The Facilitative Role of Workplace Anxiety in Increasing Motivation and Preparation Fueled by Self-Regulation

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The Facilitative Role of Workplace Anxiety in Increasing Motivation and Preparation

Fueled by Self-Regulation

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PSYCH 307: Writing Within Psychology
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April 5, 2023
Abstract

As anxiety in the workplace continues to affect a substantial percentage of employees, an understanding of the facilitative aspects of anxiety may become increasingly relevant (American Psychological Association, 2009, as cited in Cheng & McCarthy, 2018). Anxiety in the workplace is generally disadvantageous, but significant evidence supports the idea that anxiety may benefit employees in various ways (Chandra et al., 2020). Notably, anxious feelings may spark increased motivation within employees, unlocking a greater focus on future goals (Spielberger, 1985, as cited in Cheng & McCarthy, 2018). In pursuit of these goals, anxious employees may find a greater capacity for self-regulation, a focused mindset where self-control and task engagement can crowd out impulse and distraction (Prem et al., 2016). Anxious employees in a self-regulatory state may create more thorough plans, which allow them to eliminate future stress by making tangible progress towards their goals (Norem, 2007). These positive effects of anxiety can elevate anxious employees’ potential in a meaningful way. Thus, employees should seek to become familiar with these positive effects and how they can be magnified in the workplace.

Keywords: anxiety, motivation, preparation, self-regulation, workplace
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According to research from the American Psychological Association (APA, 2009), and as depicted in Figure 1, 40% of Americans experience anxiety during work (as cited in Cheng & McCarthy, 2018). To many, this may be a daunting statistic. When one thinks about anxiety in the workplace, they may envision dread before a deadline, fidgeting and shallow breathing at a job interview, or a coworker who overanalyzes every aspect of a presentation. Anxiety has developed a reputation for being burdensome and undesirable. Over the years, scientific findings have largely supported public sentiment. As employees with anxiety represent a significant portion of the workforce, researchers have devoted a great deal of time and effort to understanding the relationship between anxiety and job performance. Throughout decades of research, psychologists have consistently supported the conclusion that, overall, anxiety is detrimental to job performance (Chandra et al., 2020). This evidence bolsters the popular generalization that anxiety is negative and only serves to make life more difficult. However, discussing a highly complicated phenomena such as anxiety in terms of absolutes could be considered an intellectually incomplete approach.

A more holistic perspective may involve recognition that the relationship between anxiety and work outcomes is inherently nuanced. In fact, research suggests that the 40% of Americans, cited above, who admit to feeling anxious at work may be better off than they realize. In line with the complex reality of anxiety, research has consistently demonstrated that anxiety can have positive effects as well as negative ones. Cheng and McCarthy (2018) highlighted both negative and positive effects, with the negative frequently outshining the positive. This dichotomy of benefits and detriments often results in an interesting challenge for
employers seeking to understand their anxious team (Cheng & McCarthy, 2018). Given that people are generally more familiar with the negative aspects of anxiety, it may be advisable to work towards a comparable level of familiarity with the facilitative effects of anxiety. While considering both sides of the anxiety pendulum may seem like a balanced approach, highlighting the positive side of anxiety may still be seen as quite novel, despite growing evidence that anxiety can boost performance.

Perhaps unsurprisingly from this perspective, research suggests that anxiety prompts increased motivation towards one’s goals. Motivation can be a natural human response towards the feelings of threat and worry associated with anxiety (Elliot & McGregor, 1999; Eysenck & Derakshan, 2011). In this way, the purportedly negative effects of anxiety—feelings of stress and worry—can be transformed into positive habits. Those who experience feelings of anxiety at work tend to both hold themselves to a high standard and have the innate drive necessary to meet that standard (Mellifont, 2019). These findings suggest that the extra surge of motivation that anxious employees can experience may serve to support other positive effects of anxiety.

One of anxiety’s most important facilitative outcomes is increased self-regulation, along with its many ripple effects. A natural human response to anxious feelings, self-regulation is an increased effort towards task engagement, goal setting, and self-control (Cheng & McCarthy, 2018). Many of the behaviors that stem from self-regulation are thought to be inherently conducive to high levels of performance—especially thorough preparation. According to Norem (2007), preparation appeared to be an innate and reflexive coping strategy that allowed anxious employees to minimize future worry and perceived threat. Working toward defined goals with clear checkpoints helps to mitigate anxiety (Norem, 2007). It may also help businesses thrive, as companies are generally more likely to achieve long-term goals when they have a detailed
strategic plan. Thus, resisting the urge to overlook job candidates with anxious tendencies may allow employers to find talent in somewhat unexpected places. When businesses actively seek to accommodate employees with anxiety, they can allow these employees to unlock a more conscientious version of themselves (Chandra et al., 2020). Hence, preparation fueled by self-regulation, along with motivation, are notable standouts among the plethora of benefits from anxiety in the workplace.

