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The Big Idea Article

Crisis Management

Leading Through Anxiety

Inspiring others when you're struggling yourself **by Morra Aarons-Mele**

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Illustration by Katherine Lam

The CEO of a startup is sitting in the office space she recently leased for her fast-growing company. It's rush hour, but the streets outside are quiet, and so are the 600 empty cubicles outside her office door. Just yesterday her leadership team made the tough but crucial decision to send everyone home to work for the foreseeable future. In 30 minutes she needs to lead a videoconference to reassure her employees. But she's despondent, anxious, and just plain scared.

Versions of this scene have been playing out across the world over the past few months as Covid-19 cases rise and economies shut down. Founders, executives, managers, and employees have seen how fragile

everything they've built has become — almost overnight. One evening back in March, my husband said to me, "I'm so scared, but I can't let all the people who depend on me see that." He had been on hours of Zoom calls, trying to convince his staff and colleagues that they would get through the crisis. He was supposed to be the face of calm, but he was terrified.

How can you lead with authority and strength when you feel anxious? How can you inspire and motivate others when your mind and heart are racing? And if you hide the fear in an attempt to be leaderlike, where does it go?

Anxiety, of course, has a purpose. It protects us from harm. Psychologist Rollo May first wrote in 1977: "We are no longer prey to tigers and mastodons but to damage to our self-esteem, ostracism by our group, or the threat of losing out in the competitive struggle. The form of anxiety has changed, but the experience remains relatively the same." In other words, even though humans today aren't chased by predators, we are chased by uncertainty about the health of our loved ones, whether we'll have a job next week or next year, whether our company will go bankrupt — worries that provoke the same neurological and physical responses.

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, "Stress is a response to a threat in a situation. Anxiety is a reaction to the stress." Anxiety is fear of what might happen in the future. Sometimes that fear is rational and sometimes not. And sometimes it's about something that will happen in three minutes (stepping onto a stage to make a presentation, for example) or in 30 years (having enough money to retire).

In the United States, anxiety is the most common mental illness, affecting more than 40 million adults each year. Data from the National Institute of Mental Health has indicated that about 30% of Americans experience clinical anxiety at some point in their lives. Globally, according to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, an estimated 284 million people had an anxiety disorder as of 2017, making it the most prevalent mental disorder worldwide. And recent workplace data from Mind Share Partners, SAP, and Qualtrics suggests it's widespread on the job: Nearly 37% of workplace respondents reported symptoms of anxiety in the past year. These numbers will only increase in the wake of the pandemic.

The good news for those of us who have managed anxiety for a long time is that we were made for this moment. Data shows that anxious people process threats differently, using regions of the brain responsible for action. We react quickly in the face of danger. We may also be more comfortable with uncomfortable feelings. When channeled thoughtfully, anxiety can motivate us to make our teams more resourceful, productive, and creative. It can break down barriers and create new bonds.

Why Anxiety Has Been Called the "Shadow of Intelligence"
David Barlow, founder, Boston University's Center for Anxiety & Related Disorders

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So anxiety isn't useless. In an economic crisis, the anxiety that keeps us up at night may help us fathom a solution to keeping our businesses open. But left unchecked, anxiety distracts us, zaps our energy, and

drives us to make poor decisions. Anxiety is a powerful enemy, so we must make it our partner.

Whether you have a diagnosed anxiety disorder or are having your first dance with this intense emotion, you can still be an effective leader. But I'll be blunt: If you don't look your anxiety in the face at some point, it will take you down. This isn't easy, but doing it will change your life and your ability to lead others for the better.

So today, in this especially anxious moment, let's begin. The first stage is learning to identify your anxiety: how it manifests itself and how it feels. The second stage is taking action to manage it both day-to-day and in challenging moments. The third stage entails making smart decisions and leading others in anxious times. Finally, the fourth stage involves building a support infrastructure to help you manage your anxiety over the long term.

Acknowledging and Accepting Your Emotions

A common coping mechanism for leaders is to push through stress, fatigue, and fear. But that's succeeding *in spite of* your emotions, when it's far better to thrive *because of* your emotions. You have to learn to accept your anxiety — even though this may seem uncomfortable or counterintuitive.

Label what you're feeling

Angela Neal-Barnett, an award-winning psychologist, expert on anxiety among African Americans, and author of *Soothe Your Nerves*, is a firm believer in being honest with yourself. When you name a feeling — by saying to yourself "I'm anxious" — you can begin to address it. You can learn how anxiety informs your behavior and your decisions and what causes it to surge, which will equip you to manage it.

