

ANXIETY

How to Overcome Social Anxiety and Perfectionism at Work

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A business executive named Bob had a hidden problem at work. He became nervous when he interacted with colleagues and performed various tasks. While he didn't have an anxiety disorder, he frequently worried about his work performance.

Because Bob was grateful for his position, he was afraid of failure—he didn't want to disappoint. Time management and self-esteem suffered because he frequently got caught up in details and ended up behind in his work.

Bob experienced social anxiety and the fear of public speaking, especially about giving presentations in front of his boss. While he spoke, his primary anxiety symptom was a racing heart. And he lacked assurance in his communication skills. Small talk and socializing made him uncomfortable.

How to Overcome Anxiety at Work

Do you experience fears like Bob's that sap your confidence and hinder your career development? Do you procrastinate, worry about being a leader or doing a great job, dread giving presentations, or have insomnia from time to time?

If you experience any of these types of concerns, I'll tell you some of the ways I helped Bob that can help you too.

First, I asked Bob, "What are you doing to ensure that you don't fail?"

Sounds like a weird question, doesn't it? But, you see, most people who worry end up doing things to make their fear more likely to happen! Such was the case with Bob.

Bob told me that he worked extremely hard—often until 9pm or later, and triple-checked his work to make sure that everything was just right. Sometimes he put things off if he didn't feel he had sufficient time to do them extremely well. I told Bob that he was experiencing perfectionism, a common source of workplace distress and time management problems.

To cure his perfectionism, we had him do things less perfectly. I told him, "try to complete projects at only 90% instead of the 120% you've been doing." He was wasting 30% effort for very low returns. When he purposefully worked faster and focused less on details, the quality of his work actually sky-rocketed. Nobody noticed the decrease in "perfect-ness" of his work, instead people noticed that he had more energy and accomplished more. He used the freed up time to be with family and go to the gym, which further helped him feel relaxed and happy.

Second, we focused on his fear of public speaking. In reality, Bob was a sociable and interesting man and a great speaker. Why was he uncomfortable? Bob held rigid rules about what was proper to discuss and when. He questioned whether his statements were appropriate. If he asked about a coworker's holidays, he feared being too personal. If he discussed the weather, he thought it was too mundane. Of course, this continuous evaluation increased his discomfort.

The same process occurred when he gave presentations. He wondered what everyone was thinking, whether he was boring people, and if he was saying things just right.

I asked Bob to speak naturally without censoring his thoughts. I recommended that he focus on the significance of his message while presenting, not on the details of how he was delivering it. When he made these subtle changes, he came across very well.

Increase Your Confidence and Work Performance

If you experience worry at work like Bob did, rest assured, it does not necessarily mean that you have an anxiety disorder. There are things you can do to boost your confidence.

Identify the thought patterns that keep the worries around and challenge those thoughts. (“How do I know it is true that I’m a ‘bad’ speaker?”). Do not avoid what makes you nervous—instead get as much experience as possible. If you’re afraid of failing, push yourself to try anyway. Remember, you do not need to let nerves control you, you can control them and find greater success and enjoyment in your work.

Larina Kase, PsyD, MBA is a business coach to entrepreneurs and executives, and author of *Anxious 9 to 5: How to Beat Worry, Stop Second Guessing Yourself, and Work with Confidence*. Find her tips in media like *The New York Times* and *Entrepreneur Magazine*. For a free book chapter including a quiz to see if you have work-related social anxiety or perfectionism, go to <http://www.anxious9to5.com>