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Self-Management for Work Problems or Work Anxiety

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Abstract

This self-help booklet gives an overview on coping with anxiety and worries at work. It explains what you can do to calm yourself in stressful situations, how to cope with large workloads, find a helpful attitude towards superiors/supervisors, and not be plagued by excessive worry after work. The suggestions are based on a scientifically tested training program for coping with work-related anxiety as well as proven behavioral therapy approaches (Muschalla, 2019; Muschalla & Linden, 2013).

Keywords: work, anxiety, coping, skills, stress management

1 Coping with Anxiety at Work

Anxiety can occur in different types: as anxious fears about disasters and uncertainties that are coming up and that one has to cope with, or as a vegetative reaction of the body, sometimes called a “panic attack”.

Since there are typically several anxiety-provoking moments in the workplace, more than in any other area of life, it seems logical that there may be specific workplace-related anxiety reactions.

Work-related anxieties are anxieties like other anxieties as well. The problem is not that an anxiety occurs, but that it is handled incorrectly. Then, an anxiety reaction can spread or recur more frequently and more intensively. Coping with anxiety is first and foremost about dealing with anxiety symptoms and anxiety thoughts. In the following, some advice is given on how to deal with specific individual anxieties that can be experienced in the workplace.

1.1 Panic Reaction and Stress Symptoms at the Workplace

Acute vegetative arousal, the so-called “panic” is a natural alarm reaction of the body. Originally, it becomes activated in dangerous situations and makes the person immediately ready for reacting with fight or flight. The experience of threat leads stress reaction of the body. This serves to provide the body with all the energy it needs for self-protec-

tion and self-defense. Panic may arise also when the person thinks that the threatening situation cannot be handled.

Many factors can act as stressors: Heat, cold, infections, poisoning, injuries, but also all psycho-social factors, as long as the individual perceives them as a threat. At work, for example, this can be the uncertainty before a meeting with the boss to which one is ordered, or the conflict with the unpleasant colleague, or the anticipation of a previously unknown work task, or working in a place with potential danger or with hazardous substances. Stress can therefore be triggered by any factor that causes a more or less pronounced physical tension or arousal in the individual that can be interpreted as fear.

Panic or stress reactions can occur out of the blue or when encountering or even imagining a stressor. Persons affected usually describe a physical state of arousal with, for example, trembling, sweating, accelerated heartbeat, clammy hands, the feeling of being beside oneself, having tunnel vision, pressure on the chest, the feeling of no longer being able to breathe deeply, wobbly knees, tingling in the hands, hot flushes or cold shivers. Such a stress reaction is an ancient invention of evolution. In the past, it was necessary to do the right thing quickly and without having to think, e.g. when meeting a bear – namely to run away. Today, one rarely meets a dangerous animal in everyday work, so such activation reactions of the body are often not helpful. Physical states of arousal are certainly not needed in a modern workplace, which is

why many anxiety reactions in our modern world are rather “dysfunctional”. They are not helpful, but a hindrance.

If you have experienced such a state of agitation or a panic attack, you should consult your doctor to find out whether or not there is a physical cause for the symptoms. If there is no physical cause, it was probably a panic attack.

An important step to avoid developing an anxiety disorder is to evaluate the physical symptoms of anxiety as signals of an arousal state, which can happen to anyone at one time or another. One should allow the symptoms, when they recur, not fight them. You can let them run riot like a defiant child, and rather use the energies to act anyway!

The better one can tolerate the symptoms without being much irritated, the better is anxiety under control. People afraid of panic symptoms have a tendency to notice their body sensations (bodily changes) very closely. They quickly turn their attention inwards, listen to themselves, and are quickly alarmed when their heart beats faster. Then it helps to once again become aware of all the anxiety symptoms and the associated changes in bodily functions. You can take active action to improve the situation! Symptom tolerance can increase if the body sensations are no longer evaluated as dangerous and one manages to focus on what is happening around one instead of on the inside of the body.

When one notices emerging symptoms of agitation at work, one should engage in a simple routine activity, or seek conversation to take one’s mind off symptoms but towards the present duties. One should avoid getting caught up in catastrophizing thoughts. Instead, do something to distract yourself. You may help yourself by a reminder pinned to the computer screen with a relaxation instruction, or a picture on the desk that evokes calm and pleasant experiences when you look at it.

It can be helpful to concentrate on the times when you are feeling well and to consciously notice the small, pleasant events in everyday work, such as the lunch break with your favorite colleague, a job well done, a kind word from a customer. Moments of anxiety are only snippets of the day or week. You should try not to focus on these anxiety- or tension-filled minutes, but on the time when you are going about your daily life without complaints. It can be helpful to keep a kind of “positive diary” in which you write down in the evening what was the “best” thing about the working day – despite the stresses and strains.