As increasing amounts of research highlight the facilitative effects of anxiety, employers and psychologists alike seek to better help anxious individuals maintain a healthy balance. With regard to anxiety, determining where the negative ends and the positive begins is generally far from straightforward. However, understanding the positive effects of anxiety appears to be an essential first step. Although anxiety is generally considered to be a hindrance for employees seeking success in the workplace, employers should recognize that anxiety can enhance job performance because it can spark increased motivation, greater self-regulation, and thorough preparation.

**Increased Motivation**

Throughout the years, psychologists have gathered a substantial body of evidence to suggest that experiencing anxiety can increase motivation. Spielberger (1985) characterized workplace anxiety as an unpleasant sensation that naturally motivates employees to meet their goals, thereby reducing anxious feelings by negating the stress of perceived underachievement (as cited in Cheng & McCarthy, 2018). This idea is exemplified in a study by Mughal et al. (1996) in which researchers examined the relationship between anxiety and sales performance. In this study of 75 sales consultants, researchers found that anxious consultants were driven to put forth greater effort than their non-anxious counterparts. Notably, researchers found that
anxious sales consultants were also more efficient than non-anxious sales consultants, suggesting that anxiety can increase both motivation and efficacy (Mughal et al., 1996). Hence, the unpleasant effects of anxiety, when channeled properly, may provide the spark that employees need to take their performance to the next level. In a business environment in which managers are consistently seeking new ways to motivate their team, these findings suggest that employers may do well to reconsider the pervasive stigma surrounding anxiety in the workplace. While the motivational aspect of anxiety may be a somewhat new idea for many, research supporting its effects is well-established.

A closer look of the inner workings of anxiety shows that anxiety’s innate nature can be conducive to motivation. Anxiety may increase motivation by its natural tendency to trigger a heightened awareness of and response to threats in one’s environment. This tendency has been found to have deep roots in human nature, as psychologists have found that anxiety may serve important purposes from an evolutionary perspective. According to Bateson et al. (2011), anxiety may prompt an increased awareness of threats in one’s environment, often leading to a more vigilant response. In a business context, these threats may be perceived distance between an employee’s current progress and some sort of goal. Carver and Scheier (2011) found that anxious feelings can send powerful signals to people when there is a gap between their ideal progress towards a goal and their current progress. In line with the evolutionary response found by Bateson et al. (2011), these signals stimulated a more diligent and focused effort towards a goal. Thus, the nature of anxiety may cause anxious employees to be hyper-vigilant of their progress towards work objectives, resulting in elevated levels of motivation. Employees are generally already coded with instinctive defense mechanisms to counter inefficiency, which may allow anxiety to prompt productive behaviors.
To increase motivation, anxiety may need to be kept at manageable levels. Dr. Josh Savage, the director of organizational development at Intel, explained that in the context of employees experiencing anxiety during a major transition, “if the anxiety is managed well … that anxiety is precisely the energy they need to move into a new future” (personal communication, February 21, 2023). Cheng and McCarthy (2018) expressed a similar sentiment, noting that moderate levels of anxiety pushed employees to proper levels of awareness and drive to accomplish future plans, whereas high and low levels of anxiety led to deficiencies in this area. If employers have a vested interest in both the performance and well-being of their team, it may be prudent for them to carefully monitor the anxiety levels of individual employees. Anxious employees may hold themselves to an abnormally high standard, which can lead to undesirable consequences such as burnout (Mellifont, 2019). Thus, striking the right balance regarding anxious employees can enable them to act under a healthy level of anxiety while avoiding burnout, which may lead to enhanced performance.

**Greater Self-Regulation**

Anxious feelings have been found to strengthen self-regulation, a state that can enhance work performance in many areas. Prem et al. (2016) observed that anxiety led to drastic increases in self-regulatory behaviors, including greater self-restraint, task engagement, and meticulousness. These behaviors can even supersede negative habits, as researchers found that self-regulatory behaviors in anxious employees can offset shortcomings in other areas such as motivation. Thus, anxiety can help employees engage in productive work habits that may not be part of their normal routine. These productive work habits, often driven by a strong sense of self-regulation, can serve as an innate coping mechanism for employees to avoid anxious feelings (Norem, 2007; Prem et al., 2016). The habits that flow from increased self-regulation may be
naturally conducive to achieving work goals, which in turn can decrease workplace anxiety. Thus, employees may find that their brain’s natural response to anxiety can induce a state of increased self-control and productivity.

