



Reducing Fear and Anxiety

Description

I recently did a [podcast](#) with Mindy G. Spigel, RN, MSN, CPXP. She has a new book. It's called *There's a Snake on My Head! Strategies for Alleviating Fear and Anxiety in Healthcare for Patients, Families AND Healthcare Teams*. In the podcast, she talks about research she did on reducing fear and anxiety. When people were asked how they want to be treated when they're scared or anxious, their answers boiled down to this: "Keep me informed, keep me safe, keep me comfortable."

This truth applies to people in the workplace in general (regardless of industry), in government institutions and organizations, in communities, and in our personal lives. It's universal: All people want to be informed, safe, and comfortable.

Mindy suggested when people are fearful we might want to imagine there is a snake on their head. That snake is fear. If we don't first address the snake problem, the person we're trying to engage won't be able to hear what we're saying, they won't comply, and we won't get good results. When people can't hear us, we can't influence them.

When we can learn to recognize fear and understand how it impacts people, we can use it as a guiding principle for all of our interactions. Community leaders can use it to help people move through positive change. Teachers can use it to help students learn. Parents can use it to better guide their children.

One of the biggest opportunities may be in the workplace. At times, employees can have fear and anxiety. When we learn to see the snakes on their heads and take steps to remove them, we free people up to do their best work.

Helping reduce employee fear and anxiety is more important now than ever. COVID changed a lot of things. People used to spend a lot of time together, talking during breaks, huddles, etc. When communication goes up, fear and anxiety go down. In many ways, we now are playing communication catch-up. People may have a new boss. They may be working inside new structures. All of this impacts anxiety.

There are certain situations we know increase employee fear. As leaders we can view these touchpoints as cues to help put people at ease:

TOUCHPOINTS WHERE WE CAN REDUCE ANXIETY:

It's so important to look for opportunities, places that have traditionally been stressful, and seize the moment to make people feel better. When we get intentional about looking for these, they are easy to see. Here are a few examples:

Onboarding/new hires. Mindy talked about how when you walk into a new position, all these questions are swirling in your mind. *How do they do things here? Will people be nice to me? Will they tell me all the little unwritten rules?* She said it's important to make sure they have a mentor or coach and to make sure they meet the right people and feel connected. Also, find out something about them that has nothing to do with the job and share it with others.

Handovers with new managers coming in. Employees have a lot of anxiety about what their boss expects, what they might change, what their hot buttons might be, etc. Holding events to help the staff get to know the leader, and vice versa, can get the snake off their heads. I find this kind of fear happens even when it's an internal promotion. The more we communicate about new leader expectations, the less fear people will have.

New assignments or particularly stressful shifts or projects. It is vital to acknowledge the anxiety people feel about taking on a tough assignment or just facing a tough workday. Assure them it's normal to feel this way. Also, be very clear and thorough in communication so people understand exactly what to do. It is always better to over-communicate than to under-communicate.

Whatever role you are in, find these touchpoints and use the opportunity to really connect with someone.

GENERAL FEAR REDUCERS:

An employee doesn't have to be in these specific situations to experience anxiety or fear. Here are a few other ways we can help reduce these emotions.

Create environments where people learn from each other. Find ways to bring back networking. (This is another place we're playing catch up.)

It is okay to express your fears and be there for each other. People need the psychological safety to be able to let people know when they are struggling. They need to be able to recognize fear and express it.

Keep COVID protocols that make sense. During the worst days of the pandemic, we were really intentional about keeping people informed and worked hard to improve morale. While things have relaxed a little, we need to remember that COVID is still out there and many people may still be anxious. We need to be mindful of that.

Refill their cups. Storytelling is valuable. So is rewarding and recognizing. When we can remind people that they touch lives—teaching them to ask themselves, *How did I make a difference today?*—it refills their cup and gives them something to come back with tomorrow.

Recognize and eliminate the new we/they. Most of us have heard about the old "we/they," which is usually corporate/senior management versus middle management. (For instance, "I'd

love to give you that pay increase, but corporate says no.â?•) But now there are new forms of we/they, like virtual workers versus those in the office, or contract labor versus those people who are here all the time. When we rebuild those teams, that trust, that shared vision, and that sense of connection, we can go a long way toward reducing anxiety, because people feel that they belong.

The more we address and neutralize fear and anxiety, the better our lives become. People can do their best work, relationships improve organically, teams work together better, operations run more smoothly, communities function better, etc. We become known as a good place to work or a good place to live. It makes people want to be part of our team.

There is so much we can do to help alleviate fear and anxiety in peopleâ??s lives. Donâ??t underestimate the powerful impact you have. You make a difference.

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