



October 15, 2014 | Volume 8 | Number 9

Good Company

Information to help organizations
and their employees thrive

Are Your Employees Prone to Workplace Stress? Mentoring May Help



By Lebena Varghese, MA and [Larissa K. Barber, PhD](#)

According to John Crosby “Mentoring is a brain to pick, an ear to listen and a push in the right direction.” Many of us have needed a push in the appropriate direction, especially during times of high work stress. Additionally, some of us are vulnerable to experiencing chronic levels of stress resulting in a state of high emotional, physical and mental exhaustion (i.e., burnout; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001) due to personality traits. Personality traits predict turnover, counterproductive behavior and retention of employees in the workplace (Furnham, Jackson, & Miller, 1999).

Research examining the link between personality traits and performance identifies conscientiousness as a predictor of better achievement and neuroticism as a predictor of low performance ratings from supervisors and customers (Furnham & Miller, 1997). However, it is not all bad news for employees with high neuroticism; they actually tend to outperform their counterparts who are low in neuroticism when they are able to mentally focus on a task (Smillie, Yeo, Furnham, & Jackson, 2006). Employees high on both conscientiousness and neuroticism also tend to channel their anxiety and apprehension to motivate themselves in the workplace (Chan, 2014).

Additionally, employee learning can help overcome dispositional tendencies of personality traits (Furnham et al., 1999). Thus, multiple factors may mitigate adverse consequences of trait neuroticism on performance. In this article, we discuss how mentoring may be a particularly effective strategy for helping individuals who are predisposed toward experiencing more exhaustion deal effectively with workplace stress.

What Makes Some of us More Vulnerable Than the Others?

An individual's personality traits play a crucial role in determining burnout (Cummins, 1990). Personality traits influence the way we interpret events in our environment, with some individuals likely to see negative events as more anxiety provoking or stressful (Hobfoll, 1989). Among the various dimensions of personality traits, trait neuroticism is defined as an individual's tendency to experience negative emotions such as anger, sadness and anxiety (McCrae & Costa, 1997).

Individuals who are high on this trait are hyper-responsive to their environment. These individuals construe events in their environment as threatening even when they may appear innocuous to those who may be low on trait neuroticism. Individuals who are high on trait neuroticism also tend to perceive that they have few resources (i.e., time, money, energy) to manage work demands. They often find themselves feeling that they are not equipped to overcome challenges. This perception makes them more likely to experience stress when workplace issues arise (Schneider, 2004).

An alternative explanation is that trait neuroticism can inhibit one's ability to manage negative thoughts which impairs optimal functioning. This is commonly known as *dysregulation*. In other words, being high on trait neuroticism results in focusing more on distracting information or tasks rather than the task in question (Smillie et al., 2006). Therefore, current evidence suggests that individuals high on neuroticism are susceptible and vulnerable to burnout.

How Can Mentors Help?

The quality of supervisory relationships and the support extended by supervisors influence burnout among subordinates (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005). Thus, social support can weaken the relationship between workplace demands and employee stress reactions. Employees who are isolated at work and lack support from peers and supervisors report less well-being and more exhaustion compared to those with a mentor (Bozionelos, 2006; Gillespie, Walsh, Winefields, Dua, & Stough, 2001).

Thus, mentors can help alleviate the stress experienced by their protégés. Mentors provide their protégés with resources, such as appropriate behavior models, which are aimed at helping protégés maneuver through their day-to-day tasks and their organization as a whole (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lents, & Lima, 2004). These resources take the form of psychosocial versus career-related support.

Psychosocial Support

Psychosocial support focuses on the interpersonal dimension of relationships; manifestations include counseling, role modeling, acceptance and confirmation/validation (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lents, & Lima, 2004). When stressful situations arise in the workplace, neuroticism hinders the regulation of negative emotions and the ability to focus on tasks; this could result in mentees doubting his or her competence and possessing low self-efficacy. In other words, protégés with high neuroticism are likely to avoid feedback and tend to get defensive which may impair their performance in the long run (Allen, Shockley, & Poteat, 2010). However, feedback and affirmation provided by mentors tend to act as validation for protégés and result in positive outcomes such as enhanced morale, self-efficacy and self-esteem. These strategies can direct the protégé's focus towards task performance rather than negative thoughts about the self, which is critical for using feedback effectively (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

For example, a mentor can provide psychosocial support by scheduling time to talk with a mentee who is anxious about an upcoming performance evaluation. Having a mentor providing reassurance and taking the time to listen to the employee's concerns can help reduce anxiety. Alternatively, the mentor may be able to help reframe the interpretation of an event. A new employee who is left off an email for a social event may worry that this means his new coworkers do not like him and purposely left him out. His mentor could point out alternative logical (and nonthreatening) explanations: whoever sent the email merely forgot to update the list with new employees' emails or they used the wrong new email. Thus, mentors can provide psychosocial support by providing a new perspective on workplace events and offering a sympathetic ear for the mentee's concerns. Psychosocial mentoring can also mitigate the debilitating influence of workplace stress on key organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction. The interpersonal nature of mentoring relationships enhances liking and mutual trust within the mentor-protégé dyad, which can increase career satisfaction and employee well-being (Allen et al., 2004).