Anxiety can lead employees to experience increased self-regulation by shifting their mindset to be more goal oriented. Xu et al. (2016) described this phenomena by comparing it to a thermometer. They explained that just as one checks their thermometer to learn the difference between one’s desired temperature and what the weather is really like, anxiety may prompt employees to check the difference between a goal and their actual progress toward that goal (Xu et al., 2016). Thus, an extra surge of anxiety can contribute to employees being more conscious of personal deficits and doing what is necessary to compensate for those deficits. This awareness of personal deficits is thus thought to stem from anxiety’s natural tendency to prompt increased perception of threats in one’s environment; at its core, anxiety may contribute to people perceiving situations as threatening. Some researchers suggest that these perceptions can drive anxious individuals to action when others may not be as assertive (Cheng & McCarthy, 2018; Elliot & McGregor, 1999). Hence, anxious employees may see unresolved issues, such as an impending deadline or an incomplete project, as more than a somewhat minor difficulty inherent in their job; they may perceive these issues as active threats, prompting them to enter a self-regulatory state. In this way, anxiety may infuse employees with a strong sense of self-control in pursuit of goals.

The perception of and response to threats inherent in self-regulation can mitigate the effects of procrastination, which may be a common obstacle to workplace productivity. Xu et al. (2016) conducted a study of Chinese and American students that demonstrated the ability of self-regulation, sparked by anxiety, to counteract the temptation to procrastinate. Subjects were
allotted a period of 12 minutes and told that they could either study for an upcoming exam or entertain themselves however they pleased. Afterwards, some students were induced into an anxious state and others maintained low anxiety levels. Students with high anxiety levels were significantly more likely to study than students with low anxiety levels, who generally chose to preoccupy themselves in other ways such as watching videos on their phones (Xu et al., 2016). On one level, these findings are significant because they support the idea that anxiety increases arousal (Gray, 1987 as cited in Cheng & McCarthy, 2018). On another level, these findings are even more significant because they support the idea that anxiety not only increases arousal, but that anxiety-induced arousal can translate into concrete efforts toward a goal. Employees with anxiety may reflexively enter a self-regulatory mindset, which can serve as a potent weapon against procrastination.

**Thorough Preparation**

As employees experience anxiety-fueled self-regulation and its associated side effects, they may have an increased propensity for planning. Norem and Chang (2002) found that employees with anxiety are more likely to set challenging long-term goals and be intentional about organizing specific plans to achieve them. Thus, these findings can serve to further prove the point that anxiety may not solely prompt employees to gauge their progress towards practical goals but also take appropriate action towards those goals. Regardless of how ambitious these goals may be, anxiety-driven preparation can go beyond the immediate future to spark long-term, thorough plans that consider a wide range of possible outcomes (Carver et al., 2008). In other words, anxiety may prompt employees to reach beyond their usual capacity to create thorough plans. Hence, anxious employees may access previously untapped assistance in both choosing to plan in the first place and making those plans effective.
To mitigate the negative feelings associated with anxiety, employees may adopt a mental state that is conducive to thorough planning. According to Norem (2007), planning is an innate and reflexive coping strategy that allows anxious employees to minimize future worry and perceived threat. As discussed earlier, anxiety may increase employees’ inclination towards perceiving the distance between their progress and a desired goal as a potential threat. This perception can become constructive, as employees may cope by creating thorough plans to minimize potential failure. This type of planning may thrive in a self-regulatory state of mind facilitated by anxiety. Carver et al. (2008) observed that anxiety may contribute to a decision-making mindset that is patient and deliberate. Employees with this mindset may be more likely to consider alternative possibilities, weigh the costs and benefits of decisions, and avoid basing their decisions on impulse or mood swings (Carver et al., 2008). Hence, perhaps somewhat ironically considering popular perception of anxiety, anxiety can induce employees into a calm decision-making state, resulting in high-quality planning that resists reactivity. Thus, although experiencing anxious feelings can be somewhat unpleasant, employees may naturally respond to these feelings with enhanced planning folded into a more deliberative mental state.

For those who experience workplace anxiety, thorough planning may also be associated with another coping mechanism called defensive pessimism. Norem (2007) described defensive pessimism as a coping strategy in which anxious people play out every possible outcome in their minds and set their expectations low for a given situation. In a business context, employees who practice defensive pessimism consider every way that a project could go wrong and plan to avoid those negative outcomes. Employers may assume that a mindset that focuses on negative possibilities will cause employees to become discouraged, thereby falling behind employees who they may consider more optimistic. This assumption may seem logical, but Norem and
Burdzovic (2007, as cited in Norem, 2007) found evidence to suggest that anxious people, who may tend to have lower base levels of self-esteem than non-anxious people, grew exponentially in self-esteem as they consistently practiced defensive pessimism, eventually attaining self-esteem levels comparable to non-anxious people. Furthermore, when one compares defensive pessimists with anxious people who do not use that strategy, the defensive pessimists have been found to be better off in almost all categories, ranging from performance to self-esteem (Norem, 2007). In sum, anxious employees who use defensive pessimism to cope may perform better than other anxious employees and attain levels of self-esteem comparable to non-anxious employees. Defensive pessimism constitutes a common response to anxiety that can facilitate painstakingly meticulous planning, which may elevate performance levels.

