

REDUCING WORKPLACE ANXIETY PART 8 - EXTERNAL SOURCES OF ANXIETY

For a long time, I believed there was a “Work Cary” and a “Home Cary.” Two versions of me. One who showed up to lead, manage, and get things done, and another who dealt with everything else. It was a comforting idea. Clean. Contained. But it was also completely untrue.

When I got married, that line blurred. The joy, the logistics, the emotional bandwidth followed me into work, whether I admitted it or not. When I became a parent, the stress, the lack of sleep, the constant low-level worry about whether I was doing enough and it didn’t stay at home. It came with me. Every day.

Then came the bigger events. The moments that shook the world and made it impossible to pretend we could separate “life” from “work.” When COVID hit. When the war in Ukraine broke out. When political chaos made the news impossible to ignore. When inflation spiked, layoffs spread, and job security felt fragile.

In all of those moments, I wasn’t immune, and neither was anyone else. I saw it in myself, in my teams, in friends and colleagues across industries. People weren’t just tired. They were anxious. Disconnected. Distracted. And they were doing their best to hold it together without letting it show.

Here’s the truth: your people are carrying more than what’s in their job description. They’re carrying personal crises, social unrest, financial fears, and pretending they can leave it at the door is just that: pretending.

As leaders, as colleagues, as humans, we can’t fix the world outside. But we can choose not to make things worse inside. And it starts with acknowledging what people are bringing with them when they log in, show up, or try to lead through uncertainty.

Let’s take a closer look at the anxiety we bring with us to work.

Why We Need to Talk About Workplace Anxiety

When we talk about anxiety at work, we’re not talking about clinical diagnoses or panic attacks. We’re talking about the everyday stress, worry, and pressure that so many people carry with them. Especially right now. It’s the creeping tension that builds up over time. It chips away at focus, connection, and energy. And left unaddressed, it can quietly erode performance, well-being, and team culture.

Workplace anxiety doesn’t come from nowhere. It’s not just about having a bad boss or a tough deadline. Most often, it’s the result of deeper, systemic issues. These are things that exist across teams and organizations, baked into the culture, communication, and leadership norms.

In this series, we’re exploring **seven of the biggest drivers of workplace anxiety**. These are the themes that come up again and again in the organizations I work with and the leaders I coach. These aren’t just theoretical problems. They’re patterns I’ve seen in action, and in many cases, lived through myself.

Here’s what we’ll be digging into over the coming months:

- 1. Toxic Work Environments** - when fear replaces trust, and people feel unsafe to speak up or take risks.
- 2. Imposter Syndrome** - when talented people feel like frauds, and anxiety drives perfectionism or paralysis.
- 3. Lack of Supportive Relationships** - when workplace connections are strained, shallow, or absent altogether.
- 4. Overwhelming Workloads & Unclear Priorities** - when everything feels urgent and nothing feels achievable.
- 5. Neglected Well-Being** - when people are burning out, and no one’s paying attention to the toll.



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6. Resistance to Change - when uncertainty isn't addressed, and the unknown becomes a threat.

7. Personal and Global Stressors - when employees bring real-life challenges into a workplace that isn't ready to support them.

This article is the final piece in our seven-part series on **workplace anxiety**. Not the clinical kind, but the creeping, exhausting, hard-to-name kind that builds up over time. Each month, we've tackled one of the core drivers of anxiety inside the workplace.

This time, we're flipping the lens outward. We will be looking at the very real pressures that start outside the office but shape everything that happens inside it.

What People Bring With Them Into the Office

Anxiety doesn't always start at work. Sometimes, it walks in with people every morning.

Personal Hardships - Behind every Zoom screen or office desk is a life. A sick parent. A child struggling at school. A tough breakup. Caregiving responsibilities that never pause. When someone is navigating emotional pain at home, it's no surprise they show up distracted, low on energy, or on edge. These aren't excuses. They're real-life challenges, and they shape how someone shows up, contributes, and connects. Leaders who pretend otherwise risk losing both empathy and engagement.

What's Going On in the World - Political division. Social unrest. Global conflicts. Big headlines and quiet tensions alike find their way into our workplaces. Some employees want to talk about it. Others feel pressure to stay silent. Either way, it's there. Under the surface, shaping mood, energy, and even team dynamics. The workplace shouldn't be a battleground for every global issue, but it also can't be a bubble that ignores reality.

