

Recognizing and Addressing Anxiety in the Workplace: A Guide for HR Leaders



In today's dynamic and demanding work environment, anxiety and burnout are increasingly common challenges. Now, with newfound external stressors of tariffs, an unstable economy, and job market uncertainty, HR directors and managers play a pivotal role not just in supporting employees' mental wellbeing, but also in maintaining their own. Understanding the signs of anxiety and burnout—and taking proactive steps to address and prevent them—can foster a healthier, more productive workplace.

What Is Workplace Anxiety?

Workplace anxiety is a state of stress or fear related to one's job. It can stem from an excessive workload, unclear job expectations, job insecurity, personal mental health struggles, or a lack of support when it comes to difficulties in life and the workplace.

Common Signs of Anxiety in Employees

- **Physical Symptoms:** Headaches, stomach issues, fatigue, changes in appetite, shaking, or a change in sleep patterns.
- **Behavioural Changes:** Social withdrawal, increased absenteeism, and irritability.
- **Performance Issues:** Decline in productivity or quality of work, procrastination, and decreased participation in meetings or team activities.
- **Emotional Distress:** Mood swings, feelings of dread, difficulty concentrating, and panic attacks.

How HR Can Address Anxiety

Foster a Culture of Openness

Encourage an open dialogue about mental health. Normalize conversations through mental health awareness campaigns, peer support groups, or wellness newsletters. If one of your team members has been exhibiting signs of withdrawing from social situations or frequent absences, check in with them in an empathetic and private manner. Ask if there is anything you can do to make their workload easier on them or if certain accommodations would make work less taxing on their health.

Train Managers to Recognize the Signs

Provide training to help managers identify anxiety symptoms and approach affected employees compassionately and confidentially. If possible, have guest speakers, like mental health coaches or wellness experts, to teach your managers about the complexity of anxiety symptoms.

Provide Access to Mental Health Resources

Ensure employees know how to access Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), therapy options, mental health hotlines, and wellness apps. If applicable, make employees aware of their health benefits and how they can use them towards anxiety resources.

Offer Flexible Work Arrangements

Flexibility in schedules, remote work, or adjusted workloads can significantly reduce stressors that contribute to anxiety. Offer a struggling employee the option to arrive or leave at a more convenient and productive time for them, arrange a temporary or partial work-from-home agreement, or – if the situation is circumstantial – suggest taking a half day or a full day off so they can take care of their health.

Encourage Regular Breaks and Time Off

Promote the use of vacation time and mental health days. Avoid celebrating overwork and lead by example by taking breaks yourself. Remind employees who work long hours sitting at a desk or doing repetitive actions to take breaks, and reward good performance and seniority with increased opportunities to take time off.

Preventing Burnout for Employees

Burnout—a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion—often results from prolonged stress and can have serious consequences for health and performance.

Key Prevention Strategies

- **Set Realistic Expectations:** Avoid overburdening employees. Set clear goals and prioritize working collaboratively – if one employee is swamped with work and another is twiddling their thumbs, encourage sharing the workload to create more balance.
- **Acknowledge Efforts and Achievements:** Regular recognition improves morale and reduces feelings of being undervalued. Even a short, encouraging note via email or compliment as you pass by their cubicle can change someone's mood.
- **Encourage Autonomy and Input:** Empower employees to make decisions and contribute ideas to enhance engagement. Feeling seen and heard means you are more likely to ask for help when you need it.
- **Build Supportive Teams:** Facilitate team building and trust. A supportive work environment can reduce stress and open up discussions.
- **Implement Wellness Programs:** Include workshops on mindfulness, resilience, nutrition, and fitness as part of regular workplace programming. Check out our [handy workplace wellness game plan](#) for some inspiration.

Protecting Your Own Mental Health as an HR Leader

HR professionals are often the go-to support system—but who supports you? Managing others' stress while juggling compliance, employee relations, and leadership responsibilities can take a toll.

Strategies for Self-Care

- **Set Boundaries:** Be mindful of work-life balance. Delegate tasks when possible.
- **Practice Reflective Leadership:** Regularly assess your own stress and take action early.
- **Seek Peer Support:** Join HR peer groups or professional networks to share experiences and advice.
- **Pursue Professional Development:** Training in conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, and stress management can be as beneficial to you as your team.
- **Model Healthy Behavior:** By prioritizing your own wellbeing, you set a powerful example for your organization.

Final Thoughts

Anxiety and burnout can severely impact workplace culture and productivity. HR directors and managers are uniquely positioned to recognize early warning signs, take compassionate action, and create resilient environments where people thrive. By prioritizing mental health for both employees and themselves, HR leaders drive not only compliance, but true cultural transformation.