Career-related support

This form of support offered by mentors assists mentees with goal-coordination, directing resources and opportunities available towards mentees (Allen et al., 2004). Employees high on trait neuroticism tend to function optimally in work environments that are engaging and effortful; their performance can suffer on quiet and less busy days because they have more time to ruminate on negative thoughts (Simille et al., 2006). Employees who are engaged in formal and informal mentoring relationships also feel less alienated at work (Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002), are more involved in their job (Aryee, Chay, & Chew, 1994) and are more effective (Day & Allen, 2004). Mentors help improve these outcomes by providing their protégés with insight into 'knowing why,' 'knowing whom' and 'knowing how' (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003).

- *Knowing why* refers to understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses, setting realistic career expectation and also learning to decouple one's identity from that of the employer. This enables protégés to be open towards other opportunities.
- *Knowing whom* helps protégés to broaden their professional network. This would mean that protégés are able to get in touch with experts (protégés may not have access to these experts in the absence of a mentor) who would be able to help them with learning skills that they haven't mastered yet.
- *Knowing how* refers to mentors helping mentees realize how their skill set can be used to develop and promote a career identity. Mentors can help protégés use their knowledge base and skills to adapt to dynamic work environments. Protégés with mentors who help them cope with these rapid and constant changes are likely to experience less strain (Eby et al., 2003).

Hence, mentors provide employees with resources to accomplish tasks when mentees are struggling to focus on viable solutions to career issues. In using the previous example of performance evaluation, career-related support from the mentor would include providing information on why performance evaluations are conducted, tips on how best prepare for the evaluation and whom to approach for more information or assistance. The mentor could also role-play potential feedback scenarios and give the employee feedback on his or her responses. Career-related support for the new employee left out of social events would include suggesting possibilities for why the event may have occurred (including errors), strategies or business etiquette tips for how the employee can socialize better with his coworkers and whom to network with outside of the mentee's organization.

Thus, mentors can provide career-related support by providing resources to help employees succeed at their jobs in both performance and social domains.

Conclusion

Although there is considerable evidence demonstrating that employees high on trait neuroticism experience more distress and strain when exposed to stressors, there are various conditions under which high neuroticism employees also perform better than their low neuroticism counterparts. Employees with high trait neuroticism are also known for being cautious and vigilant for errors. Mentoring programs within organizations can capitalize on the positive aspects of this personality trait while reducing some of the negative aspects such as high anxiety and negative ruminations.

The trust and intimacy within mentoring dyads can have a positive impact on outcomes at the individual level (e.g., enhanced subjective career success) and at the organizational level (e.g., organizational commitment, reduced turnover). As such, mentors who promote work involvement, reduce work alienation and offer reassurance can be beneficial to protégés who are particularly vulnerable towards workplace stress.

References

- Allen, T., Eby, L., Poteet, M., Lentz, E., & Lima, L. (2004). Career Benefits Associated With Mentoring for Proteges: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 89*(1), 127-136.
- Allen, T., Shockley, K., & Poteat, L. (2010). Protégé anxiety attachment and feedback in mentoring relationships. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 77*(1), 73-80.
- Aryee, S., Chay, Y., & Chew, J. (1994). An investigation of the predictors and outcomes of career commitment in three career stages. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 44*(1), 1-16.
- Bakker, A., Demerouti, E., & Euwema, M. (2005). Job resources buffer the impact of job demands on burnout. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 10*(2), 170-180.
- Bozionelos, N. (2006). Mentoring and expressive network resources: their relationship with career success and emotional exhaustion among Hellenes employees involved in emotion work. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 17*(2), 362-378.
- Chan, A. (2014). *Why Being Neurotic Could Actually Be A Good Thing*. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved 29 September 2014, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/09/healthy-neuroticism_n_5035297.html
- Cummins, R. (1990). Job stress and the buffering effect of supervisory support. *Group & Organization Management, 15*(1), 92-104.
- Day, R., & Allen, T. (2004). The relationship between career motivation and self-efficacy with prot'eg'e career success. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 64*(1), 72-91.
- Eby, L., Butts, M., & Lockwood, A. (2003). Predictors of success in the era of the boundaryless career. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 24*(6), 689-708.
- Furnham, A., & Miller, T. (1997). Personality, absenteeism and productivity. *Personality and Individual Differences, 23*(4), 705-707.
- Furnham, A., Jackson, C., & Miller, T. (1999). Personality, learning style and work performance. *Personality and Individual Differences, 27*(6), 1113-1122.

- Gillespie, N., Walsh, M., Winefield, A., Dua, J., & Stough, C. (2001). Occupational stress in universities: staff perceptions of the causes, consequences and moderators of stress. *Work & Stress*, 15(1), 53-72.
- Hobfoll, S. (1989). Conservation of resources: A new attempt at conceptualizing stress. *American Psychologist*, 44(3), 513-524.
- Kluger, A., & DeNisi, A. (1996). The effects of feedback interventions on performance: a historical review, a meta-analysis, and a preliminary feedback intervention theory. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119(2), 254-284.
- Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W., & Leiter, M. (2001). Job burnout. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52(1), 397-422.
- McCrae, R., & Costa Jr, P. (1997). Personality trait structure as a human universal. *American Psychologist*, 52(5), 509-516.
- Noe, R., Greenberger, D., & Wang, S. (2002). Mentoring: What we know and where we might go. *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, 21, 129-173.
- Schneider, T. (2004). The role of neuroticism on psychological and physiological stress responses. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 40(6), 795-804.
- Smillie, L., Yeo, G., Furnham, A., & Jackson, C. (2006). Benefits of all work and no play: the relationship between neuroticism and performance as a function of resource allocation. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91(1), 139-155.