Economic Uncertainty - Money anxiety hits hard, even when no one talks about it. Maybe someone is worried about their partner getting laid off. Maybe they're feeling the squeeze of rising prices or watching their retirement savings take a hit. Whether it's personal or big-picture, financial instability creates stress. People start questioning their security, pulling back from risk, or losing focus on long-term goals. You might not see it, but they feel it. And here's the thing: most people won't come up and say, "Hey, I'm anxious today." But you'll see it. The energy shift. The shorter temper. The hesitations in meetings. The sudden silence from someone who's usually outspoken. When leaders ignore those signs, they send a message (intentionally or not) that there's no space for real-life struggles here. And that's when the culture starts to suffer.

Unchecked anxiety doesn't just hurt the individual. It chips away at the team. It erodes creativity, risk taking, collaboration, and trust. People play it safe. They pull back. They stop sharing bold ideas. And when that becomes the norm, performance drops. Not all at once, but slowly. Until you're leading a team that's surviving, not thriving.

You may not be able to fix what's happening outside of work. But that doesn't mean you're powerless. You can acknowledge it. You can ask, "How are you really doing?" And sometimes, that simple act of leadership can make all the difference.

So, What Can You Actually Do?

You can't fix someone's personal life. You can't stop a war, stabilize the economy, or change the outcome of an election. But that doesn't mean you're powerless. As a leader, colleague, or teammate, your actions can still have a meaningful impact.

Sometimes it starts with simply noticing. When someone seems off. Maybe they are quieter than usual, less engaged, or even a bit distracted. That shift may signal more than just a bad day. It might be a personal hardship. Or a reaction to what's happening in the world. Or something they're not ready to talk about.

You don't have to pry. You don't need to diagnose. But you can lead with curiosity and care.



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Here are a few ways to do just that:

- **Check in with care.** A simple, private message like “Hey, I noticed you’ve seemed a bit off. Is everything okay?” can open the door.
- **Don’t try to fix.** Sometimes listening is more powerful than solving. Just being present and supportive is enough.
- **Create space, not pressure.** If they’re not ready to talk, that’s okay. Let them know you’re there if and when they are.
- **Model boundaries.** Respecting your own limits shows others they can do the same. “Let’s all step away when we need to. Burnout doesn’t help anyone.”
- **Watch the broader environment.** If several people seem anxious or withdrawn, it might be time to ask if the team culture or workload needs adjusting.
- **Encourage support.** If someone seems to be struggling beyond what you can handle, gently guide them toward professional help.

Above all, remember: **Support doesn’t have to be big. It just has to be kind.**

A Personal Note to Close this Series on Anxiety in the Workplace

I never really saw myself as someone who struggled with anxiety at work.

Sure, I’ve had stressful days, tough deadlines, and difficult situations. But “anxious”? That always felt like something other people dealt with. People who were wired differently. People who couldn’t manage pressure. That wasn’t me, or so I thought.

But this past year, with everything going on in the world, something shifted. I found myself more distracted, more irritable, more mentally checked out than usual. I couldn’t focus the way I wanted to. I wasn’t showing up the way I wanted to. And when I took a step back, I realized that this was anxiety. Not the clinical kind that requires a diagnosis or medication, but the real, humankind. The kind that sneaks in during uncertain times. The kind that clouds your thinking, drains your energy, and changes how you show up for your team, your family, and yourself.

Once I saw it clearly in the present, I started seeing it in my past too. During big transitions. During layoffs. During personal struggles that bled into work. I hadn’t called it anxiety then, but that’s what it was. And I’m guessing I’m not alone.

So, as we close out this series, I want to challenge you.

Take a moment to reflect on your own experience. Have there been times when you’ve felt a heavy emotional weight at work? Times when personal or global stress made it hard to focus or stay motivated? Are there people around you who might be carrying that weight right now?

Even if you’re not feeling it today, chances are you’ve felt it before. And chances are someone on your team is feeling it right now.

You don’t have to overhaul your workplace. You don’t have to fix everything. But you can notice. You can care. And you can take one small action to make your workplace just a little more human.

Thanks for being part of this conversation. Let’s keep it going.

Cary Bailey-Findley has spent the past decade building the Human Capital within three Fortune 500 companies and was awarded the ranking of #1 development organization in the world by the Association of Talent Development. He is currently the Talent Manager for SimCorp, the world’s leading provider of integrated investment management solutions for investment and asset managers. He holds a Master’s degree in Industrial and Organizational Psychology and a Master’s degree in Business Administration. You can follow his blog at www.cavemaninasuit.com or download leadership and team development tools at <https://healthyperformanceculture.com>.

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