

Learning to Tame Your Office Anxiety

EILENE ZIMMERMAN; December 18, 2010; New York Times

Q. You're feeling anxious at work, and you think it's affecting your performance. What causes anxiety, anyhow?

A. Anxiety is the body's defense mechanism in action. Although we no longer live with many of the physical dangers our ancestors did, our bodies and brains still react to perceived dangers — like making a presentation to a room full of colleagues — the same way our forebears reacted to the sight of a predator: with the “fight or flight” response, says Christopher Willard, a staff psychologist at Tufts University who specializes in treating anxiety. That feeling can be described as panic — our hearts race, our palms sweat and we feel ready to confront the danger or run away from it as fast as we can.

Most people experience some anxiety in their lives, but when it disrupts day-to-day functioning, self-image or the ability to concentrate or work effectively, it becomes a disorder, says Linda B. Welsh a clinical psychologist and director of the Anxiety and Agoraphobia Treatment Center in Bala Cynwyd, Pa.

“You may be prone to anxiety biologically, but it could also be how you were raised,” Ms. Welsh says. “If your parents reacted to the world by being frightened, that would lead you to believe the world is an unpredictable, unsafe place. Anxiety can also be caused by early trauma, something that went wrong in your life when you were young.”

Q. *How can you manage anxiety-provoking situations?*

A. One of the most common treatments for anxiety is confronting it, since facing such situations head-on will ultimately reduce your fear and discomfort. Because most anxiety is focused on the future, try to catch yourself having negative thoughts and think about them rationally, says Lauren Rose, a psychotherapist and founder of the Rose Center for Mind and Body in Rye, N.Y.

“Let's say you have a performance evaluation coming up and you're getting very anxious about it,” she says. “Think of the worst thing that's happened in the last year. Was it anything to worry about? Your boss likes you; your sales are good. Keep going back to these facts and show yourself there's no rational basis for your fear.” Preparation also helps. If you're making a presentation, for example, rehearse with a friend or in the mirror. Mr. Willard suggests writing on your notes things like “take a deep breath here” or “pause and feel your feet on the ground beneath you.” These notes act like a reset button, he says, lassoing your mind back to reality and distracting you from negative thoughts.

New or unfamiliar situations tend to cause the most anxiety. If you are learning something new, try to figure out why you are anxious about it, Ms. Rose says. Do you lack a certain skill and need some training? Would it help to proceed more slowly? “It could be that you don't have a problem with the learning; you just get anxious because it's something new,” she says.

If anxiety is affecting other aspects of your life — like sleep or appetite — you should seek help from a mental health professional, Ms. Welsh advises.

Q. *Despite your best efforts to prepare, you're having an anxiety attack. What do you do?*

A. Start breathing deeply through your nose. Inhale and push air into your belly and up into

your chest, then exhale slowly, says Susan Orenstein, a psychologist who treats anxiety and is founder of Orenstein Solutions, a psychotherapy practice in Cary, N.C.

After those deep breaths, talk to yourself. “Say what you might say to a friend who is suffering or a child — soothing things like ‘one step at a time,’” she advises. “It’s also helpful to remind yourself that just because you feel you’re in danger doesn’t mean you actually are in danger. If you can, work with a coach or therapist to craft soothing statements that are more personalized.”

Q. *Is it possible to channel that anxious energy into better performance?*

A. Ms. Rose suggests thinking of that energy as a racehorse running wild. “Think of how powerful it can be,” she says. “Visualize using it to be more passionate when speaking or selling, or more enthusiastic when trying something new.”

Try not to present your anxiety to colleagues as a negative, Mr. Willard says. Rather than stating, “I hate public speaking” or “I’m bad with computers,” say: “What do you do to control your nerves when you speak in public?”

Q. *Your anxiety seems limited to the workplace. Could it be that your job is so stressful that the only way to stop the problem is to leave?*

A. If you’ve been anxious in the job for a while and not in the rest of your life, it may mean the job isn’t right for you, Mr. Willard says.

“Don’t leave without talking to human resources or a supervisor first about ways to accommodate your needs — perhaps changing your job description to play more to your strengths than to trigger your anxieties, like less public speaking,” he says.

Or you may decide that you can live with some anxiety. Eventually, “it will expand your comfort zone,” says Ms. Orenstein, “and as adults, if we want to grow we need to be willing to take on new challenges.”