

Fear of Making a Mistake at Work

WHEN PERFECTIONISM, ANXIETY AND PREVIOUS CRITICISM MAKE EVERY DECISION FEEL RISKY

When getting something wrong feels much bigger than the mistake

Most of us would prefer to do our work well. But there is a difference between caring about quality and feeling frightened of getting anything wrong. When mistake anxiety becomes strong, an ordinary email, decision, spreadsheet, phone call or piece of work can begin to feel as though it carries an enormous consequence.

You may check the same sentence repeatedly before pressing send. You may ask somebody else to confirm decisions you already understand. You might delay starting because you are worried you will choose the wrong approach, or spend far longer on a task than it requires because 'good enough' never feels safe enough.

From the outside this can look like procrastination, indecisiveness or excessive reassurance seeking. Underneath it may be a person trying very hard to protect themselves from criticism, embarrassment, rejection or the feeling that one error will change how everybody sees them.

Perfectionism is not always about wanting everything to be perfect. Sometimes it is about trying to feel safe.

Where the fear can come from

Mistake anxiety can develop in many ways. Perhaps mistakes were heavily criticised at school. Perhaps a previous manager corrected you publicly or made you feel incompetent. Maybe expectations were unclear but you were still blamed when you misunderstood them. Bullying, humiliation, unstable workplaces and repeated negative feedback can leave a person anticipating danger long after the original experience has passed.

For some neurodivergent people, years of being corrected for forgetting, misunderstanding instructions, missing social cues, being late, losing things or approaching tasks differently can create a deep expectation of getting something wrong. Rejection sensitivity may intensify the emotional impact of criticism, while executive-function difficulties can make it harder to trust your own memory or organisation.

The hidden workload of checking

Fear creates extra work. The task is no longer simply 'write the report'. It becomes write it, reread it, question it, change it, compare it, ask somebody else, reread it again and then spend the evening wondering whether something was missed. This invisible checking can be exhausting.

Ironically, intense fear of mistakes can sometimes make work harder. Cognitive energy that could be used for the task is being used to monitor for danger.

When Perfectionism Starts Controlling the Working Day

Perfectionism is often praised in workplaces because it can look like dedication. A person may produce excellent work, meet deadlines and appear highly conscientious. What colleagues may not see is the cost: working through breaks, staying late, repeatedly checking, struggling to delegate, avoiding unfamiliar tasks and carrying work home mentally long after the laptop has closed.

Procrastination can be fear in disguise

When a task feels as though it must be done perfectly, beginning can become difficult. The person may wait until they feel completely ready, search for more information or focus on smaller jobs first. This can create deadline pressure, which then appears to confirm the belief that they are disorganised or failing. Understanding the fear underneath procrastination can open up different solutions.

Reassurance helps — until you cannot work without it

Checking with a colleague can be sensible. But anxiety can gradually turn reassurance into a requirement. You may know the answer and still feel unable to proceed until someone confirms it. The relief is real but temporary, and the next decision creates the same doubt. Building confidence often involves learning which decisions genuinely require checking and which can safely be made independently.

A practical 'good enough' question

Before continuing to refine something, ask: What is this task actually for? What standard does it genuinely require? What would a competent, complete version look like? Is another hour likely to materially improve the outcome, or am I trying to reduce anxiety?

It can also help to distinguish between reversible and high-impact decisions. Many everyday workplace choices can be corrected. Treating every decision as permanent and dangerous places the nervous system under unnecessary pressure.

What supportive management looks like

Clear expectations reduce unnecessary uncertainty. Explain what a completed task needs to include, what the deadline is, what decisions the employee can make independently and when checking is genuinely required. If priorities change, say so clearly rather than expecting someone to infer it.

When an error happens, address the error rather than attacking the person. 'This figure needs correcting' is different from 'You're always careless.' Specific feedback gives somebody information they can use. Shame usually gives them fear.

People learn more effectively in workplaces where mistakes can be discussed without humiliation.

Building Confidence Without Pretending Mistakes Do Not Matter

Reducing mistake anxiety does not mean adopting an 'anything goes' attitude. Some roles involve serious responsibilities and some errors matter. The goal is proportion: understanding the real level of risk, having appropriate checks and learning from mistakes without turning every imperfection into evidence of personal failure.

Look at the culture as well as the individual

When several employees are frightened to make decisions, repeatedly seek approval or hide mistakes, the workplace should look beyond individual resilience. Are instructions inconsistent? Are people blamed for things they were never told? Is feedback delivered publicly? Do managers react unpredictably? Are workloads so high that errors become more likely? Is asking a question treated as incompetence?

A psychologically safer culture makes it possible to say, 'I am not sure,' 'I need clarification,' or 'I made an error and I need help correcting it.' That openness can help problems be identified earlier rather than concealed through fear.

If the fear belongs partly to the past

Sometimes the present workplace is relatively safe but the body is still responding to previous experiences. A neutral email from a manager may trigger the same dread once associated with a critical boss. Feedback may feel much larger than the words being used. Recognising that connection does not mean dismissing the reaction; it helps separate what is happening now from what happened before.

If anxiety is significantly affecting work, sleep or everyday functioning, additional support may be helpful. Depending on the situation this could include a GP, therapist, occupational health, workplace wellbeing support or discussion about appropriate workplace adjustments.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

There is a particular kind of exhaustion that comes from believing you must never get anything wrong. You can finish a day's work and still carry every decision home with you, replaying conversations, reopening emails in your head and wondering whether you should have done something differently.

I would encourage you to notice the difference between responsibility and fear. Responsibility says, 'I care about doing this properly, and if I make an error I will address it.' Fear says, 'I must get everything right or something terrible will happen.' Those are very different ways to live through a working day.

You are allowed to learn. You are allowed to ask. You are allowed to make an ordinary human error and correct it. A healthy workplace can maintain standards without making people frightened of being human.

A gentle check-in: What do I believe will happen if I make a mistake? Where did I learn that? Which tasks genuinely require a high level of checking? Where could I practise accepting 'complete and good enough'? What would help me feel safer asking for clarification?

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