



OpenConversations

How can I support an employee with anxiety?



Over half of the UK's workforce are experiencing anxiety, according to a [Workplace Health Report](#) conducted earlier this year. While around half of those experience mild symptoms, 24% experience more severe anxiety – and there are a whole host of contributing factors that are unique to every employee.

For some, anxiety may be work related, with unachievable workloads or unrealistic expectations fuelling feelings of anxiety or contributing to anxiety that is already present. For others, their anxiety may stem purely from external factors or be due to an anxiety disorder, like GAD. Either way, as a manager you have to understand your report's anxiety and its relationship to their work in order to both support and help them thrive.

[Here, we answer your questions about anxiety and share our tips to managing employees with anxiety.](#)



What is Anxiety?

We all get anxious sometimes – that feeling of worry, fear or unease is part of life, an evolutionary mechanism that helps us to protect ourselves. If you have an anxiety disorder or condition, however, it's a very different experience. Rather than feeling occasional concern, that anxiety becomes pervasive – impacting on every aspect of your life, including work. It's effects can range from memory problems to physical symptoms like panic attacks.



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What are Anxiety Disorders?

Anxiety disorders can be short lived or long term. They can be sparked by specific triggers, or by seemingly nothing at all. They can change the individual's outward behaviour, or be invisible, effecting the sufferer mentally and emotionally without being noticeable to others. Anxiety disorders include:

- **Panic disorder:** bouts of sudden, intense anxiety and panic attacks.
- **Phobia:** major anxiety response when exposed to a specific situation or object (like agoraphobia)
- **Social anxiety disorder:** high anxiety levels in social situations that can lead to avoidance.
- **Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD):** excessive, unfounded worry, stress and tension.
- **PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder):** anxiety that has been triggered by a traumatic experience or event.

Is Anxiety a disability?

Anxiety disorders can be classified as a disability under the **Equality Act 2010** if the condition has a long-term effect on day-to-day life.



The Equality Act 2010

According to current legislation, 'long-term' is defined as 12 months or more. Yet whether an anxiety condition is long or short term, it can be debilitating if it isn't managed correctly, and if the sufferer doesn't have the support they need. Anxiety disorders can also take a long time to be diagnosed: if an employee is going through this process, offering your support is crucial to helping them manage their condition and perform to the best of their ability at work.

What impact does anxiety have on an employee?

It depends on the individual, and on the type of anxiety condition they have. **Anxiety is not just a feeling of worry: it can have a range of symptoms, some of which can even present as physical ailments.** It can have a significant impact on the individual's life and work, depending on how their anxiety presents itself and what, if anything, triggers it. At work, for example, someone with social anxiety disorder may make excuses not to join in social events, which can have a knock-on effect on their relationships at work if not managed and communicated correctly. **Kept hidden, it can overshadow the positive aspects of their role and impact on the opportunities available to them.**

How do I know if a report has an anxiety disorder?

Hopefully, your employee will come to you and disclose the information – but they will only do this if they feel they have a platform to speak candidly with their manager without fear of recrimination. Regular, open, honest **one-to-ones** with your reports are the only sure-fire way to guarantee this. Not only do they provide a forum for constructive conversations, but they demonstrate that this is a people-first business, you want to support them, and they can be honest.

There are also some tell-tale signs that an employee could be suffering from anxiety, such as missed deadlines, disorganisation, decreased productivity, a marked change in behaviour or increased absences. If you're holding regular 1:1s, you'll be more able to recognise these flags and ask your employee outright how they are feeling.

Is their anxiety work related?

This is a critical question. **As a manager, you need to understand whether anxiety stems solely from work-related stress issues:** if it does, you need to tackle those problems immediately. If someone feels that their workload is unachievable, for instance, what's causing it? How can they, or you as their manager, find a solution? Fail to do so and you could quickly lose talented staff.

If their anxiety has a deep-rooted cause external to work, such as a diagnosed disorder, work can still play a role in how severe their symptoms are and how well they are able to manage their condition. Again, **communication is key:** you need to find out what aspects of work trigger anxiety symptoms and provide methods to address them.

Should I manage someone with Anxiety differently?

Not necessarily. You should be mindful of the employee's individual needs, but that's true of every employee, in every workplace.

Everyone has different circumstances, personalities, priorities, challenges: someone with anxiety will just have different motivators and obstacles to someone who doesn't.

What is important is making reasonable adjustments to support their anxiety, especially (but not only) if it is a diagnosed condition under the Equality Act. Someone with social anxiety disorder, for instance, may be unable to attend a client social function because of their disorder, not because they don't feel like it or are not committed to their role. **The key to understanding and making those adjustments? Yes, you guessed it – one-to-one conversation.**

How can I support someone who has anxiety?

Supporting an employee who has anxiety really comes down to understanding how their condition affects them. For instance, someone with Panic Disorder is going to have very different challenges to someone with a phobia, such as claustrophobia. For the latter, support could be as simple as not forcing them to be in enclosed spaces in the short-term and helping them to seek treatment in the long term. For the former, support will need to be more nuanced and accept the impact that their condition can have on their working day, making reasonable adjustments to their expectations and work environment. You may also want to get information on how to help with panic attacks, either from the report or from a mental health professional.

It is also worth noting that anxiety symptoms can be the result of other issues, such as neurodivergence or specific trauma. Be mindful of understanding the employee as a complete person and not a single-issue, as it will change how you manage them successfully.

OpenBlend's tips for managing employees with anxiety effectively

Remember, every employee is different:
whether they have an anxiety condition or not.

**These tips all come with a caveat: ask the
right questions before you assume anything
about the individual or their condition.**



1 Understand their needs and challenges

Ask, don't assume. Find out what the **individual needs** to manage their role, rather than making sweeping generalisations. Regular 1:1s are essential to this, as needs and challenges can change over time.

2 Keep a close eye on their confidence and ability to manage stress

Giving an employee with anxiety a way to keep track of their confidence and their ability to manage stress is essential. It can help you both to pinpoint triggers that are worsening their condition and tackle them before they get out of hand.

3 Proactively monitor wellbeing

Addressing **wellbeing** has to go beyond a quick 'how are you?' By giving every employee a way to measure their wellbeing and keep track of changes, anxiety-sufferers will feel more empowered to flag when their wellbeing is being affected.

4

Address how you give feedback

One mistake that managers make is to stop having difficult conversations once an employee discloses their anxiety. For the report, this can trigger even more anxiety and hinder their progression and fulfilment at work. Instead, look at how you give **feedback**, making it prescriptive, achievable and aligned with clear goals. Don't forget to share recognition for successes, too.

5

Allow for preparation

Being blindsided by an unexpected task or conversation can worsen anxiety, particularly when it comes to one-to-one meetings. Allowing the employee to see meeting agendas ahead of time and set their own **agenda**, will enable more effective and relaxed conversations.

6

Become a coach

By scheduling regular 1:1s, asking the right questions, listening, and taking action, you can help reports with anxiety to manage their condition and perform to the best of their ability at work. By building **coaching** techniques into one-to-one meetings, you can help employees to identify triggers, overcome challenges and continue to progress at work.



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Managing an employee with anxiety should be no different from managing any other employee: it's about having inclusive conversations and taking a people-first approach. Listen to what your reports have to say. Make the adjustments they need to be happy and productive in the workplace. Have regular, open and honest conversations to stay up to date with their wellbeing, challenges and goals.

If you want a better way to manage and coach employees with anxiety successfully, download the free version of OpenBlend. It will give unique insight into your team: sparking the right conversations, at the right time, for more effective 1:1s.

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