



Why am I afraid of my email? Strategies to manage fear, stress and anxiety at work

At a glance:



Understanding fear, stress and anxiety as a first step to keeping perspective.



Fear is a survival mechanism; chronic **stress** occurs when our stress response is activated continuously; **anxiety** is borne out of fear when our “thinking minds” lack sufficient information to predict the future.



Consider whether your current strategies to manage fear, stress and anxiety are working:
Are they producing short-term or long-term results?



Real solutions: Try out as many of the strategies below – apply them consistently to support your well-being and fulfil your potential.

Strategies to manage fear, stress and anxiety for in-house lawyers

As in-house lawyers, we face intense pressures. Our work is serious and must be taken seriously, but we all know that it typically doesn't involve matters of life and death. Despite this awareness, many of us find ourselves stressing out about relatively insignificant things like an email from a demanding manager or a presentation to the board. *Why does this happen?*

Why we lose perspective: Fear, stress and anxiety in the modern world

While personality, upbringing, past trauma and feeling like an outsider play a role in how we respond to stressors, to grasp why we lose perspective so easily, we need to break down the concepts of **fear**, **anxiety** and **stress**.

- **Fear** is survival mechanism that motivates us to act in the face of danger. Fear in response to an actual threat is adaptive. If there's a fire in the building, you get out to save your life. While human minds are wired to search for threats, there can be no doubt that modern life – including an “always on” work culture and the onslaught of information that accompanies it – has distorted our perception of danger. Fear of life-threatening dangers has been replaced by fear of things that can't kill us, at least in the short-term. And if these perceived dangers are ever-present (deadlines, constant emails + Teams notifications) then we can wind up with **chronic stress**.
- One definition of stress is: “*a relationship between the person and the environment that is...taxing or exceeding their resources and endangering their well-being*”. The “**stress-response**” (fight/flight/freeze) gets activated when you perceive danger. The body releases stress hormones and primes you to deal with imminent danger – this is a good thing when the danger is real. However, in the face of unceasing stressors, the stress response goes haywire. When this happens, the “emotional brain” can become hypervigilant. You begin to sense danger even when it isn't there (a benign email from your manager fills you with terror). Under extreme stress, the “emotional brain” can hijack the “thinking brain”. Enter brain fog. Enter **anxiety**.
- **Anxiety** is not the same as fear. One dictionary definition is “a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome.” Anxiety is maladaptive – it is borne out of fear when our “thinking brain” doesn't have enough information to accurately predict the future (think of how you feel waiting for health test results). A little anxiety is part of the human condition. A lot of anxiety interferes with our ability to feel good and function well.

What are we afraid of at work?

COMMON TRIGGERS INCLUDE:

- A volatile and/or controlling manager (and emails from this person)
- Hearing about redundancies
- Unmanageable workloads
- A complex legal problem with a tight deadline
- Presenting to a senior audience

UNDERNEATH THE EXTERNAL TRIGGERS LIE DEEPER FEARS:

- Fear of not being good enough
- Fear of making a mistake or a bad decision
- Fear of losing your reputation
- Fear of failure
- Fear of losing your job/becoming obsolete (replaced by AI)
- Fear of being humiliated
- Fear of success

How do we manage fear, anxiety and stress?

While we all have strategies to manage fear, stress and anxiety, we must ask ourselves: “*are our strategies working?*”.

Modern day painkillers include comfort eating, doom scrolling, online shopping, procrastination, drinking and other substances which might help us feel better and avoid unpleasant feelings in the short term, but can cause damage in the long-term.

Similarly, if our fears are rooted in a deeper sense that we are not worthy of success, we may engage in protective behaviours (people pleasing, hesitating, keeping a low profile, etc.) to stay safe in the short-term but at a cost to our ultimate success.

Real solutions

BELOW ARE STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO TAKE CHARGE OF FEAR, STRESS AND ANXIETY:*

1. **Get the fundamentals right** – aim for quality sleep (take tech out of the bedroom); eat right; take breaks; go for walks, preferably in nature and sunlight; find exercise you enjoy (the best thing you can do for your mind and to release stress).
2. **Build resources and limit distractions to find flow** – identify the people and materials that can help with a complex problem (mastery facilitates flow). Here's where AI can come in handy. Turn off notifications and your smart phone to find flow – anxiety cannot exist in the flow state.
3. **Manage your thoughts** – ask are my thoughts helping me or harming me? Am I processing the fact that my manager yelled at me in a healthy way or am I ruminating and reinforcing the stress response?
4. **Increase positive self-talk** – silence the inner critic and empower yourself. Try affirmations in the third person (just not in front of anyone!).
5. **Meditate** – find a meditation practice that you can stick to – 3 minutes each morning is a good start.
6. **Practice mindfulness** – pay attention to your surroundings and embrace your senses. Be present with daily activities. When triggered, plant your feet on the ground and notice the colours in the room. Breathe deeply and mindfully.
7. **Break the worry habit** – in *Unwinding Anxiety*, Dr. Judson Brewer explains that we can't change our behaviour unless we identify its adverse consequences. Recognise that thinking and planning help us to solve problems, but worry does not. Experiment with becoming disenchanted with the feeling of anxiety – get curious about what anxiety feels like and replace it with the openness that accompanies mindfulness. See <https://drjud.com/book/>
8. **Adopt a growth mindset** – Carol Dweck describes a growth mindset as the belief that your abilities can be developed over time – this mindset lightens your response to mistakes and failure and allows you to see them as opportunities for learning and growth. Remember that most mistakes can be corrected.
9. **Take action** – confront the feared situation until the fear diminishes. The way to beat the fear of public speaking is to speak publicly!
10. **Co-regulate** – a fancy term for hanging out with people on your wavelength. You can recognise genuine connection by the peace it brings. Read more about how to synchronise nervous systems [here](#).
11. **Perceive reality correctly** – ask: is my perception true? If you see yourself as a “stressed” person, this can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Can you detach from that identity? If you perceive a colleague as being out to get you then you will live in fear of him – can you see him as a human dealing with his own stressors? (Note this doesn't mean you should tolerate bad behaviour).
12. **Communicate skilfully** – explore healthy and compassionate communication methods to transform difficult relationships and the stress that they cause.

For more guidance or information on this topic email win@dlapiper.com or stephanie@haladner.com, or visit the WIN website for events, tools and guides addressing the technical, commercial and personal aspects of working as an in-house lawyer.

* It is also vital to note that self-care isn't enough – as Jennifer Moss states in *The Burnout Epidemic*, employee burnout is an organisational problem that requires an organisational solution. These strategies are also not a substitute for seeking professional support when needed.