6 steps

to supporting an employee with anxiety

Mental health is an extremely common buzzword in today's world. And quite rightly so: research by Raconteur found that an astonishing **1 in 3** of UK workers have been formally diagnosed with a mental health condition at some point in their lifetime.

That's around 11 million people. In other words, the population of Greece. Let's just let that sink in.

And anxiety is one of the biggest culprits: **1 in 10** of us are likely to have a 'disabling anxiety disorder' at some point in our lives. That's 6.6 million of us – and, newsflash: that includes your employees, too.

As an employer, line manager or HR professional it's crucial you know exactly how to support your people should they be suffering from an anxiety disorder. But, unless you've experienced these issues first hand it can be incredibly difficult to understand the condition, let alone know how to give them the right support.

That's where we come in. In this article, we'll guide you through what an anxiety disorder is, what causes it and what you can do to effectively support a member of staff who may be suffering with anxiety.

Let's dig in.

What is anxiety?

The actual feeling of anxiety is a very human thing. It's part of our biological make-up. We all experience it from time to time.

Anxiety is a natural response to stress or danger. It's caused by a rush of adrenaline being pumped through your body to prepare you to deal with a potential threat. It's what makes you feel fear and is what causes you react with either 'fight or flight' - a key part of basic human survival.

However, anxiety disorders can develop when this response is blown out of proportion. You can find yourself panicking when really there's nothing to panic about. Sometimes, the feeling of anxiety can become so overwhelming that it can lead to what's known as an anxiety attack.

Symptoms of an anxiety disorder include:

- Racing heartbeat
- Sweating
- Shortness of breath
- Shaking
- Feeling sick
- Dry mouth

What causes anxiety disorders?

As with most medical conditions, there isn't one sole cause. There is a whole host of factors that can trigger it – and sometimes it can develop for what seems like no reason at all.

The common everyday causes include trauma, stress, relationship or family problems and alcohol or drug abuse. Health problems such as thyroid problems, biochemical changes (e.g. serotonin) or genetic predispositions can also play a part.

A lot of these triggers are often beyond a person's control, making it difficult to stop anxiety in its tracks. But, there are a number of **work-related causes** that you need to watch out for, too – which is hardly surprising as we typically spend 90,000 hours of our lifetime at work (ouch).

Work-related factors include:

- High workloads
- Performance worries
- Workplace stress
- Conflict with colleauges
- Presenteeism

Now let's move onto the practical bit...

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1 Spot the signs

There are a number of behaviours that can indicate that an employee could be suffering from anxiety. You should keep an eye out for these – identifying it early will allow you to have a conversation sooner and get cracking with an action plan.

Spotting the issue is the first step to getting your employee back to their usual self, re-integrated into their team and producing the work you know they're capable of.

Things to watch out for include:

- Increased sick leave
- Drop in performance
- Struggling to make decisions
- Changes in eating habits
- Excessive smoking/drinking

2 Adopt an open-door policy

An open-door policy means that your door is quite literally open to every employee, any time. It helps to create a friendly, welcoming and communicative culture.

Many businesses adopt this as a way of encouraging open, flowing communication as well as building employee trust and promoting closer working relationships.

This policy is especially beneficial for an employee suffering with anxiety as it will help put their mind at ease and will let them know that support is there any time, whenever they may need it.

This can also act as a preventative for anxiety in the workplace as a whole – if your employees are openly sharing their worries or stresses instead of keeping them bottled up, they're much less likely to become overwhelmed.

3 Be flexible

If your employee's anxiety is affecting their day-to-day work, as an employer you're required by the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 to make reasonable adjustments for them, as far as is deemed practical.

This means you need to be as flexible as possible to aid their recovery. Even the smallest adjustments can make the world of difference.

For example, you may think about changing their hours temporarily or letting them work from home for a while. You'd be surprised how effective a little headspace can be.

You'll also need to accommodate for any therapy or counselling sessions they may be attending.

4 Have a conversation

If you're to take away one thing from this article, make sure it's this.

Communicating is key if you're wanting to help your people get better.

When you become aware of the issue, put some time aside to have a chat with them in a private space to try and understand more.

Try to get an idea of what **triggers** their anxiety and what kind of **support** they might need. Reassure them that you're there to help and support them. It's important you don't make assumptions here and that you promise absolute confidentiality.

This initial conversation will give you the means to create an action plan together and decide what the best step forward might be.

Going forward, book in regular 1-2-1s to catch up and check in on their progress.

5 Get trained up

Look into mental health training for both you and your management team. This training, provided by mental health experts, will provide you with the tools you need to tackle stigma in the workplace and educate you about mental health – both incredibly important when it comes to supporting an employee with anxiety.

Training recommendation:

Mind offer a fully-comprehensive in-house training programme designed for managers and employers. Trust us on this one: the Breathe management team booked on and the knowledge and skills they came away with were beyond invaluable.

www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mind-training/

6 Champion a mental health-friendly culture

Your company culture is at the core of **everything** you do. Including how you deal with mental health.

In order to be fully prepared to support your staff, first make sure you've established a positive, thriving culture that puts employee wellbeing first (and nothing less).

A culture that supports mental health will not only determine how comfortable an employee feels about opening up with you about their struggles – but could prevent them from ever suffering in the first place if the cause is work-related.

There's our 6 steps to help you support your people if they're suffering from anxiety. We hope you find this guide super-valuable. ♡

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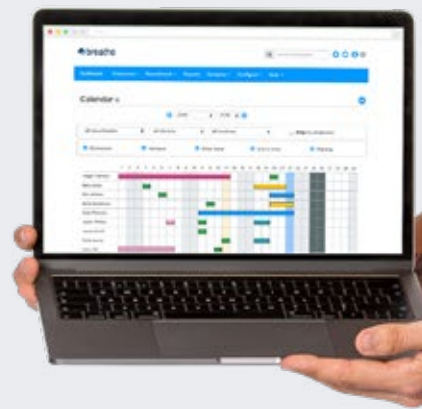
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