Acknowledging Your Anxiety, Especially When You're a High-Achieving "Only"

Angela Neal-Barnett, professor of psychology, Kent State University

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No one has to hear you say it. This is for you. Take the time to wallow in your thoughts. Let yourself experience the discomfort of fear and anxiety. Play out worst-case scenarios in your head. Allow your imagination to go wild with catastrophe. Cry. Grieve. But don't turn away. As Alice Boyes, a former clinical psychologist and author of *The Anxiety Toolkit*, says: The more you try to control your anxiety, the more it fights back.

Decades of research on emotional intelligence have shown that people who understand their own feelings have higher job satisfaction, stronger job performance, and better relationships; are more innovative; and can synthesize diverse opinions and lessen conflict. And all those things make people better leaders.

If the word "anxiety" feels wrong to you, label it whatever you like. Call it "unease" or "temporary uncertainty" or even give it a silly name. I think of my own anxiety as a separate character who travels with me. She doesn't have a name or a face, but I know when she's present.

The leadership coach and CEO of Reboot, Jerry Colonna, says that the best way to deal with uncomfortable feelings is to welcome them in. Think of your thoughts and emotions as trains coming in and out of a station, he advises. Watch them arrive and depart without attachment. Imagine saying, "Hello, anxiety. See you later, fear." This technique

actually will help you build distance from the negative feelings in your mind.

How to Let Go of Your Pain
Jerry Colonna, leadership coach and CEO of Reboot

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Sometimes it may be impossible to get rid of your anxiety, which can feel frustrating. Rebecca Harley, a psychologist at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, emphasizes, "The goal is not to magically make things perfect. The goal is to learn to surf the waves of distress successfully. Give yourself credit even if things don't feel all the way better."

Play detective

Once you've labeled your anxiety, you can start pinpointing when it appears and why. Harley helped me learn to do this. When you feel anxious, take note of your physical reactions — what she calls the "early warning system" that anxiety might be taking over.

Becoming Your Own (Nonjudgmental) Detective
Rebecca Harley, psychologist, Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School

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Your triggers might be small. You might notice a stomach flip and a spark of dread when you see someone's name pop up in your in-box. Or they might be bigger. When unemployment numbers skyrocket, you might feel nauseous and unable to focus even though you still have a job.

When an interaction or a situation sets you off, examine why. You might be hesitant to delve into issues from your childhood, but "unresolved business" from your past, as Colonna puts it, is very much present in — and relevant to — how you lead. He notes it can be a relief to truly understand how your old wounds inform your present behavior. When I realized that my near-constant worry about going broke stemmed more from my childhood than from my current financial situation, I was finally able to proactively manage my money, after years of avoiding it and piling up debt. I broke a damaging pattern.

It's also good to understand how you react when triggered. I call these anxiety "tells." Social worker and therapist Carolyn Glass suggests asking yourself, "How did I respond to that anxiety in that moment? And were those behaviors helpful or not? Did those behaviors fuel or alleviate my anxiety?" Glass says that writing down your fears will help you examine them. Keeping a journal of your anxiety — when it happens, what triggers it, and how you reacted — is a great way to develop self-awareness. Your tells may not always be negative behaviors, though; for instance, many of us find ourselves connecting with friends and family more during stressful times. When I'm very anxious, I cook and freeze meals!

Many successful leaders react to anxiety by working harder, holding themselves and others to an impossibly high standard, or trying to control things that are beyond their power. For them, it's hard to imagine *not* fussing over every project and detail in their work lives, not

taking responsibility for everything or always giving their all. “People respond to anxiety by trying to be more perfect and more in control,” Boyes says. “They not only have a Plan B but Plans C, D, and E.” In many societies those behaviors are rewarded. We think of it as a “good work ethic,” but often perfectionism and overwork only cause further anxiety — in yourself and others.

Why Perfectionism and Overthinking Can Backfire
Alice Boyes, former clinical psychologist and author of *The Healthy Mind Toolkit*

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Imagine a CEO who is terrified by the economic news surrounding Covid-19. He jumps into the problem in the way that’s worked for him in the past: making detailed projections on all aspects of the business. He buries himself in these charts while constantly consuming news about the crisis. Some of his team might wonder what he’s up to or feel unsettled by his visible yet unspoken panic. Are the charts he furiously creates accurate? Who knows! But the deep dive into worst-case scenario planning gives him the illusion of control.

