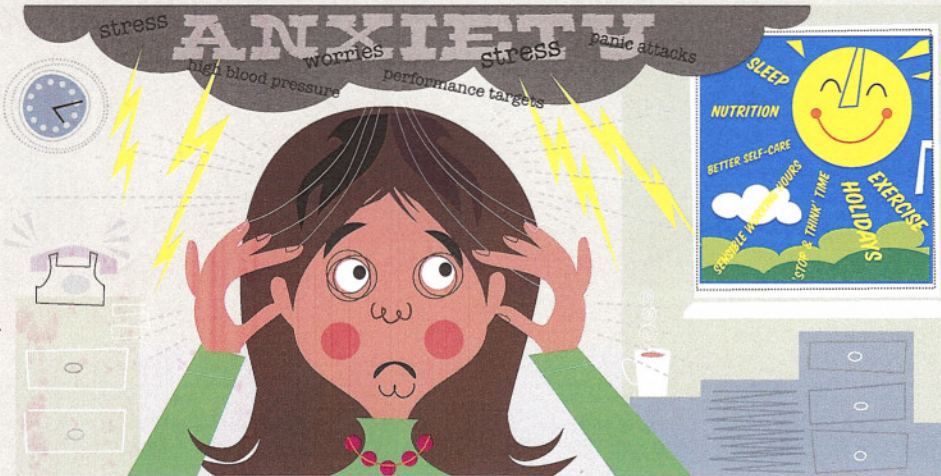


HOW TO...



... manage leaders' anxiety

Anxiety is a natural and unavoidable emotion. While a certain level keeps us on our toes, anxiety also causes distress and can be a key driver of dysfunctional behaviour. Most leaders face public scrutiny, huge pressure to deliver results, complex tasks and relationships, and a highly competitive environment. Add to that the consequences of the economic downturn and it's easy to see why many leaders suffer heightened anxiety levels.

Anxiety that is not well-managed can negatively affect a leader's mood and behaviour, damaging their performance and the motivation and productivity of their staff. L&D professionals can be crucial in helping leaders develop the strategies needed to resist destructive emotional patterns and manage anxiety effectively.

KEY POINTS

- ◆ Remember that anxiety is often the hidden driver behind unskilful leadership behaviour.
- ◆ Be empathic and honest to help the leader become more self-aware.
- ◆ Identify triggers and support the leader in developing practical strategies for mood and behaviour management.

THE EXPERT

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1 PLAN YOUR INTERVENTION

Think about how you can best influence an anxious leader – this can take different forms, depending on your seniority and role as well as the culture of your organisation. If you can take up a coaching role, formally or informally, or propose external coaching, this is extremely helpful. Alternatively, consider organising a seminar on a theme such as “The emotional impact of change”, perhaps involving external specialists. As a minimum, create and seize opportunities via your everyday interaction with the leader to undertake the points below. Wherever possible, influence other skilful stakeholders to do the same.

2 VALIDATE FEELINGS

Get your leader to talk about how they experience the pressures they face, providing a safe space where they can share difficult emotions. Resist jumping in with reassurance – instead, validate their experience by empathising and underlining the value of emotional intelligence which is built on the ability to identify one's own feelings. As leaders often feel weak if they acknowledge being less than confident, this normalising of their emotions can be helpful.

3 CHALLENGE BEHAVIOUR

Empathy is important but honesty is vital. When leaders fail to manage anxiety they need to know the negative impact on their team and the wider organisation. Direct criticism will evoke defensiveness so simply describe how you and other employees experience the leader and the practical consequences of their behaviour. Where possible, use your own experience, for example: “When you cancelled three meetings in a row, I felt frustrated and was unable to meet the project deadline.”

4 IDENTIFY TRIGGERS

Having helped the leader understand the impact of their behaviour, work to identify key situations, people or events that trigger anxiety. For example, a task-focused individual with a tendency to perfectionism may become particularly anxious when a project risks not reaching their high standards and begin to micro-manage as a result. The more aware leaders are of their default position, the better they can resist it.

5 WORK OUT WHAT HELPS

Help the leader generate practical strategies. These may include reviewing priorities and better self-care – nutrition, sleep, exercise, sensible hours and holidays are all important. Excessive anxiety can contribute to medical problems, so if you are concerned about the health of a leader persuade them to see their GP.

6 LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

Make sure your own needs are being met – L&D professionals get anxious too. The more resourced you are, the better equipped you will be to help your leaders remain their most skilful and successful selves.

LINKS

How to...

All PM's “How to...” articles can be accessed at www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/howto **HRD conference and exhibition** Sandler will be running a workshop at the CIPD's HRD conference and exhibition. www.cipd.co.uk/hrd

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