



# Managing Anxiety and Burnout When the Situation Is Tense

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Calm yourself and the people around you in anxious environments by asking questions that get people thinking instead of worrying.
- Reach out to trusted mentors or other supports you have in life who can help you navigate uncertainty.
- Stop burnout from impacting your results by using optimization techniques and enlisting others.

We all like to imagine ourselves as being calm, cool and collected during life's tense moments. But it's all too easy for anxiety and even panic to rear their ugly heads when we're faced with a sudden crisis at home, at work and even just out in the world at large.

It's no wonder, then, that 78 percent of Americans describe their jobs as stressful and 40 percent report their job is very or extremely stressful, according to the American Institute of Stress.

Of course, sustained levels of heightened anxiety can be bad for our health and bad for our ability to make smart decisions that lead to good outcomes. Fear can cloud our thinking and effectively "turn off" the rational parts of our brains that we need in order to excel in so many areas of life. What's more, when you let your anxiety get the better of you, it can cause those around you—co-workers, your teams or your bosses—to doubt your abilities.

The good news: There are proven techniques and strategies, used by highly successful people in our experience, that can help you deal when tense situations threaten to ramp up your anxiety.

## Tactics for addressing anxiety

Some of these steps can help you get calm fast, right in the moment when you need it. Others can help you build up the resilience you need in order to minimize or eliminate anxiety over time and navigate tense moments with intelligence.

### 1. Slow down.

When a moment of tension or crisis arises, take a breath. If you can, don't react instantly—as an immediate response will likely be a highly emotional, raw reaction instead of one that is carefully considered and both emotionally and intellectually intelligent. Bonus: If you're a boss or leader and people in the moment look to you for guidance, your ability to slow the moment down will benefit you and the team.



### 2. Ask questions.

One way to slow down the moment is to ask intelligent questions of the people around you who are impacted and who will be involved in crafting a solution to the problem. Feverishly throwing around orders and directives will make you look rash, while asking questions will help you seem calm and authoritative at the same time. Questioning will give you time to think clearly and help those around you get focused on facts and information instead of their own worries—potentially “bringing down the temperature” across the entire group or company.

### 3. Be on guard for catastrophic thinking.

In highly charged moments, our minds can want to catastrophize the future—meaning we quickly imagine the absolute worst-case outcome of the current problem. In the moment, refocus on something positive—even if it's something extremely small. Ask yourself as objectively as you can: “Is the absolute worst-case scenario I can think of the most likely outcome here? Is it even 50 percent likely to happen?” Almost always, the answer to those question is a resounding “no.”

**Important:** Another way to sidestep catastrophic thinking is to avoid asking “what if?” in the middle of the tense moment. A job loss or layoff can quickly turn into panic if you “what if?” yourself into thinking about losing your house, for example.

#### 4. Take care of yourself.

This is so obvious but so often overlooked. You'll likely be better able to deal with a crisis and reduce your anxiety if your personal health is in good shape. It's well established that exercise reduces stress hormones, for example. Better health can mean better memory, stronger emotional control and easier self-regulation when the moment is difficult.

**Note:** Don't forget to take care of your brain too. A study by Harvard found that people who engaged in meditation/mindfulness practice daily for eight weeks experienced growth in the hippocampus (the brain's emotion regulator) and a reduction in the brain cell volume in the amygdala—the part of the brain responsible for anxiety and stress.

#### 5. Reach out to a trusted mentor or other support.

Contact someone you respect who you think has experienced challenges similar to the one confronting you. It could be a former co-worker or someone you know who holds a position similar to yours. Advice and insights from someone outside of your current situation who can take a more objective view can help calm you as well as generate ideas you might not have considered.

Don't have a trusted go-to sounding board? Mastermind groups can be excellent resources to help you find other people who share your goals and are willing to work with you toward mutual success.

## Avoiding—and navigating—burnout

One big reason you should learn to better navigate through anxious moments, particularly in work or other environments where you're being called on to get results, is to avoid burnout—the gradual depletion of motivation and of connection with a job or other position.

Although burnout is a term often used by people when they feel “fried,” the best definition we've seen is that burnout is a long-term consequence of aversive working conditions characterized by the simultaneous experience of the symptoms of exhaustion (intensive physical, affective and cognitive strain brought on by prolonged exposure to certain job demands) and cynicism about/disengagement from one's job.

Basically, when we're confronted with high job demands but provided with inadequate job resources, we are at risk of developing burnout. And not surprisingly, those two situations tend to arise during crises and other moments of tension!

With that in mind, consider two strategies from research done in the Netherlands for dealing with diminished availability of time as well as mental and physical energy:

## 1. Focus on daily “recovery.”

Researchers found that taking time to recover from a work environment each day—meaning a person’s functioning returns to its pre-stressor levels—helped significantly to prevent or reduce burnout. The most valuable types of recovery that helped diminish both daily burnout and the risk of burnout over time were:

- Detaching from work—not thinking about work; disengaging from it mentally
- Relaxing—performing actions and activities that require little effort and put few demands on the mind and body
- Engaging in social activities—spending post-work time with others

**Important:** One key is to keep your recovery period as positive as you can. The research found that “whereas talking to family, colleagues or friends about positive emotions is found to have a beneficial impact on vitality at the end of the day, talking about negative issues led to higher levels of exhaustion.”

## 2. Use tactics to keep your performance level high.

Chances are you will feel burned out from time to time—but you still need to perform well and get the job done. That calls for adaptive strategies to avoid the unfavorable effects of burnout on your performance so that you can remain effective—or effective enough—even when your resources are shrinking.

One such adaptive behavior is optimization—improving your use of the resources you have in order to better pursue your goals. A few examples of what that might mean include learning and practicing new procedures, modeling yourself after successful colleagues, and making different choices about how you spend your time while working (see the sidebar below).



Another similar strategy is compensation, which involves using substitute methods to reach your goals and to maintain a certain level of functioning in response to the loss of resources. For example, you can compensate for increases in workload by using external aids—making use of technology to help you, say—or by enlisting colleagues for help.

As one study in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* notes, such strategies have been found to be beneficial for job satisfaction, for subjective and objective job performance, for work ability, and for a focus on opportunities at work.



### Optimizing your time

One way to keep performance levels strong during periods of stress or burnout is to better manage your time when working.

- 1. Prioritize.** The number of time-sucking tasks in our workdays can be enormous. Try focusing on a maximum of three tasks to complete during a single day—and make those tasks the ones that will do the most to push you closer to your goal or desired outcome.
- 2. Align tasks with your energy levels.** Chances are you've noticed that there are certain times of the day when you're extremely productive and other times when you're practically slumped over in your chair. Pay attention to that information; it's your body telling you when your focus is strong and when it's weak. Schedule the hardest and most critical tasks during your strong energy hour or hours—those times when you can work for an hour straight without a break—and leave secondary stuff for blocks of time when you're not at your best.
- 3. Delegate.** The hardest-to-take advice for many people is to delegate tasks that they don't have to do themselves. Always ask yourself what you do best and better than others, then devote your time to those tasks—and farm out everything else you possibly can. The amount of time you spend overseeing and checking in on others you delegate to will almost certainly be less than the time it takes to do it all yourself.

## Conclusion

As the author and poet Rudyard Kipling famously wrote, "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs ... yours is the Earth and everything that's in it." Take action steps to stay cool in anxious moments and keep burnout at bay—and navigate it well when you simply can't avoid it—and you'll put yourself in a much stronger position to achieve your goals and effectively lead your people.

VFO Inner Circle Special Report

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