1.2 Anxiety of Insufficiency

In many professions, work demands have steadily increased, the amount of work is getting higher, the responsibilities are getting bigger. Often there is good reason to believe that one can no longer cope with the work.

If you notice that you often brood over this topic or get tense, or if you come up with ideas like “I can’t do anything right, I’m too bad for this work”, “I just make mistakes all the time”, “Everyone else is better than me”, “I work much too slowly”, then you should first do a realistic check before you get carried away. Which of these worries are actually true? What is it exactly that cannot be done? Is there critical feedback from colleagues or superiors? Have mistakes ever been pointed out to you, or have they been pointed out more often than to your colleagues? Is it realistic to work completely error-free? Sometimes one’s own fears turn out to be unfounded when viewed realistically from the outside. Fear can quickly lead to “making a mountain out of a molehill”.

If there is a concrete problem, i.e. if your work performance is actually reduced, the question arises how it comes about. Is the cause an illness or a permanent health problem? Or is it due to a lack of training? In both cases, something can be done. In the first case, it would be advisable to discuss with the supervisor and the company doctor how the work demands can be adapted to the existing impairment. In the second case, it would be necessary to learn the required competences and to be better trained in the respective area, for example by an experienced colleague, or within a training course.

Sometime there are structural conditions at the workplace which may be cause of overload anxiety. This can be found out by talking to colleagues and finding out whether they have the same problem with work coping. Often it is a lack of or false organization of work that leads to overload. Such matters should be discussed in the work team with all those concerned and involved in the tasks, and the mistakes should be analyzed. In doing so, it must be clear to all that the aim is not to find personal blame or fault with individual employees, but to improve the overall organization and system processes. Every good supervisor should also be interested in such an approach.

1.3 Anxiety towards the Superior/ Supervisor

Being afraid of your supervisor is basically normal. It does not even require a particularly threatening superior. Supervisors have threat potential simply by their role. It is their job to monitor, to control, to find and report errors in the work process or result, and if necessary to make demands, to give instructions, with the threat of negative sanctions if demands are not fulfilled. It is quite normal for employees not to sit in the chair where the boss usually sits at the conference. This causes anxiety even if the boss is a very nice person.

Now there are certainly different kinds of bosses. There are those who prefer so-called “flat hierarchies”, who want to be called by their employees by their first names, who avoid giving clear instruc-

tions and behave in an emphatically “collegial” and understanding way. Then there are others who make hierarchies clear with clear signals, who are called by their last name, who distinguish themselves from their employees in habitus, language and clothing, and who also grumble once in a while when things do not go as they should.

No matter how a superior behaves towards his employees, he still has to fulfil his role function. Therefore, it is not always helpful when superiors/supervisors behave like colleagues. Under certain conditions, a lack of hierarchy even creates role diffusion and misunderstandings among employees and can lead to employees ending up being horrified when the supervisor does behave according to his role in some situation.

So, if someone is unexpectedly called to a supervisor meeting and experiences a momentary feeling of trepidation and thinks of potential problems or, for example, “Have I done something wrong?”, this is not initially a pathological reaction. In analogy to the strategies described above for checking fears, one can ask oneself whether one might already have an idea of what the superior/supervisor might want. You can also ask yourself how often you have already talked to him and how often it was about simple, factual, everyday things. It becomes problematic if you often and excessively go into such a conversation with anxiety, and if the fear is so strong that it impairs your ability to act.

It may also help to get some basic ideas about the superior/supervisor and thus prepare yourself for what is coming up.

- Superiors/supervisors have a role to fulfil that contains threat potential. They must control work processes and results, give instructions, and monitor compliance, and also impose sanctions, if necessary.
- It is normal to feel tense towards the superior/supervisor sometimes.
- There are bad and good superior/supervisor. You can be lucky or unlucky with a superior. In the rarest of cases, you can change him or her.
- Superiors/supervisors usually have superiors too. They may feel the same way about them as you feel about your superior.
- Superiors/supervisors are human too. They have sensitivities like all people, sometimes they are in a good mood and sometimes they are not. They put their pants on one leg at a time like any ordinary person.
- Who am I dealing with? (He’s always getting upset, but he doesn’t mean it. He says one thing today and another thing tomorrow, so we’ll

have to wait and see. My boss is objective. You can talk to him, etc.).

1.4 „Don’t worry” – Worries and Problems in Daily Working Life

You can worry about many everyday things at work. Sometimes you may worry too much. One indication of this is when colleagues or family repeatedly tell you that you shouldn’t worry so much about work.