Your tells may also be physical. Anxiety can manifest itself as tightness in the chest, shallow breathing, clenched jaw muscles, frozen shoulders, gastrointestinal symptoms, skin breakouts, appetite changes, and radical shifts in energy. When I recently had a panic attack, for example, I was convinced it was heart failure — even though I’d had panic attacks before.

To help you identify the ways anxiety may be physically affecting you, try this two-part exercise:

First, sit upright in a chair. Put your feet flat on the floor, and your hands on your lap. Keep your chin neutral. Note which part of the body you can immediately feel. Then, with your eyes closed, scan through the following:

- Your head
- Your jaw
- Your neck cords
- Your shoulders
- Your wrists and forearms
- Your chest
- Your upper back
- Your lower back
- Your stomach
- Your hips
- Your hamstrings and rear
- Your calves, ankles, and feet

Note which ones feel tight, and to gain some relief, breathe into the areas of tightness or pain.

You can also pay attention to what's happening with your body at different points during the workday, when specific events occur, or when you make certain decisions:

- How do you feel at 9 AM, noon, and 3 and 6 PM? Does your body change over the course of the day?

- If you get stressed, does a particular part of your body react?
- How often do you rely on a drink, drug, muscle relaxant, or over-the-counter pain relief over the week?
- Does your body feel different after you exercise? Do your shoulders feel lighter?
- How does your body feel on the weekend or when you're doing something you enjoy?

Sort out the probable from the possible

Once you understand your triggers and tells, you can start developing a new relationship with your anxiety.

Remember, some anxiety is rational and helpful. In an economic downturn it makes sense for a leader to feel anxious. You might have to lay people off. Your business might fail. But you might find that you get stuck in a negative thought loop that prevents you from moving forward; you start obsessing. Boyes points out that some leaders get so focused on the worst-case scenario and overwhelmed by scary possibilities that they become frozen.

So how do you avoid being stuck? Here I turn to advice from Colonna: "Differentiate what's possible from what's probable. It is *possible* that everyone I love will die of a pandemic and I will lose everything I hold dear. But it's not *probable* that everything that we love and hold dear will disappear." Try to distinguish your worst fears from what is likely to happen. This will help calm you and give you space to move forward. So when a catastrophic thought comes into your head, such as "My partner and I are both going to lose our jobs" or "I'm definitely going to get sick," remember that you're an unreliable narrator when you're anxious. Check in with someone else you trust and ask for that person's help in telling what is likely to unfold from what is a long shot.

What to Do with a Hurricane of Internal Anxiety

Jerry Colonna, leadership coach and CEO of Reboot

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Back in early March, when the stock market first slumped and people's fears about Covid-19 spiked, one of my biggest clients canceled work with my small business. I quickly convinced myself that our company was doomed, that it would be only a matter of months before we had to close up shop. "We'll never survive this," I kept telling myself. But then I consulted my business partner — a more reliable narrator than I — and she suggested we readjust our forecast, which we did. Now we're projecting that we'll lose half our revenue for the year. This is probable and upsetting, but it's far different from going out of business completely.

Focusing on what's probable also takes flexibility — the future won't be what you thought, and that hurts. When my preschooler really wants to keep coloring, but it's time for dinner, I ask her, "Please be flexible. You can color later, I promise." I'm now trying to do what I've taught my kids for years: to handle the disappointment of things not going the way I expected or wanted. These disappointments are real, and sometimes the changes are grave. Acknowledge the grief and anger you feel (at least to yourself) and then make adjustments, identifying the aspects of your vision that may still work, and focus on what's probable.

Taking Action to Manage Your Anxiety

Once you make your way through these three steps, you can start to manage your anxiety daily in ways that allow you to grow as a leader and be more resourceful and productive.

The following tactics can help ground you.

Control what you can

Many faith traditions teach us to accept what we cannot control, without preoccupation or panic. But in the middle of an anxiety attack at work, you probably don't have time for philosophy. So here's what to do when things feel completely off the rails.

Structure your time. A solid body of research shows that improved "time management disposition" — meaning your attitude toward how you organize and value your time — has a positive impact on mental health. And it's especially crucial when you're gripped by anxiety.

First thing in the morning, create a to-do list and a detailed schedule for your day. I like to do it while having my coffee. You might use 30-minute increments to spell out when you'll shower, take a lunch break, make a phone call, or tackle that report that needs to get done. This is what many experts call "timeboxing." While you're at it, try to avoid what cognitive behavioral therapy terms "cognitive distortions." These are the catastrophic thoughts, self-judgments, and all-or-nothing ideas that often accompany anxiety.

