

WORKING KNOWLEDGE

The Thinking That Leads

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Overcoming Nervous Nelly

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In situations from business negotiations to karaoke, Alison Wood Brooks explores the harmful effects of anxiety on performance—and how to combat them.

by Michael Blanding

A colleague is out sick, and suddenly it's fallen on you to deliver a crucial client presentation. The saliva dries up in your mouth, your heart races. You briefly consider heading home sick yourself, before moving into the conference room to discover your boss has decided to sit in. If you were in danger of failing before, now your anxiety has made failure a foregone conclusion.

We've all experienced the crippling effects of job performance anxiety. But far from being uniquely relegated to nightmare scenarios like the one outlined above, anxiety is a pervasive aspect of office life, says Harvard Business School Assistant Professor Alison Wood Brooks.

IT WAS SURPRISING TO SEE SUCH A DEVIOS TWIST THAT PEOPLE WOULD TAKE ADVANTAGE OF SOMEONE IN AN ANXIOUS STATE”

"People who are perfectly healthy feel anxious many times each day," she says. "Anxiety can be triggered by very small things—for instance, "Did I leave the coffeemaker on this morning?"—by bigger things like meeting with a colleague or a manager, or by very important things like job security or health."

At its core, anxiety is about uncertainty, working us up about something that *might* happen rather than something that has or certainly will happen. "There is the possibility that something bad could happen, and a sense that you don't have control over it," Brooks explains.

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ALISON WOOD BROOKS

Alison Wood Brooks is an assistant professor of business administration in the Negotiation, Organizations & Markets Unit at Harvard Business School.

THE ANXIOUS MIND

While a little bit of anxiety can be good, helping us prepare for difficult events, too much can be debilitating. In a series of experiments, Brooks has more fully examined the landscape of the anxious mind, looking at how it impedes performance in everything from business negotiations to karaoke singing, as well as some surprising ways we can work to limit its sting.

Take negotiations, for instance. In buying a house or a car, a disparity in knowledge can cause purchasers to feel anxious over bargaining for the best price. In the study *Can Nervous Nelly Negotiate? How Anxiety Causes Negotiators to Make Low First Offers, Exit Early, and Earn Less Profit*, Brooks and Maurice E. Schweitzer looked at how that anxiety can change the outcomes of negotiations.

In order to induce anxiety in participants, she asked them to listen to the theme from the horror film *Psycho*; others heard soothing classical music instead. Then she placed them in a mock negotiation over a cellphone contract.

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Following that minor emotion induction, the anxious negotiators made lower initial offers and bartered less favorable prices than the neutral participants. Anxious buyers, for example, ended up with a \$6.60 final profit versus \$7.94 for those who hadn't been exposed to incidental anxiety.

"If we can make people anxious by listening to a short music clip and see how they suffer in mock negotiations, then we can extrapolate the effects of anxiety to the pressures of the real world, where it's likely to have an even more profound effect," says

Nervous energy before public speaking can be useful or incapacitating.

Brooks. In related experiments, she found that in some cases, anxiety caused negotiators to be more likely to leave the bargaining table altogether.

THE WRONG ADVICE

In another study, Brooks and coauthors Schweitzer and Harvard's Francesca Gino considered the effects of anxiety on one possible solution to uncertainty: taking advice from someone else. Again inducing participants by playing scary music or video clips, she found that anxious individuals were much more likely to seek out advice from others when they were asked to estimate the body weights of random people in photographs. Anxious individuals were also more likely to use that advice in making their final estimates: 90 percent of anxious individuals relied on advice compared to 72 percent of the neutral participants.

She also found that anxious individuals were less confident in their own estimates, suggesting that their lower self-confidence had caused them both to reach out for a lifeline and to rely more heavily on the advisor's judgments.

That's not necessarily a bad thing—in fact, it's reassuring to think that people who are unsure of their own judgment might reach out to a knowledgeable advisor. Unfortunately, Brooks also learned that her jittery subjects were less likely to be able to tell the difference between good and bad advice. In another experiment, in which she asked participants to estimate the amount of money in a jar of coins, she found that anxious participants were apt to give equal weight to good advice (estimates that were within \$2 of the actual amount) and to poor advice (extreme estimates that were \$5 or \$10 off the mark). Even more worrisome, she found that advisors took advantage of the anxious guesser's poor judgment by giving bad advice to increase their own profit.

"It was surprising to see such a devious twist that people would take advantage of someone in an anxious state," says Brooks. "Although participants who weren't anxious could see through it, the anxious people could not."

All of these experiments point to the importance of recognizing when we are feeling anxious, in order to protect ourselves from making bad choices that may harm us.

"If people know that everyone feels anxious a lot—including themselves—then they can be more self-aware and able to do things that are likely to improve their decision-making," says Brooks.

IMPROVING PERFORMANCE

In a last set of experiments, she used her own experience to find a surprisingly effective way to use that self-awareness to improve performance.

In college, Brooks was the lead singer of a cover band and sang in an a cappella group. She watched anxiety derail countless auditions of talented performers, but a small number of vocalists seemed to do better when they arrived excited to perform.

RITUALS, THOUGH THEY MAY SEEM IRRATIONAL, ACTUALLY REDUCE ANXIETY AND HAVE A REAL IMPACT ON PERFORMANCE”

That made sense to Brooks. In psychological terms, anxiety is an emotion characterized by both "high arousal" and "negative valence." Common wisdom says that the best way to overcome anxiety is to calm yourself down, creating an emotion with low arousal and positive valence. But enacting a transformation across two axes at once is difficult to achieve. Turning anxiety into excitement, however, only requires a person to switch from a negative to a positive valence, while remaining in a state of high arousal, an easier prospect.

