

## Reducing Stress and Anxiety in Uncertain Times

**A**re sales and other financial matters important in your workplace? Of course. Every company or other organization needs a certain amount of cash coming in to stay in business. Efficiency? You bet. In today's competitive global marketplace, inadequate service and products tend to drive customers elsewhere — another ticket to disaster. However, managing excessive, chronic anxiety *should* be your organization's number-one priority, according to Jeffrey Miller, a noted business consultant and trainer.

Why? Because too much stress and anxiety cause employees to operate on emotions rather than principles, asserts Miller, author of *The Anxious Organization, 2nd Edition: Why Smart Companies Do Dumb Things*, \$19.95, Facts on Demand Press. "When people stay in low-grade panic mode, they no longer think clearly, creatively, and flexibly," Miller says. "They make irrational decisions. When irrational decisions start adding up, the company isn't long for this world."

Do *you* work for an overly anxious organization? Miller's list of 10 telltale signs will help you find out. Ask Brown Bag participants to truthfully answer the following questions:

1. Do people take sides with other *people* instead of taking stands on *issues*? Do they form coalitions and/or cliques?
2. Do people assert their territory to the detriment of the organization as a whole? Are feuding, back-stabbing, and turf wars a way of life?
3. Do work groups tend to come to rapid agreement, with very little discussion or dissent?
4. Do particular individuals or departments tend to be blamed consistently for organizational problems?
5. Is there a problem with disruptive employee turnover? Put another way, are people constantly quitting due to job stress or dissatisfaction with the organization?
6. When conflicts and problems arise, are people urged to show more "team spirit"?

7. Does leadership send out conflicting instructions and mixed messages? Are organizational objectives contradictory or unclear?
8. Do people tend to avoid conflict by avoiding each other altogether? Do they hide out in their offices or cubicles, neglect to return phone calls, etc?
9. Is "improved communication" considered the solution to all problems and conflicts rather than making decisions that are based on solid principles?
10. Is high productivity emphasized as the key to organizational well-being? Do you get the feeling that people are overworked?

If the answer to most of these questions was an emphatic *yes*, you are probably dealing with a level of anxiety that's too high to be healthy — for employees *or* for the company itself.

"Anxiety, like anything else in life, is best in moderation," Miller says. "*Some* anxiety in the workplace is normal and even desirable. If there were no anxiety at all, no work would ever get done. But when the pendulum swings too far in the other direction, all sorts of counterproductive things can happen. Not only do employees get burned out, the organization tends to make a lot of bad business decisions that threaten its long-term survival."

Furthermore, anxiety is contagious. Here's how it affects your company:

- ✓ In order to relieve your anxiety, you unwittingly pass it on to a co-worker;
- ✓ He or she passes it on to someone else; and
- ✓ This person passes it along to *yet another* employee.

Before you know it, the entire organization is trapped in a cycle of anxiety that seems to have no clear starting point. And all the while, the underlying cause goes unaddressed.

"What happens next is rarely pretty," Miller explains. "Perhaps...employees can't take the stress any longer and start leaving the company. A very

common scenario is one where people are fired to ‘solve the problem,’ which only reappears later with the new employee because the *system* that caused the problem hasn’t really changed.”

## Breaking the Destructive Cycle of Anxiety

Dismal as this scenario sounds, there *is* some good news. Rather than accepting out-of-control anxiety as a way of life in today’s uncertain economic climate, Miller offers the following suggestions to relieve the level of anxiety in *your* workplace:

➤ **Strive to be a predictable leader:** The least stressful companies to work for are those in which officially stated goals, values, procedures, job responsibilities, etc., is a fairly accurate description of what actually transpires in an average workday. What the leaders of these companies have in common is their predictability. If you want to guess what the leader will do in a given situation, check out the company’s mission statement, objectives, policy manual, etc. The leader’s behavior will likely be consistent with the organization’s structure.

However, when there is a conflict between an organization’s operations *and* the personalities of those in charge, emotions will generally prevail. For instance, employees will tend to ignore policies and procedures if they are rewarded for doing something different.

