday and allows you to transition into relaxation mode.
- **Breaks During the Day:** Regular breaks throughout the day are crucial for preventing burnout. Use these moments to step away from your desk, take a quick walk, stretch or breathe deeply for a few minutes. These breaks allow your mind to recharge, so you can return to work feeling more focused and less anxious.

Managing Workload and Setting Boundaries

One of the key contributors to workplace anxiety is an overwhelming workload. Managing your workload and setting clear boundaries are essential to keeping anxiety at bay.

- **Prioritize Tasks:** When faced with multiple deadlines, break your tasks into smaller, more manageable steps. This makes them feel less overwhelming and helps you focus on one thing at a time.
- **Set Boundaries:** Establishing clear boundaries with your work is critical. Whether limiting the hours you’re available for meetings or ensuring you take time off when needed, boundaries are essential for preventing burnout. Be proactive in protecting your time and energy.
- **Delegate When Necessary:** If you’re feeling overwhelmed, don’t hesitate to delegate tasks. Trust your colleagues to take on some of the workload. Delegation is an essential skill that can help reduce your stress and prevent anxiety from building.

Supporting Your Colleagues

As a colleague or leader, you play an essential role in caring for those around you who may be experiencing anxiety. Here are some ways to support your peers.

- **Implement an Open-Door Policy:** If you're in a leadership role, having an open-door policy is crucial for creating a space where employees feel safe to express concerns. While it's not possible to be available all the time, making it clear that your door is open some of the time helps foster a sense of trust and encourages open communication.
- **Encourage Team-Building and Social Connection:** Workplace anxiety often thrives when employees feel disconnected. Foster a culture of connection by encouraging informal team-building activities, such as group lunch breaks or casual coffee chats. These moments of social interaction allow colleagues to bond, reducing isolation and promoting a sense of belonging.
- **Promote Open Communication:** Communication is key when it comes to supporting employees with anxiety. Encourage an open, transparent dialogue in which employees feel comfortable expressing concerns and asking for help. Whether through formal channels or casual check-ins, giving employees a voice can help them feel heard and valued.
- **Advocate for Work-Life Balance:** Supporting work-life balance is another important way to reduce anxiety. Flexible schedules, the ability to work remotely and mental health days all contribute to reducing stress. As a leader, promote a healthy balance by offering these options and encouraging employees to take time off when needed.

When to Seek Professional Help

While proactive strategies and workplace support can make a big difference, there are times when anxiety may require professional intervention. If anxiety becomes so overwhelming that it's affecting your ability to perform tasks, impacting your sleep or causing significant distress, it may be time to seek additional support.

A therapist or counsellor can help identify triggers, develop personalized coping strategies and provide deeper insights into how anxiety is affecting your life. Coaches can also help with workplace-specific anxiety by offering guidance on managing stress and setting healthy boundaries.

BIO

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She is an experienced educator, workplace wellness leader, board certified health and wellness coach, and yoga teacher. With over two decades of experience in the wellness field, she empowers individuals and organizations to thrive through mindfulness, lifestyle medicine and habit change.



Professional help can provide the support needed to address deeper issues or when self-care strategies are no longer enough. Seeking help is not a sign of weakness but a proactive step toward ensuring long-term mental health and well-being.

Conclusion

Workplace anxiety is a common challenge, but it can be managed with the right tools and strategies. We can create a more positive, productive work environment by recognizing anxiety early, implementing proactive strategies, supporting our colleagues and knowing when to seek professional help.

Remember, managing anxiety is not about eliminating stress entirely but finding ways to cope with it in a healthy, balanced way. By taking small, consistent steps every day, you can build a foundation for better mental health and create a work culture that supports well-being for everyone. ☺

Endnotes

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