If this is the case, you should check whether you are particularly careful, conscientious and precise in carrying out and planning your work, compared to other colleagues. Is there a tendency to think further ahead than others and to recognize in advance any minor or major disasters that may occur in everyday work and to take immediate action to prevent the disasters from occurring? Do you feel stressed throughout? Does one struggle with many more “problems” during the working day than colleagues who have similar or the same work tasks? Being far-sighted and actively taking care of the important things is good, because then you can actually prevent many disasters. However, there is also the danger that if you are very practiced at it, you will also worry too much at some point. How often does it happen that you have worried about things that in the end have taken a completely different outcome than feared or expected – whether positive or negative? In the end, it’s not about “not worrying”, but about “not worrying when the worries turn out to be unnecessary in the end”.

Whether one worries too much or not can be checked by how accurate the predictions are: For what percentage of the worries and “problems thought through” during the day does a threat actually occur that needs to be averted? The question also arises as to whether it is at all possible to safeguard all things in everyday life one hundred percent? Of course, one should not become negligent in one’s work tasks. However, a little more composure at the right time could also help you to feel more balanced, fresher, and less easily exhausted in your everyday working life. If you can take your mind off your work problems after work and enjoy your free time, this is an important contribution to being able to start the next day fresh and motivated, without having spent the night thinking about what problems you might encounter.

If you come to the conclusion that your worries are excessively frequent and intense, then you have to learn not to worry too much about everything. But this is not so easy, because you have always done it this way and your worrying is thus well practiced.

First of all, you should take stock and write down the typical everyday worries about work. This should then be sorted into important problems and more trivial everyday problems. It is amazing how diverse the range of worries can be. It

is often less about concrete content, but rather that “so many worries and catastrophic thoughts” arise in the mind, regardless of what is at hand.

Nevertheless, it is possible to relieve worries to a certain extent. You should observe what your own “favorite worries” are. Then you are forewarned. You don’t have to believe yourself immediately when you think of the worst again. You have to learn to recognize when the “worry machinery” is starting up. The goal is to interrupt it as early as possible, for example with an inner stop signal. In a second step, you should then counter the catastrophic thoughts that take on a life of their own with other neutral or positive realistic thoughts. You can learn to do this, but first you really have to “search” for alternative thoughts. If necessary, you can ask your family, friends, or colleagues what they think about the issue when you realize your brain is starting a cascade of worries on this issue.

You should always bear in mind that it is not a matter of talking yourself into a better world without work problems. It is only a matter of bringing one’s foresighted and far-sighted behavior to a level that allows one to go about one’s daily life in a balanced mood and without permanent stress. Life is “life-threatening” and there is always a “residual risk”, even when you are lying in bed or just crossing the street, no matter how hard you try to protect yourself. You have to learn to live with the residual risk, and you will be living a bit more relaxed.

2 Healthy Life Style and Meaning of Work

In addition to the concrete management of anxiety symptoms and worries, a generally healthy lifestyle is helpful. Regular sport and physical exercise make people more psychologically resilient. Sport is also distracting. While exercising, there is no room for “thoughts of anxiety”. Sport can give you a new feeling for your own ability. Sport was proven to be an excellent way to reduce stress.

You should make sure that you get enough sleep. If you don’t get enough sleep, your biorhythm is no longer in balance. This makes the body more susceptible to stress and panic reactions.

It is advisable not to smoke, drink little coffee, tea, and alcohol. Pleasure poisons have the property of influencing our circulatory system and increasing the risk for panic attacks.

It is also important to pay attention to a balanced diet. Too many sweets can increase panic through their biochemical effect without you noticing it. Eating too little food can lead to hypoglycaemia. Symptoms such as dizziness, racing heart, sweating or shaky legs are the result. These are the same symptoms that one also feels during a panic attack.

It is almost a banality that it is impossible to feel anxiety in a relaxed state. Thus, there is noth-

ing wrong with relaxation training. Progressive muscle relaxation, breathing meditation, autogenic training and many more are well effective. However, only if you practise, you will feel an effect. Therefore: practice, practice, practice! You shouldn’t be put off by the fact that you can’t relax at first when you try, but become more restless. This just shows how much you need it. You should keep practicing.

An important message is that life “consists of work” to a considerable extent, but not completely. Accordingly, work should not be the only “mainstay” in life. It is important to find a healthy balance between family, friends, and leisure time, to cultivate hobbies and contacts and to see work as a necessity in life, for being able to enjoy other pleasant things. A certain distance from work helps to emotionally distance oneself from events at work even in times of conflict and to be able to distract oneself from them.

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Statements

Scientifically tested

The principles for anxiety coping which are described in the text are based on broad and year-long practical and scientific experiences (see literature) and have been tested in a therapy study for 345 patients with different work anxiety problems. The work-oriented cognitive behavioral coping program leads to strengthened work coping in comparison to a recreation program (Muschalla, 2016, 2017, 2019).

Translation

This brochure is an English translation of an earlier brochure published in German language, as a supplement to the book Muschalla & Linden (2013).