Be careful not to overschedule or overestimate your productivity; instead focus on the critical work and leave time to take care of yourself.

How Making Lists and Schedules Helps with Anxiety and PTSD
Gabrielle Union, actor, activist, and sexual assault survivor

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Take small, meaningful actions. During the first few weeks of the coronavirus shutdown, traffic dropped drastically where I live. The local department of public works took that time to repaint all the crosswalks. For a week, roads were halfway blocked off as DPW crews painted. It wasn't a big deal because our normally bustling town was quiet. And each time I slowed down to drive past one of the crews, I smiled because it struck me: This is their small, meaningful action.

When you feel anxious, an immediate task can easily become overwhelming. Take running a cash flow analysis for your business. When you open up the accounting software, your mind might go to a dark place, and all of a sudden a month's worth of figures have spiraled into the business tanking and your losing your home. To break that mental spiral, take a small, meaningful action. If running a cash flow projection terrifies you, organize some receipts or clean up some file folders until the panic subsides.

In general, focus on the near term whenever you can. You may not be able to tell your employees what will happen next year — or even three months from now. You can't promise everything will be OK. But you *can* help your people be safe this week. Focus on that, and then deal with the big questions when you feel calmer or when you can get input from trusted colleagues. Sometimes you have to turn off the future for a little while and just manage through the present.

Develop techniques for situations you can't control

Of course, it's not always possible to turn off the future. What if your board needs those cash flow projections in the next 30 minutes and you're in a downward spiral? Here you'll want to have tools that help you calm down quickly so that you can get your job done.

Find a mindfulness technique that eases your acute anxiety. Neurologist Victor Frankl famously said, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." This is mindfulness in a nutshell. Even if you are high on anxiety and short on time, you can claim the space in between.

There are lots of ways to do this; the key is to find what's most effective for you. One option is to focus on your breathing. Belly breaths are a classic technique. Others prefer what's called "the 4-7-8 method." Either is simple to memorize and subtle enough to do at your desk. When you deliberately slow your breath, it sends a message to your brain to calm down, and your brain then sends the message to your body so that many of the physical symptoms of anxiety — such as increased heart rate and higher blood pressure — decrease.

You can also shift your attention. Glass says this technique is "great for someone who doesn't want to meditate but gets maladaptively anxious and cannot focus on anything else." Focus first on your anxiety, and then slowly turn your attention to something tangible, something you hold in your hand, like a book. By concentrating on an object in the present moment, you can turn the volume of your worry down until it's background noise.

An Exercise in Mindfulness
Carolyn Glass, social worker and therapist

Audio Available Online
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If I'm full of anxious energy and unable to sit still, or if quiet breathing exercises don't work, I like to loudly blast a favorite song and dance for five minutes. Some people like to sing instead. Experiment with what works for you and then keep that tactic in your back pocket for when you need it.

Compartmentalize or postpone your worry. Sometimes I talk out loud to my anxiety, saying, "Sorry, I'm going to deal with you after I finish my work." You may want to write the worry down and save it for a specific time — maybe later that day or your next session with your therapist.

In times of crisis you may actually find that things that worried you in the past fade into the background. The urgency of what's happening in the moment takes over. To stop your anxiety from sneaking into the

foreground, you might tell it, "You can stay where you are. I'm part of the solution here, and I need to get this task done."

Make a connection. Connecting with others can break the negative thought loop that often accompanies anxiety. Instead of focusing on yourself, you turn your attention outward. When I asked my friend and colleague Cheryl Contee, the CEO and cofounder of the digital agency Do Big Things, how she was staying motivated during the crisis, she said that she was trying to "be a good neighbor," something she learned from her grandfather, William G. Contee, who has a park dedicated to him in his Baltimore neighborhood. "Being a good neighbor is surprisingly simple — it's just about connecting on the human level," she told me. "Do you say hello to your neighbors? Have you asked how they're doing or if they need anything?"

Contee also connects digitally with people in her field, who support one another and contribute to causes they care about. At her company she and her colleagues are leaning into talking about their feelings and families, doing a lot of checking about how to balance homeschooling with work. "We're all veteran virtual knowledge workers, but having kids around and being responsible for their education is a new challenge we're facing together," she said.

