Bupa

Supporting shy and socially anxious employees.

Here, we'll look at the reasons why people feel shy or anxious, and what colleagues can do to help them feel welcome in the workplace.

Shyness and social anxiety in the workplace.

Being shy or socially anxious can be difficult at the best of times – work is no exception. There are lots of people with different personalities to interact with and situations that could make a socially anxious person feel uncomfortable. Worse still, they may feel unable to avoid or escape these situations, which can amplify their worry and uncertainty.

For someone who feels this way, even introducing themselves to a new colleague – shaking their hand, making eye contact and maintaining conversation – is no mean feat.

What's the issue?

Shy and socially anxious colleagues may feel overly worried and troubled by certain situations or tasks at work. This anxiety can be detrimental to their mental health and wellbeing, and may hinder their progress. For example, they may resist promotion and development opportunities in order to self-preserve and avoid situations that make them feel uncomfortable.

As an employer it's our responsibility to make sure our employees' health and wellbeing is looked after and to create an environment where they feel comfortable and able to thrive. A thriving workforce is a productive one, which lays the groundwork for developing or maintaining a successful business.

By helping shy and socially anxious colleagues feel welcomed and comfortable, you can also help to support overall health and wellbeing in your workplace.

Why do some people feel shy or fearful of certain situations?

Are we born shy and socially anxious or do we develop it? Again, it's the time-old question of nature versus nurture, but what's the answer?

In short, we think it's a bit of both. It's thought that we can be born with a genetic predisposition to being socially anxious – yet be able to manage it – while others develop social anxiety without being genetically predisposed. The key here is, whether your genetics play a role or not, the way we nurture our colleagues – the environment we provide, the way we act as individuals (and as a company) – can help everyone to feel more at ease.

What can you do to help?

Understand your colleague's mindset

Shy and socially anxious colleagues are fearful of social and 'performance' related situations. As we mentioned earlier, these may include things like presenting at a meeting, a job interview or speaking with people of higher authority. It can also include smaller tasks such as writing in front of people and vocalising their opinions.

When presented with these situations, shy and socially anxious colleagues can think negatively about their ability to cope and perform, and may critique and mull over their actions afterwards.

Overall, the fear is fuelled by not wanting to be judged by others. Understanding a colleague's train of thought could be the first step in helping them to feel more comfortable.

Don't underestimate your colleague's ability

It can be very difficult to be shy or socially anxious in the workplace. Someone who is shy or socially anxious will need to work hard to recondition the way they think about, and respond to certain situations. They'll need to work on challenging their negative thoughts and gradually start to involve themselves in situations that they find uncomfortable. As an employer, you can help by creating a controlled and safe environment for them to do so.

Challenging these negative thoughts and stepping outside of the comfort zone can be terrifying. Your colleagues may need some help and support along the way. However, this should have no bearing on your perception of how capable they are as a person, or in their ability to do their job. Shy and socially anxious colleagues may shine in ways that others don't, so it's important that we celebrate our diversity and differences to build a well-rounded and inclusive workplace.

Identify and mitigate problem situations

Make a list of the situations within your working environment that could make people feel uncomfortable. Where you can, think about ways that you can actively help your colleagues to feel more at ease. Here are a few examples:

- **Working collaboratively and sharing ideas at a team meeting**
  If you're leading a meeting, try to create a safe environment where colleagues feel comfortable enough to challenge themselves. It might also be a good idea to invite your colleagues to drop you an email or speak to you later if they have any further thoughts or suggestions. Not everyone will feel confident enough to speak up in front of others and share ideas. This way, without drawing attention to the situation, you give everyone the opportunity to input in whatever way they feel most comfortable.

- **Presenting to a group of people**
  For some, presenting in front of an audience can be nerve-racking. All eyes are on you, and once you take the stand, you've reached the point of no return. If you're shy or socially anxious, your head may be polluted with toxic thoughts such as, "I'm going to fail", "They can tell I'm nervous" or even "Nobody cares what I have to say anyway". When listening to a presentation, try to make sure that your actions don't reinforce someone's self-critical behaviour. Try not to yawn, chatter amongst yourselves or laugh. Although there may be a reasonable explanation for your actions, think about how they may be perceived by the person presenting.

Useful links

Visit **www.rcpsych.ac.uk** for information on shyness and social phobia from The Royal College of Psychiatrists.

Visit MoodJuice and read their self-help manual for shyness and social phobia at **www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk**

- **Interacting with senior colleagues**
  If you're in a position of authority, try to understand how your position and status could be intimidating to someone less senior. Finding a shared interest or common ground with the person you're talking to may help them to feel more at ease. You might not both have an interest in fluffy felines or fine art, but it's likely that you've got a lot in common such as the weather, talking about what you're doing at the weekend or where you're going on holiday. Test the waters and see how you get on.

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