

The Commute Before a Difficult Day

WHEN ANXIETY STARTS BEFORE YOU EVEN ARRIVE

Sometimes work begins before we reach the workplace

For someone living with workplace anxiety, the journey to work can become much more than getting from one place to another. The mind may already be rehearsing the meeting, the workload, a difficult conversation, the noise of the office, the possibility of making a mistake or simply the effort of holding everything together for another day. By the time the person arrives, they may have spent thirty minutes, an hour or longer mentally living through situations that have not happened yet.

The body can join in. The heart may race. The stomach may tighten. Hands can feel clammy, breathing becomes shallower and thoughts speed up. Some people feel nauseous or need the toilet repeatedly before leaving. Others become irritable with family members, delay leaving home, take a longer route, sit on the bus feeling trapped or pull into the work car park and discover that they cannot make themselves get out of the car.

That experience deserves more understanding than 'I just hate Mondays.' The commute can become a transition point where anticipatory anxiety, sensory demand and memories of previous difficult days all meet.

What is your mind preparing for?

Anxiety often tries to protect us by predicting what might go wrong. On the journey to work that can sound like: 'What if they ask me about that mistake?' 'What if I cannot get everything finished?' 'What mood will my manager be in?' 'What if the office is too noisy?' or 'How am I going to get through another whole day?' The brain is attempting to create certainty by running scenarios, but repeated rehearsal can leave us feeling as if the feared event is already underway.

Rather than arguing with every anxious thought, notice the theme. Is the fear about workload, people, performance, uncertainty, sensory overload, being late, the journey itself, masking or something specific that happened at work? The answer matters because different problems need different forms of support.

The commute itself may be demanding

Crowded trains, traffic, delays, bright lights, noise, unpredictable passengers and having to watch the clock can all add another layer. For an autistic or ADHD employee, arriving at work may follow a substantial period of sensory and executive demand. The person can enter the workplace already using resources that colleagues assume are still available.

This is why 'just leave earlier' is not always a complete answer. We need to understand both the journey and what the person believes is waiting at the end of it.

Making the Journey Less Emotionally Expensive

The aim is not to turn every commute into a mindfulness exercise. Sometimes people simply need fewer demands. A useful starting point is to remove decisions that do not need to be made while anxious. Know the route, prepare what genuinely helps the night before, keep essential items in one place and allow enough time that a minor delay does not immediately become a crisis.

Give the brain one job at a time

If you are travelling safely as a passenger or on public transport, you may find familiar audio, music, an audiobook or noise-reducing headphones helpful where appropriate. If you are driving, keep attention on driving and avoid strategies that divide attention. The goal is not to analyse the working day while travelling. You can decide that planning work happens when you arrive, not while you are on the road.

Create a boundary sentence

A short phrase can interrupt the feeling that you need to solve the day before you arrive: 'I do not need to do the meeting in my head before I do it in the room.' Another might be: 'My job right now is to get there safely.' This is not positive thinking. It is placing the task back into the correct moment.

Build in a transition if you can

Some people need a few minutes between travelling and performing. That may mean sitting somewhere quiet, having a drink, using the toilet, changing from headphones to the workplace gradually, taking a short walk or arriving with enough time not to move immediately from traffic into a meeting. For neurodivergent workers, this transition can be particularly valuable because regulation may take time after a sensory-heavy journey.

If you sit in the car before going inside

This is more common than people often admit. The car can feel like the last controllable space before entering an environment that feels demanding. Rather than shaming yourself for needing those minutes, become curious about what you are waiting for. Are you regulating after the drive? Dreading a particular person? Trying to gather enough energy to mask? Feeling close to panic? The answer may show whether those minutes are a useful transition or a sign that work itself has become frightening.

A calmer commute is helpful, but it should not be used to disguise a workplace that repeatedly makes you feel unsafe.

When travelling by public transport

Consider what reduces demand for you: checking disruptions before leaving, having an alternative route, travelling outside the busiest period if your role allows it, using sensory supports, sitting in a more predictable part of the train or bus, or asking whether flexible start times are possible. Small adjustments can change how much capacity remains when the working day begins.

When the Anxiety Is Really About What Is Waiting at Work

If your commute anxiety repeatedly disappears on days when a certain manager is absent, before particular meetings or when working from home, that pattern is useful information. Likewise, if it becomes worse during periods of excessive workload, conflict, bullying, sensory overload or unclear expectations, the journey may not be the central problem at all. It may simply be where your nervous system has enough space to tell you how it feels about the workplace.

Notice patterns without judging them

For a couple of weeks, note when the anxiety begins, what thought appears first, how intense it feels, what is happening at work that day and whether anything makes the journey easier. You are not creating evidence against yourself. You are looking for information. Patterns can help you explain your experience to a manager, occupational health professional, therapist or GP.

Could the workplace change something?

Flexible start times, hybrid working, fewer early meetings, a quieter arrival space, predictable schedules, clearer expectations or reasonable adjustments may reduce the pressure surrounding the commute. If public transport at peak time creates substantial disability-related difficulty, discussing working patterns may be more useful than repeatedly asking the person to tolerate an inaccessible journey.

When you need more support

If you are regularly unable to enter the workplace, experiencing panic, vomiting, severe physical anxiety, losing sleep because of the next day, or finding that fear is spreading into more of your life, reach for additional support. A GP, therapist, occupational health service or appropriate workplace support may help you understand both the anxiety and the conditions surrounding it. If bullying, harassment or another workplace problem is involved, use appropriate organisational or external advice routes rather than treating the problem solely as personal anxiety.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

There is a particular loneliness in sitting outside work trying to find enough courage or energy to walk through the door while everybody else seems simply to arrive and get on with their day. From the outside, nobody may know that you have already fought through an hour of thoughts before your working day has even officially begun.

I would want you to look at that experience with curiosity rather than shame. What happens during the journey? What are you preparing yourself for? What does your body believe is waiting for you? And is there something that could be changed so that getting to work does not cost so much before you have even started?

The goal is not to become brilliant at enduring dread. It is to understand why the dread is there, reduce what can be reduced and make the journey — and the workplace waiting at the end of it — feel more manageable.

A small check-in for tomorrow: Before leaving, ask yourself: 'What am I expecting from today?' When you arrive, ask: 'What actually happened on the journey?' At the end of the day, ask: 'Was the thing I feared about the commute, the workplace, or both?' Repeat this gently for a few days and look for patterns.

Important: This resource provides general wellbeing information and does not replace individual medical, psychological, occupational-health or employment advice.