

When Your Manager Makes You Anxious

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EVERYDAY MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION THAT LEAVES YOU FRIGHTENED

When seeing their name on your screen changes how your body feels

A message from a manager should not automatically make your stomach drop. Yet for some people, seeing a manager's name appear in an inbox or hearing 'Can I have a quick word?' can produce an immediate physical reaction: racing thoughts, nausea, shaking, a pounding heart, going blank or urgently trying to remember what might have gone wrong.

Sometimes that anxiety comes from previous experiences rather than the manager in front of you. A person who has been bullied, humiliated, heavily criticised or managed unpredictably may carry that expectation into a safer workplace. But sometimes the present relationship really is contributing to the fear. Understanding the difference matters.

Not every uncomfortable management conversation is harmful. Managers need to set expectations, discuss performance, correct errors and sometimes say no. The question is not simply, 'Did this conversation make me uncomfortable?' It is also, 'How am I being communicated with, how consistently is this happening, and what happens to me around this person over time?'

Good management can include difficult conversations. It should not require somebody to live in fear of the next one.

Ordinary management can still feel uncomfortable

Feedback may sting. Being told a deadline was missed or that something needs to change can trigger anxiety, particularly if confidence is already low. A manager can be clear and direct without being cruel. They can describe the concern, explain what needs to happen next, allow questions and speak to the employee with dignity.

When the communication itself becomes part of the problem

Repeated shouting, humiliation, sarcasm, personal attacks, threatening language, unpredictable anger, deliberately withholding information, public criticism or creating an atmosphere where employees are frightened to ask questions are different from ordinary performance management. Patterns matter. So does the impact of power: it can be much harder to challenge behaviour when the person creating the fear also controls work, opportunities or evaluations.

Your body may notice before you have words

People sometimes minimise a difficult workplace relationship because no single incident seems 'bad enough.' Yet they notice they are checking emails repeatedly, rehearsing every conversation, avoiding the manager, becoming unusually quiet, crying after meetings or feeling relief whenever that person is absent. These reactions do not automatically prove wrongdoing, but they are worth paying attention to.

Is It the Present, the Past — or Both?

Workplace anxiety is rarely helped by forcing a simple explanation. A manager may communicate reasonably and still trigger memories of a previous harmful relationship. Equally, somebody with a history of anxiety can also be experiencing genuinely poor management now. Having anxiety does not mean every concern is imagined, and having had difficult experiences does not mean every new manager is unsafe.

Look for patterns rather than one uncomfortable moment

Ask what happens repeatedly. Are expectations explained clearly? Can you ask questions without being mocked? Is feedback specific to the work, or does it become personal? Are standards applied consistently? Are you given a realistic opportunity to respond or improve? Does the manager behave similarly with others? Do conversations become threatening or humiliating?

It can help to record factual information for yourself: the date, what was discussed, what was requested, what you understood the next action to be and any follow-up communication. The purpose is not to build a dramatic case around every interaction; it is to reduce the confusion that anxiety can create and help you see patterns more clearly.

When 'Can I have a word?' creates panic

Uncertainty can intensify anxiety. Managers can reduce unnecessary fear by giving context where possible: 'Can we talk at 2pm about the Smith project? I want to clarify the deadline.' That single sentence can prevent hours of catastrophic thinking.

Employees can also ask for clarity: 'Could you let me know what the meeting is about so I can prepare?' or 'Would you mind putting the key actions in writing afterwards?' These are practical communication strategies, not signs of weakness.

Neurodivergence and management communication

Autistic and ADHD employees may be particularly affected by vague expectations, sudden changes, ambiguous feedback, interruptions or communication that relies heavily on implied meaning. Someone may need direct language, written follow-up, processing time or clearer priorities. A manager who understands this can often prevent difficulties before they escalate.

The goal is not a workplace where nobody ever feels challenged. It is a workplace where challenge can happen without humiliation, intimidation or unnecessary uncertainty.

What Can Help When the Relationship Is Affecting You

Begin by identifying what would make communication more workable. Perhaps you need clearer priorities, regular rather than unpredictable check-ins, written actions after meetings, notice before difficult conversations or another person present for certain discussions. Specific requests are often easier to act on than simply saying, 'My manager makes me anxious.'

When you need another route

If you feel unable to resolve concerns directly with your manager, other workplace routes may be available depending on the organisation. These might include another manager, HR, occupational health, an employee assistance or wellbeing service, a trade union or another appropriate internal process. Where health or mental wellbeing is being significantly affected, professional support outside work may also be useful.

If behaviour may involve bullying, harassment, discrimination or another serious workplace concern, seek appropriate advice rather than assuming you must manage the situation alone. Keep factual records and use the relevant organisational or professional support routes.

For managers: authority does not require fear

Employees do not need to be frightened of you in order to respect expectations. Clear leadership means people understand what is required, what has gone wrong when there is a problem, and what they can do next. Predictability, privacy, specificity and respectful language make difficult conversations more effective, not less.

Notice whether employees seem afraid to tell you about mistakes or problems. A team that hides difficulties because it fears the manager may appear compliant while important information remains unseen.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

If your body changes the moment your manager enters the room, I would not dismiss that reaction — but I also would not want fear alone to decide what the relationship means. Slow it down. Look at what is actually happening. Look at the pattern, the language, the expectations and the way you are treated. Then consider what belongs to this workplace, what may belong to previous experiences and what support would help you feel clearer.

And if you are a manager, remember how much weight your words can carry. A sentence you forget five minutes later may be replayed by an anxious employee all evening. That does not mean avoiding honest feedback. It means giving it with clarity, dignity and enough context that somebody can learn rather than simply become frightened.

A healthier workplace is not one without difficult conversations. It is one where people can have those conversations and still feel respected.

A gentle check-in: What exactly happens before I feel anxious around my manager? What is fact and what am I predicting? Is there a repeated pattern? What communication would help? Who could I speak to if I do not feel able to address this directly?

Important: This resource provides general wellbeing information and does not determine whether particular workplace conduct is lawful, bullying, harassment or discrimination. Individual employment, medical, psychological or occupational-health advice may be needed.