➤ **Calm yourself with a six-second vacation:** When you are in a situation that makes you feel anxious, you must distance yourself from it so you can think clearly. If you are in the middle of a meeting, conversation, or other incident that’s escalating anxiety, try taking a six-second vacation:

- ✓ Inhale for two seconds;
- ✓ Exhale for two seconds; and
- ✓ Do NOTHING for two seconds.

➤ **Correct an overfunctioning/underfunctioning relationship:** *Overfunctioners* take over responsibilities that belong to another person. *Underfunctioners* allow this to happen. It’s a reciprocal relationship — neither can exist without the other — and both parties are reacting to anxiety. Needless to say, too much of this type of behavior is

unhealthy for both people and for the organization as a whole.

“Fortunately, either party can break the cycle...” Miller says. “If you are an overfunctioner, realize that you are NOT responsible for someone else’s success or failure. You cannot do the job *for* the individual, even if this person is a subordinate. If the individual fails, then he/she fails (although he/she probably won’t).

“On the other hand, if you are the underfunctioner in the relationship, recognize that your long-term passive approach serves to maintain the other person’s overfunctioning behaviors (micromanaging, controlling, etc),” he adds. “Be clear on *your* responsibilities and take actions that will reverse this tendency.” (**Editor’s note:** For more information on assertive problem solving and effective conflict management, see the May 2009 *Brown Bagger*, “Tips to Make Conflict Work, not Hurt.”)

➤ **Don’t overlook the effect a single individual can have:** Because anxiety is complex, many companies need professional help (such as the EAP) in identifying its many variations and sorting out its root causes. But don’t despair — when even a single worker makes an effort to rise above his/her own anxiety, a “ripple effect” can start that’ll transform an entire organization.

“Because everyone in an organization is connected, you can’t change your own behavior without changing the entire system,” Miller states. “...Sometimes these changes are subtle — sometimes they’re profound. For example, I had one client who learned to manage his own anxiety and as a result, averted a strike, saved his company \$6 million, and earned a major promotion.

“Taking responsibility for yourself — giving up the need to blame or control others — actually requires a tremendous amount of courage,” Miller adds. “That’s the stuff leaders are made of. And when enough people are able to manage their anxiety and find this level of courage, well, that’s the formula for a stunningly successful organization.”

## Leave Your Stressed-out Life Behind

While the shaky stock market and job layoffs have many people anxious and stressed-out, an overlooked fact is that many people were just as stressed *before* the economy collapsed, according to James Looram, a noted consultant and trainer. The key, Looram states, is to take steps to alleviate stress



now, as opposed to assuming that personal stress will fade, “*once this economic upheaval levels off.*”

Thinking like this misses the point. What if the economy started rebounding *tomorrow*, but the day after that you or your spouse got in a bad car accident...or you found out you or your spouse has cancer. Would you be any less stressed? Probably not. Consequently, Looram, author of *Your Essential Self*, \$14.95, Frederick Fell Publishers, suggests taking the plunge now toward leading a less-stressed life. His recommendations include the following:

➤ **Try a little soul-searching:** Many people are in need of a “life revival,” and a recession is a good time to do just that, according to Looram. “...America is already in an introspective mood,” Looram notes. “We’ve just elected a new president — we’ve clamped down on mindless spending. As a nation we seem to realize the old ways aren’t working anymore. Why can’t we take that a step further and [recognize that] as individuals?”

*What truly enthuses you? Are you doing the work you feel you were meant to do?* Unemployment can actually turn out to be blessing in which people eventually find work they’re much happier at. If you’re fortunate enough to be working but can’t quit your day job (especially in this economy), it’s still possible to revitalize your life. Determine what you really love doing and incorporate it into your daily life.

“If you discover your passion is in caring for animals, start volunteering each weekend at a local humane society,” Looram suggests. “By folding your passion into your life, you will find that you can enjoy other things more and you will be rejuvenated in every way.”