**Conclusion**

Anxiety can be a challenging condition, as the 40% of Americans who experience anxiety at work can likely attest (APA, 2009, as cited in Cheng & McCarthy, 2018). People may generally associate anxiety with negative perceptions and experiences, especially in the workplace—an environment that may already include a plethora of unique stresses and challenges. Anxiety can be a complicated phenomenon and the workplace can be a complicated setting. Accordingly, studies of anxiety in the workplace have also been found to be somewhat complicated. Findings largely seem to support the negative assumptions that commonly surround anxiety, warranting some level of discouragement from employees seeking to overcome the effects of their anxiety. However, employees who wrestle with anxiety may have substantial reason to hope for more than merely surviving their condition.

Psychologists have largely regarded anxiety in the workplace as a detriment to employee performance, but emerging evidence throughout the years has supported the idea that anxiety
may have various facilitative effects. In an exhaustive review of news texts, journal articles, and other studies, Mellifont (2019) concluded that although the positive effects of anxiety have largely evaded acknowledgement in the public eye, considerable numbers of people recognize ways that anxiety aids personal performance in a variety of areas. Hence, real people with workplace anxiety may experience emotions and side effects across a wide spectrum rather than within defined limits. Some of the side effects across this spectrum may even be quite positive.

In harmony with these findings, the ever-evolving body of research examining anxiety points to several benefits in the workplace, including boosts of motivation, elevated self-regulation, and more careful planning.

When their anxiety is properly managed, anxious employees may feel threatened by incomplete goals and experience increased motivation. Carver and Scheier (2011) explained that anxiety may lead people to become increasingly aware of deficits between their desired outcome and their current progress. Anxiety may spark employees to close that gap and redouble their efforts to achieve their goals (Carver & Scheier, 2011). However, for anxiety to become a motivating force, anxiety may need to be kept at moderate levels. Cheng and McCarthy (2018) observed that moderate levels of anxiety, as opposed to high or low levels, were ideal for pushing employees towards peak performance. While the role that managers play in monitoring employees’ health may be somewhat unclear at times, these findings suggest that investing in the mental health of anxious employees may magnify the positive effects of these employees’ anxiety. With the tools that they need to succeed, anxious employees can tap into a greater capacity for motivation.

Employees’ anxious feelings may induce them into a self-regulatory state, allowing them to exercise greater self-control and prepare more thoroughly. Prem et al. (2016) found that
anxiety may be associated with increased self-regulatory behaviors. These behaviors may be linked to an anxiety-driven mindset that constantly measures the distance between an individual’s current progress and their desired goal (Xu et al., 2016). Awareness of this distance can naturally drive employees toward more thorough planning. Norem and Chang (2001) observed that anxious employees tend to excel in preparation, creating detail-oriented plans that extend far into the future. According to Carver et al. (2008) and Norem (2007), an anxiety-driven deliberative mindset and defensive pessimism may be two explanations for anxious employees’ inclination towards meticulous planning. With a variety of coping mechanisms that may feed into productive behaviors, employees who grapple with anxiety can access higher levels of both self-regulatory behaviors and preparation.

In light of growing evidentiary support for various benefits of workplace anxiety, it may be reasonable for employers to invest in a more holistic understanding of their anxious employees. While literature on the positive effects of anxiety in the workplace is currently somewhat limited, research revealing positive aspects of anxiety can provide a glimmer of hope for those who may feel limited by their anxious feelings. Anxious people, who can already find the demands of everyday life moderately challenging, may view the competitive and somewhat volatile nature of the business world as rather intimidating. As with all disciplines and professional settings, businesses can benefit from the wide variety of experiences and insights that anxious people offer. In fact, as the aforementioned findings indicate, anxious employees may even bring distinctive skills to the table that can elevate businesses toward their goals. In order to enable their anxious employees to harness the most productive version of themselves, it may be important for employers to understand what the benefits of anxiety look like and how to bring about those benefits. Thus, for the benefit of businesses, the public perception of anxiety,
and anxious people themselves who want to succeed in the office, employers should work
towards a reasonable understanding of the facilitative effects of anxiety in the workplace.
References


https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-192950


Appendix

Figure 1

*Anxiety Prevalence Rate among Employees in the U.S.*

*Note.* This infographic depicts the percentage of people in the U.S. that experience anxiety at work. Adapted from APA (2009, as cited in Cheng & McCarthy, 2018).