In your own life, think about performing a quick, generous act. You might check in on a former colleague via text message. Or ask a family member how you might help. When I'm feeling anxious, I sometimes go to LinkedIn and "like" articles written by my colleagues or write up an endorsement of their work. This gets me out of my head and focused on something more positive.

Finally, if anxiety is persistent and hampering your days, you might consider consulting a therapist or mental health professional. Talking

to someone trained in helping others manage anxiety may give you additional coping mechanisms to address debilitating symptoms.

Limiting Anxiety's Impact on Your Leadership

Once you have a better sense of how you experience anxiety and how you can manage it daily, it's time to turn to how it affects your leadership and management abilities.

Make good decisions

Anxiety can impair our judgment. It can cause us to focus on the wrong things, distort the facts, or rush to conclusions. Ideally, we could postpone critical decisions until we're in a better frame of mind, but that's not always possible.

In anxious times it's important to proactively set yourself up to make good choices. Much as you do when separating the possible from the probable, start by acknowledging that your emotions can make you an unreliable narrator and that you will likely be prone to negative thoughts. Let's say you're prepping for a speech and the last time you spoke to a group of a similar size, you felt that you bombed. You may even have a long-held belief that you're a terrible public speaker because a middle school recitation drew snickers. Ask yourself: Are you being objective? If you're not sure, check whether your memory is correct, perhaps by asking a colleague who was in the room for feedback.

Of course, you need to ask the right people. Boyes suggests you find a trusted adviser with a decision-making style that differs from your own. If you're impulsive, consult someone who is methodical and conservative, for example.

Ultimately, every leader should develop a team of "real talk" peers: people who will provide their unvarnished opinions. You can fill this role for others, too. You can still offer them clarity and insight even if you're an unreliable narrator of your own experience.

Practice healthy communication

One of the most dangerous aspects of anxiety is that it's contagious, and leaders set the tone. Daniel Goleman, the renowned psychologist and author of *Emotional Intelligence*, calls this "neural Wi-Fi," in which humans pick up on others' unspoken feelings.

If you're not admitting that you're anxious but instead emitting irritability or distraction, you're not doing your staff any favors. But how can you be honest with your people in a way that doesn't strike fear in them? What degree of emotion is appropriate to express?

Ultimately, how much you disclose is a personal decision. As an owner of a business and the host of a podcast about anxiety and mental health, I tend to be an open book. But I know that most leaders don't share their demons. Few feel comfortable starting a staff meeting with "Wow, I'm anxious today."

But self-aware leaders know when it's appropriate to be vulnerable. And here's the thing: Your staff needs you to be transparent and honest about anxiety and mental health, especially when the future of your company and their livelihoods are uncertain.

Amelia Ransom, the senior director of engagement and diversity at Avalara, says that she wants her leaders to admit when they're not doing OK, because it affirms her experience. "It makes me feel normal if someone I respect and trust admits they aren't all right. I think, 'Thank you for being human,' and I want to follow that person." Ransom recounts a powerful moment when a senior executive in her company brought the staff together on a videoconference and said, "I can't tell you, 'You got this.' What I can do is hold space for us to be together right now, to talk and figure some things out."

Admitting "I'm anxious today" or "I didn't sleep well" lets everyone else in the room breathe a little easier. ("Phew, it's not my fault he is so tense.") And remember, you don't have to share details; just share the state you're in.

The social psychologist Amy Cuddy tells us we need leaders who exhibit both warmth and strength. "Most leaders today tend to emphasize their strength, competence, and credentials in the workplace, but that is exactly the wrong approach," she writes. "Leaders who project strength before establishing trust run the risk of eliciting fear, and along with it a host of dysfunctional behaviors." Nothing establishes trust more

effectively than the emotional connection fostered through empathy and shared humanity. This is why being open about your own anxiety can be so powerful. It builds trust when you can ask teammates, "How are you?" and they don't feel as if they have to lie or put on a happy face, because they know you feel the strain, too.

This doesn't mean that you fall into a puddle of tears during a videoconference, of course, or visibly lose control. And while your workers might want to know that you're closely monitoring cash flow to make sure bills get paid, they don't need to know that your anxiety is deeply rooted in your parents' money troubles during your childhood. It's possible to model taking care of your mental health without making people lose confidence in your competence.

