

How anxiety at work differs from stress – and how to manage it

workplaceinfo, By [Mike Toten](#) on 17 September 2014

One person in four will suffer from an anxiety disorder at some stage during their life, and that number has increased significantly over the past decade.

What are the main symptoms of anxiety at the workplace and how can they best be handled? These questions were addressed in a panel discussion at the NSW Safety in Action Conference and Exhibition, held in Sydney 2–4 September 2014.

Stress is okay in moderation

Dorienne Spennato, from AccessEAP, said some stress is not a bad thing, because it provides people with stimulation.



This can be contrasted with people who may suffer “bad” stress because they are underused or undervalued at work (ie they don’t receive enough positive stress). However, people need a reprieve from heightened levels of stress, otherwise there will be consequences such as burnout.

How is anxiety different?

Spennato said an anxiety disorder was a more severe form of stress reaction that lasts longer and interferes with work and work relationships. It is more likely than depression to lead to suicidal thoughts. Some common work situations that make employees feel anxious include:

- having to speak up during meetings
- remembering people’s names
- making presentations
- job interviews
- keeping up with technology
- asking questions
- meeting the CEO in the corridor.

Employees won't seek help

Spennato added that about 50 per cent of employees who have mental health issues do not seek help at work. The issue is still stigmatised in many workplaces, and subject to ignorance and prejudices.

This is in contrast to diseases such as breast cancer, which have been heavily publicised and which now have widespread access to support.

Deal with anxiety

Spennato outlined the role of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and recommended that all employees be provided with access to them. However, it was even more important to pay attention to protective factors within the workplace.

These factors included supportive managers, cohesive work teams, social connectedness, encouraging a healthy lifestyle, no bullying or harassment, a good work–life balance, manageable workloads, embracing diversity, and fostering job satisfaction and engagement.

Sharon Leadbetter, from the charity Mental Health Association of NSW, added some specific actions to the above list:

- setting up a Wellbeing Committee
- conducting a mental health needs assessment
- reviewing the organisation culture
- providing training for managers on how to identify mental illness symptoms and approach affected employees
- integrating responsibility for employee wellbeing and mental health into legal and financial key performance indicators
- encouraging employees to visit their own doctors – many are reluctant to do so (eg due to fears for job security).

Leadbetter also said many people were unaware of the distinction between “mental health” and “mental illness”. Mental health refers to a person’s day-to-day wellbeing, and everyone has it – whether good or bad. Mental illness is a diagnosable condition that requires treatment.

Types of interventions

Greg McLoughlin, managing director of Health by Design, summarised some case studies of different types of mental health interventions. These included a “brain bootcamp” course used by mining companies in the Pilbara region, which aimed to remove the stigma associated with mental illness, a bigger than usual problem in the mining industry.

A newer type of intervention is a “brain chemistry” approach currently being trialled by Telstra. This approach focuses on WHY people do what they do, and its impact on their job performance and health, then looks at forms of treatment that address the psychological reasons.

Examples

- Some people seek out excitement and mild stress, and if they don’t find it they may become depressed. As a result, they manufacture crises at work, overreact and become angry in response to relatively minor issues.
- Others may become “control freaks” when under stress. This has a negative impact on other employees because “control freaks” tend to inhibit their performance as well and are usually bad at dealing with details.

The point of these examples is that generic solutions will often not work because they do not address individual causes and needs – “not everyone enjoys rock climbing”.

Other points

Some other points to note include:

- Employees need to have sufficient “reflection time” to enable them to process thoughts and sort out what’s really important to them.
- When providing wellbeing initiatives, ensure they are things that employees are actually interested in, by seeking prior employee input. Otherwise, an entitlement mentality may develop around “perks” such as free massages and their value may diminish.
- The timing of introducing initiatives also matters. For example, don’t introduce Resilience Training during a period of major organisation change.

Source: [http://workplaceinfo.com.au/ohs/safety-in-the-workplace/analysis/how-anxiety-at-work-differs-from-stress-%E2%80%93-and-how-to-manage-it-\(1\)#.VCj9efmSwcB](http://workplaceinfo.com.au/ohs/safety-in-the-workplace/analysis/how-anxiety-at-work-differs-from-stress-%E2%80%93-and-how-to-manage-it-(1)#.VCj9efmSwcB)