

# Generalized Anxiety and Social Anxiety in the Workplace!

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*During COVID, excessive worrying, isolation, and extended periods of time spent focusing on the bad news of the day became a way of life for many people. Social media exploded with mounting conflicts and conspiracy theories, and there seemed to be no escape from endless — and often sensationalized and dire — media coverage of the real-time spread of the virus.*

*It is no wonder that many people found themselves with mounting fears, and began imagining worst-case scenarios... the perfect conditions for Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) and Social Anxiety (also known as Social Anxiety Disorder) to take root. As vaccines offer hope and an eventual end to COVID, people are left struggling in unprecedented numbers with troubling symptoms of Generalized Anxiety and Social Anxiety. The better we can understand these conditions, and how to identify their symptoms, the better equipped we will be at coping with this potentially crippling form of anxiety as we re-enter our work and social environments.*

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## **Signs and Symptoms of Generalized Anxiety Disorder**

Generalized Anxiety Disorder is the term used to identify people suffering from excessive levels of worry, over-thinking, and anxiety over several areas of their lives for a prolonged period of time. Generalized Anxiety Disorder does not limit itself to one or two aspects of life. These worries can infiltrate virtually every aspect of a GAD sufferer's world. GAD sufferers worry to a point where they are no longer in control of their thoughts, and they begin experiencing problematic symptoms that diminish the quality of their lives. Chronic, excessive worrying — where thoughts become distorted and worries are blown completely out of proportion — expands into all areas of life. GAD sufferers cannot stop themselves from constantly worrying and forecasting worst-case scenarios in even the most inconsequential and trivial areas of life.

Adults suffering from GAD find themselves exhausted and on edge, and unable to stop their racing negative thoughts and dread of impending chaos and imagined worst-case scenarios. They are irritable and lack patience with others. They often experience troubling physical symptoms, like muscle tension and aches, heart palpitations, headaches, and insomnia. They may experience panic attacks. They are restless and have difficulty concentrating on tasks and staying present. They often draw a blank or lose their train of thought mid-conversation.

## **Signs and Symptoms of Social Anxiety**

Social Anxiety is defined as an intense fear of social situations. Disconnection, withdrawal, and isolation characterize the feelings and actions of people suffering from Social Anxiety. People suffering from Social Anxiety struggle with irrational fears of being singled out, judged, ridiculed, ignored, or ostracized in social situations. They feel awkward, insecure, and bad about themselves. They have fears of embarrassing themselves and coming across as not capable, smart, or good enough. They fear scrutiny, negative judgment and evaluation of others. These overwhelming concerns can increase insecurities, self-doubt and self-consciousness, and impede cognitive functioning. In other words, social anxiety can prevent a person from performing to the best of their ability.

Many settings or situations that would cause most people temporary, passing nervousness, like speaking up in group situations, saying something inappropriate in front of strangers, or being negatively judged by others for exhibiting nervousness or unease, cause people with Social Anxiety overwhelming and long-lasting distress.

Just as people who are suffering from agoraphobia (anxiety and avoidance of certain unsettling or upsetting settings) people with Social Anxiety avoid situations, fear, and suffer tremendous distress in some — and in some cases, all — social settings. They can experience symptoms similar to panic attacks, including heart palpitations, racing negative thoughts, stomach pain, sweating, headaches, and muscle tension.

### ***How Social Anxiety and Generalize Anxiety Disorder manifest in the workplace***

Since both Social Anxiety and Generalized Anxiety Disorder can profoundly lower group morale and productivity, it is critical that team leaders and managers understand the symptoms and recognize the behaviors when they manifest in workplace settings.

Social Anxiety shows up in the workplace in many ways. People suffering from Social Anxiety avoid social situations and interactions, and, in some cases, even avoid making eye contact. Though present in meetings and group situations, they avoid actively participating — especially speaking up, or voicing conflicting opinions. They lack confidence in their work and fear making mistakes. They often double or triple-check their work, adding significant stress and time to completing tasks. They harbor elevated fears of falling short and failing at tasks they may have successfully accomplished many times over.

Employees struggling with Generalized Anxiety Disorder suffer from many physical issues, like headaches, fatigue, body aches due to muscle tension, and digestive issues. These physical symptoms trigger an increase in sick days and doctor's visits. People suffering from Generalized Anxiety Disorder doubt their abilities and expertise in the workplace. They can become paralyzed by anxieties and worries. They struggle to stay focused on what they are doing and take longer than usual to complete tasks. With their excessive worrying is out of control, they may question or ruminate over and raising the same concerns time after time, which can lead to conflict or frustration with their coworkers and managers. These behaviors can result in missed deadlines and a dramatic decline in productivity and team morale.

### ***Strategic transitional people management***

As the world reopens and life returns to normal after an unprecedented pause, it is critical for

employers to make employee health and wellness a top priority. Leaders will need to show compassion for what employees have been through and are experiencing, and understand that the troublesome symptoms of post-COVID Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Social Anxiety will not simply dissolve.

It is important that front-line team leaders and managers understand and recognize symptoms of Social Anxiety and Generalized Anxiety Disorder, in order to support employees and teams as we move through this transition. Strategic corporate wellness training and psychoeducation will provide the support, strategies, and tools they need to recognize the behaviors and signs of employees dealing with anxiety, and support them with patience and compassion. Strategies like defining concrete limits to daily work hours and setting boundaries, clear expectations, and limits around tasks and deadlines will help manage employee fears around expectations. Providing compassionate and reassuring feedback can also help bolster confidence in employee skills and capabilities. Offering accommodations where necessary will also go a long way to demonstrate to employees that they are valued and that their health and safety are of prime importance during this transition. Bringing in an expert to provide psychoeducation lunch and learns or small group sessions focused on dealing with the challenges employees face as they reintegrate into the workplace will help all employees feel supported and safe.

Finally, for employers and employees alike, be assured that this is a time of transition. We need to be patient and kind as we reintegrate and return to business as usual. And we must remember that this is a moment in time, that this time will pass, and that compassionate management of people — every organization's greatest resource — is key to a successful return to normal.



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*About the author*

*Dr. Monica Vermani is a Clinical Psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress and mood & anxiety disorders, and the founder of Start Living Corporate Wellness. She is a well-known speaker and author on mental health and wellness. Her upcoming book, A Deeper Wellness, is scheduled for publication in 2021.*

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*Dr. Vermani has recently launched an exciting online self-help program, A Deeper Wellness, delivering powerful mental-health guidance, life skills, and knowledge that employees can access anywhere, anytime. <https://www.adeeperwellness.com/>*