What better way to put this theory to the test than by asking participants to sing karaoke?

In the study, Brooks surprised participants by informing them that they would be publicly singing the first verse of Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'." Instantly, the participants' heart rate monitors shot up. She inserted one important twist: Before performing, she asked participants to repeat a statement out loud. Some were randomly assigned to say "I am excited," while others said, "I am anxious" or "I am calm." That simple reframing device dramatically changed the outcome of their performances.

Measured by voice recognition software that rated pitch, volume, and rhythm, the "I am excited" performers scored an average of 81 percent, while performers who said "I am anxious" notched 69 percent, and those who said "I am calm" gained a miserable 53 percent.

Brooks also repeated the experiment in a venue closer to a business context, but no less anxiety producing: public speaking. She asked participants to give a three-minute presentation explaining why they would be good work colleagues. Those who said they were excited scored higher across measures of persuasiveness, competence, confidence, and persistence compared to those who said they were anxious or those who explicitly tried to calm down.

"When your heart is already racing, you can use that high arousal in a positive way by being energetic, enthusiastic, and passionate," she says. "People's intuition is to try and calm down. You are better off running with your high arousal and channeling it in a positive direction."

In the case of that high-stakes client presentation, Brooks's findings suggest that an employee might perform better after considering the opportunities for success rather than the consequences of failure. Managers, meanwhile, can help subordinates by keeping them focused on the positive.

"In almost every decision, there is risk—there are potential upsides and downsides. Focusing an employee's attention on the potential upsides can make him or her feel more confident and more likely to achieve those positive outcomes."

NEW RESEARCH

Brooks is expanding her work on anxiety to examine other prevalent workplace emotions such as envy and admiration, as well as additional techniques for coping with anxiety, such as applying the elaborate rituals athletes employ before competing to a business context.

"My coauthors and I find that rituals, though they may seem irrational, actually reduce anxiety and have a real impact on performance."

Using techniques like these, employees just may be able to turn the next surprise client presentation from an anxious failure into an excited, passionate, and resounding success. [WK](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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COMMENTS

IBRAHIM TANKO MOHAMMED EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, UNITY BANK PLC. NIGERIA

I am of the opinion that, expected better performance in anticipation of success might be applicable to organizations whose staff are already in high spirits. Organizations characterized by staff with negative attitudes are more likely to be motivated towards better performance by fear of failure if it would be followed with appropriate sanctions. I stand to be corrected. Thank you.

PREMANATHAN DIRECTOR, TIMS, KERALA, INDIA

Silently counting upto ten or clenching one's fist 5 times are rituals that can calm your nerves. We can learn the use of rituals from sports persons. Djocovich at times makes fun of Nadal or Seriena imitating their rituals which are anxiety beaters!

FERGUS MCCLELLAND OWNER, VOCALTRADEMARK

All makes sense to me. I train people to speak and make a lot of speeches myself. I am excited, plain and simple. A part of me is calm as well. There is no anxiety. When people are trained into how to speak effectively and know that they are going to perform well, they do. I hate the idea that you have to be afraid/nervous to give a good speech - that is as crazy as saying you have to be scared to drive a car! Great article, and I will reference it in my trainings, thank you

FRANCIS HILOTINA EMPLOYEE, SAN MIGUEL FOODS INC.

All points here relate to common experience. Anxiety brings both positive and negative impacts to one's health and well-being in every situation. Its effect measured in stress levels varies depending on whether long-term uncertainty persists or short-lived loss of confidence exists in, say, completing a job. This is similar to common work situations, where across the effort spectrum anxiety presents different levels of stress. At one end, work overload is taxing when one sees his inability to sustain job momentum or unable to accomplish his targets. More punishing is the lack of activity often due to uncertainties and absence of feedback that stifle one's urge to move forward. In either case, anxiety comes from the lack of feedback, and as this article suggests, one emerges from it depends on how he freely communicates within his environment.

KAPIL KUMAR SOPORY COMPANY SECRETARY, SMEC(INDIA) PRIVATE LIMITED

Anxiety is an avoidable - eventhough not so at times - human failing. It is aroused through negative thoughts created as a cosequence of feeling fear about something or some event. Also, uncertainty of what is to befall in future. The more one accumulates fear, the more anxious one becomes. Turning towards "Happy Thoughts" is a solution for shifting to peaceful living. Moreover, if one has complete faith that we are always guided by a Superpower (God or whatsoever) and "I'm not the doer", great relief would generally result. Thinking is necessary bur worrying is not for worrying retards proper thinking and appreciation of what is happening around us. Belief in "His Will be done" is a soothing tonic.

PETER

One must not confuse calm with limp. You also must distinguish between long-term development of your capabilities for close combat (e.g. a presentation or negotiation) and making the best out of an ad-hoc situation. Fergus McClelland described in his comment two key elements of the basic state of a master in martial arts going into a fight:

(1) I am excited, plain and simple. (=fighting spirit, you are ready to attack or respond to an attacker) (2) A part of me is calm as well. There is no anxiety. (= when your mind is calm, i.e. free of fear and distracting thoughts, you have the full processing power of your brain and body to deal with the situation at hand extremely fast).

A few thousand hours of meditation help.

You also need to look at the level of stress hormones such as Cortisol. Again, meditation helps.

Some happy people have a natural talent re 1+2 such as the German Chancellor Angela Merkel.