

Workplace anxiety can be good if you harness it to remain motivated and stay on task

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New research on anxiety in the workplace finds that too much worrying about work can hinder an employee's performance, but a moderate dose

can help drive improvement.

"There are a lot of theories and models of [anxiety](#) that exist, but this is the first model situated in the [workplace](#) focusing on employees," says Julie McCarthy, professor of organizational behaviour and human resources management at U of T Scarborough and the Rotman School of Management.

McCarthy, who co-authored the study with her former grad student, Bonnie Hayden Cheng, looked at both the triggers of workplace anxiety and also its relationship to [employee](#) performance.

"If you have too much anxiety, and you're completely consumed by it, then it's going to derail your performance," says McCarthy. "On the other hand, moderate levels of anxiety can facilitate and drive performance."

Cheng, who is now an assistant professor at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, compares it to athletes who are trained to harness anxiety in order to remain motivated and stay on [task](#). If employees are constantly distracted or thinking about things that are causing them anxiety, it will prevent them from completing tasks at work, she adds, leading to exhaustion and burnout.

But, she says, work-anxious employees who are motivated can harness anxiety in order to stay focused on tasks: Those who are emotionally intelligent can recognize their anxiety and use it to regulate their behaviour like monitor progress on a task and focus efforts on performing that task.

"After all, if we have no anxiety, and we just don't care about performance, then we are not going to be motivated to do the job," says Cheng. She adds that those who are experienced and skilled at their job

are also less likely to have anxiety affect their performance.

The model of workplace anxiety Cheng and McCarthy developed is broken down into two categories.

One covers "dispositional" aspects, such as those that align with individual character traits. If someone already experiences high levels of general anxiety for example, their experiences with workplace anxiety will be different from those who don't.

The other covers "situational" aspects, such as those that arise in specific job tasks. Some employees may be more affected by job appraisals, public speaking or other tasks that can distract them and lead to poor performance.

The study, which is published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, also outlines many of the triggers for workplace anxiety. The most prominent include [jobs](#) that require constant expression or suppression of emotion – think "service with a smile" – as well as jobs with constant looming deadlines or frequent organizational change.

Office politics and control over work are other important factors. Employee characteristics including age, gender and job tenure can also affect the experience of workplace anxiety.

The authors note that anxiety is a growing issue for workplaces. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 72 per cent of Americans experience daily anxiety, saying it interferes with their work and personal lives.

While the authors do not condone inducing anxiety in employees to foster high performance, the good news for employees who chronically experience anxiety at work, or who experience it from time to time, is

that it can help performance if they can self-regulate their behaviour.

"Managing anxiety can be done by recognizing and addressing triggers of workplace anxiety, but also being aware of how to leverage it in order to drive [performance](#)," says Cheng.

She says there are many strategies organizations can use to help employees. Some of these include training to help boost self-confidence, offering tools and resources to perform tasks at work, and equipping employees with strategies to recognize, use, and manage feelings of anxiety through emotional intelligence development.

More information: Bonnie Hayden Cheng et al. Understanding the Dark and Bright Sides of Anxiety: A Theory of Workplace Anxiety., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000266](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000266)

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