➤ **Give your priorities the attention they deserve:** Continue the soul-searching journey by asking yourself some tough questions, such as, “*What is most important to me in life?*” “*What values do I embrace the most?*” When you learn to focus on what is truly important, you can expend more energy on the other aspects of your life.

“The manager who focuses time on truly developing a relationship with his daughter will find that it gets easier to focus on work demands because there is no longer the distraction of an unhealthy relationship at home,” Looram says. Conversely, he adds that the manager who becomes re-energized by

finding his/her niche at work becomes more fulfilled and better focused on his/her family at home.

➤ **Stop trying to do it all:** Advancements in technology have made it possible to work from virtually anywhere, which means that many businesspeople work on their vacations and after their kids go to bed at night. And remember, behavior like this was most likely going on *before* the recession! “Everyone tries to do it all in order to get ahead, but what happens most often is we look back and realize we have accomplished nothing,” Looram asserts.

For instance, Looram questions if a work project or pay raise was worth trying to explain to your daughter why you missed yet *another* soccer game. “What I ask you to do is to focus on one true path for you and cut out what just doesn’t fit,” Looram recommends. “...When you are able to focus on your essential self, everything else falls into place.”

➤ **Learn to accept others:** Perhaps you allow that irritating person at the office to ruin your fun at the company picnic — or you let a parent that gets under your skin distract you from enjoying your son’s performance in a school play. Notice the crucial words “allow” and “let.” You can’t control someone else’s behavior and actions, but you *can* choose to “let things go” — or allow him/her to “get to you.” Which will it be?

Second, you probably haven’t accepted what makes the two of you different. “At least once a day, try to see the world through another person’s eyes,” Looram suggests. “Once you accept that there are personality differences..., it can be easier for you to find the common ground on which you can work together.” (**Editor’s note:** For more stress-reduction tips, see the handout section on page 4.)

## Summary

Being stressed-out and/or overly anxious is all too common. However, while it’s true there are many things in life we can’t control — take the necessary steps, such as the suggestions presented in this article, to alleviate the ones that you *can*. The reduced stress and anxiety will be worth it — for you, your family, and your workplace. ■

*For more information on Miller or his book, visit [www.anxiousorg.com](http://www.anxiousorg.com). To find out more about Looram or his book, visit [www.looram.com](http://www.looram.com) or [www.fellpub.com](http://www.fellpub.com).*



## Try These Tips for Managing Stress

- ❖ Identify what's making you feel stressed, and then focus on what you *can* control. While some things might be out of your control, it can be emotionally uplifting when you take action to fix something that you *can* control.
- ❖ If your company offers an EAP, use it. It's free and confidential. An EAP counselor can help you cope with stress and can direct you to resources for managing financial, legal, and many other issues.
- ❖ Talk to your boss about issues such as workload. Explain that you want to do a good job. Set priorities and establish goals that are fair and achievable.
- ❖ Talk to your friends and family about what you're feeling. There's no shame in admitting that you're feeling overwhelmed or stressed. Sometimes just having a conversation with someone you trust can take a huge weight off your shoulders.
- ❖ Slow down and simplify your life. You can't do everything, so allow yourself to say "no" sometimes. Don't overextend yourself. Set realistic expectations as well. Don't make your "to do" list so long that you can't see the light at the end of the tunnel. It's better to set three realistic goals you can attain as opposed to a list of 10 that is unrealistic and overwhelming.
- ❖ Get some exercise. Not only is it good for your body, it's a great way to maintain energy and reduce stress.
- ❖ Don't get caught up in "gloom and doom" discussions around the water cooler. Focus on what's positive in your life. When you feel negative thoughts creeping in, try jotting down five things you are thankful for. You will most likely be able to come up with more than five, and it will instantly change your mindset and mood.
- ❖ Take care of yourself. Take time out to do the things you like to do, whether that's shopping, taking a walk in the woods, or going to a movie.

Sources: CIGNA ([www.cigna.com](http://www.cigna.com)).