Imagine you're in an anxiety spiral from reading news about Covid-19, but you need to lead a staff meeting in 10 minutes. You could open the meeting by saying, "Obviously, the news is getting more upsetting by the minute, but I want us to put that aside for the next half hour while we go through this call." Or you could be even more vulnerable and share that you're working to contain your scary thoughts by giving yourself what Glass calls a "worry hour," when you allow yourself to indulge your biggest concerns before putting them away again and forging on.

If you want to encourage people to share but don't want the conversation to slip into an anxiety fest, you can use a red-yellow-green exercise. (Here are some tips from Reboot.) Team members individually indicate where their moods are that day with one of the three colors, and they can expand on why if they wish. This allows people to share if they feel comfortable doing so and gives you useful information about the emotions of the group. You can then adjust your communication style and messaging accordingly.

And remember, while being positive is important to prevent emotional contagion, you don't want to give anyone false hope. If you get tough questions like "Is my job safe?" or "Will we be in business in six months?" it's not your job to divine the future. No one has a crystal ball, and so you can say what you know to be true in this moment and affirm the importance of working together and focusing on what each person can control.

Building a Support System

The final step in leading through anxiety is making sure you have ongoing support. This means not only surrounding yourself with the right people but also developing routines that help you deal with bouts of anxiety and lay the groundwork for maintaining your mental health.

Schedule, structure, and scenario plan

When you have anxiety, you need to be intentional about what your days look like, as I discussed earlier. The methods are basic: making lists, prioritizing, and breaking work into manageable chunks. Chop tasks that make you extremely anxious into bearable pieces. I learned this trick from my own psychiatrist, Carol Birnbaum.

Also use the detective work you did about your triggers to prepare for situations or events you know will cause you anxiety. If public speaking stresses you out, make sure you leave plenty of time to rehearse presentations. If you're afraid of flying, mentally rehearse a business trip from "I'm going to pack" to "I'm going to order a cab and call my friend while I'm on my way to the airport" to "I'll buy M&M's when I get there because they make me happy." And finally, once on the plane: "I'm going to take a Xanax, do a calming meditation, and survive."

I get anxious when I'm working far from home and haven't heard from my nanny or husband. I worry something bad has happened and get

distracted from what I'm supposed to be doing. To counter this I ask my husband or the babysitter to text me with an update every three hours. That way I don't pester them when they might be driving with the kids in the car, for example. And knowing that they will keep me updated allows me to sink into my work.

Know who your "safe team" is

Since you want to spare your employees the messy details of your anxiety, you need a place for those emotions to go. Make sure you have a "safe team" of people to whom you can confess scary thoughts. They can include a therapist, a coach, a mentor, a spouse or partner, and friends. It could be an intimate group of fellow leaders, online or off-line, who commit to sharing in confidence and making space for one another's difficult emotions.

Practice self-care

I don't need to belabor this point. You know what self-care means for you, whether it's sleep, exercise, hobbies, massage, spending time alone, or being with people you love. The point is, take it seriously, as if your doctor had written you a prescription for it. It's neither frivolous nor optional for you as a leader. And aspects of it you feel comfortable sharing can benefit your team: When you model good practices, others feel permission to take care of themselves, too. This could be as simple as letting people know that you don't take your phone upstairs when you head to bed, that you're taking an hour during the workday to exercise, or that you're limiting exposure to news or Twitter.

Putting in place the support infrastructure to manage your anxiety will help you ride out setbacks and tough times. It's a strategy for long-term success and sustainability as a leader. It means you'll have better workdays, both when things are status quo and during transitions and tough times.

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Ultimately, anxiety comes with the job of being a leader. The process of managing it can make you stronger, more empathetic, and more effective. It just might be bumpy along the way. So remember to treat yourself with compassion. Recognize that you're doing the best you can, that your emotions are normal, and that the healthiest thing you can do is to allow yourself to experience them.

Far too many of us think it's taboo to talk about mental health at work. I know many leaders who don't feel as if they can walk into a staff meeting and say, "I'm anxious today."

Why not? And why not now? These are not normal times, and acknowledging a universal emotion can help people understand that what they're feeling is OK.

We're in desperate need of better models of leadership, especially when society tells us that anxiety and depression are weaknesses. The data bears this out: A 2019 Mind Share Partners report found that 86% of U.S. job seekers thought it was important for an employer's culture to support mental health, but only 37% of employees saw their company leaders as advocates for mental health at work.

This time of crisis — in which those of us with a history of anxiety may be experiencing it acutely while others may be feeling it intensely for the first time — is an opportunity to change that perception.

You can play a role in telling a different story.

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