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YOUR ANXIOUS WORKPLACE

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Work—it's a stressful business. That may not seem like big news do you, but the way anxiety plays out in the workplace is more complex and intriguing than you might imagine. For starters, it's not only individuals who get anxious. S*ystems* get anxious, too. When a workplace is under stress (which is almost always),it will have an anxiety disorder of its very own, which is not simply the sum total of the anxiety of its individual members.

Are you part of a work organization, large or small? If so you are part of an anxious system. As organizational consultant Jeffrey Miller succinctly puts it, "There is no other kind." Indeed, he suggests that if you happen to find yourself in an anxiety-free workplace, it won't be in business for long, so you should send out your resume at once.

As Miller writes in *The Anxious Organization*, anxiety is "a force of nature, as elemental as wind and rain. It is what organizations are made of, and what makes them tick." Any system that doesn't register and respond to anxiety won't survive. Nor will you survive (or at least not well) if you don't know how to recognize the signs of an anxious workplace and figure out how to manage your anxiety at a personal level.

In these days of corporate corruption and collapse, ruthless downsizing and instant terminations, it may seem like a luxury to contemplate ways to identify and tame workplace anxiety. People today live in fear of losing their jobs or not finding one to begin with. It's a wildly anxious time for economic survival. Nonetheless, most of us either work at some kind of job or are looking hard for one. As current or future members of a workplace, our livelihoods will depend partly on how well we're able to size up and negotiate the anxieties of our particular organization.

GOING TO EXTREMES

If, like many people, you happen to work in an organization that is struggling with anxiety about resources and survival, you may know firsthand that it will behave just like a dysfunctional family under stress. *All* anxious systems have certain traits and characteristics in common.

As we've seen, anxiety causes a loss of objectivity and balance in individuals, pushing us to extremes. When anxiety and fear invade your workplace, your superiors will expect too little or too much, will underreact or overreact, be too authoritarian and involved or too hands-off and withdrawn. They will over-focus on your mistakes in an unhelpful way, or ignore your performance altogether. You will be denied the information and feedback necessary to do your job, or you will given more information than you need to know or can manage. Your organization will have little spirit for adventure and risk-taking, or it

will plunge into impulsive, high-risk ventures. There will be exaggerated calls to loyalty and sameness, or not enough cohesiveness and togetherness. Sound familiar?

Anxiety is a good thing when it signals a problem and motivates a group to pull together to solve it. Without anxiety, a system wouldn't register and respond to threats to its survival. But more frequently, this signal value of anxiety is lost in the stampede toward extremes. It primes everyone to "do something," even when the nature of the threat isn't clear. Even if it is, there may be no agreement about what to do. The lack of a clear perspective and a plan of action generate additional anxiety, which turns into chronic, underground anxiety. This results in poorly thought-out behaviors, less objective thinking, and less creative problem-solving that considers both history and the future. In addition, you can expect a steep decline in civility and cooperation among participants in the system.

You can't observe the actual anxiety in a system because anxiety is an invisible force that flows from one person (or department) to another. But you *can* observe the symptoms and signs of an anxious system, just as you can observe the symptoms and signs of your anxious self. *Observation* is the first step in changing your own anxiety-driven behaviors so that you will feel more comfortable at work.

IS THIS YOUR BOSS?

If you're in a chronically anxious (read, dysfunctional) system, your boss or supervisor probably do what anxious people automatically do. When stress hits, she might angrily confront someone or go for the quick fix. She might give in to the impulse ot "do something," like calling an emergency meeting or demanding that an employee meet a near-impossible deadline. Of course, any "solution" hatched in the overheated incubator of anxiety will almost surely be the wrong one.

Other typical anxiety-driven behaviors might prevail. Your boss might become fixated on the "hot spots" in the organization while ignoring the quieter problems that also need attention. He might participate in gossip, take sides and form cliques or triangles. He might apply personnel policies in an arbitrary or partial manner, or announce ambitious new plans or initiatives—then suddenly abandon them. When employees got embroiled in seeming irresolvable conflicts, he might over focus on certain "difficult personalities" ("Bob is passive-aggressive") rather than staying task-oriented, gathering facts, and clarifying policy and procedures.

What else? Your anxious boss might fail to ask clarifying questions, state clear expectations, give direct feedback about performance, or listen well to the different opinions of others. Instead her communications might be vague, contradictory, mystifying—or dictatorial. Or she might try to make her employees feel like "one big happy family" by failing to take unpopular positions when need be or by discouraging open expressions of dissent.

I'm not just making a laundry list of the regrettable qualities that your lousy boss may have. We tend to think of an individual's behavior as reflecting fixed "personality characteristics." But people are capable of varying levels of competence, depending on their own level of stress and the level of anxiety in

the system. If your boss were magically free of anxiety and stress, he might behave with more clarity and maturity.

But reality is reality. If your workplace is chronically anxious someone at work will drive you crazy a good bit of the time. Even mature bosses and administrators (if you're lucky enough to have them)) will start making decisions on the basis of emotions rather than clear thinking. You will be vulnerable to absorbing high levels of anxiety yourself unless you know how to protect yourself by recognizing and modifying your own style of managing stress.

Put on your anthropologist hat and think of yourself as an observer of a fascinating culture. It is the culture of the anxious system—your workplace system. Keep in mind that all systems are anxious a good deal of the time, to one degree or another. Obviously, anxiety is highest when resources are scarce and the well-being or survival of your organization is threatened. But it's important to remember that any change can trigger anxiety in a system. So even when your workplace has abundant resources, you can count on the fact that your work system, like your family system, will be regularly hit with sources of stress from changes both inside and outside the organization

ANXIETY TRAVELS

When stress hits your workplace, anxiety will zoom through the system as everyone tries to get rid of their own by dumping it on someone else. How you manage your own anxiety, no matter where you are in the work hierarchy, will either calm things down or further rev things up.

From a systems perspective, there are five styles of managing anxiety. These are the patterned ways we move under stress:

- Underfunctioning
- Overfunctioning
- Distancing
- Blaming
- Triangles (Gossip, gossip, gossip)

These behaviors are a good barometer of the level of anxiety in any work (or family) system. Of course, there are an infinite number of things that you might do to reduce your personal stress and get comfortable, like eating the bag of potato chips that's stashed in your desk or going for a walk around the block. But there are only five automatic patterned ways that we behave *in relationships* under stress.

Each of these styles of managing anxiety bring short-term comfort with a long-term cost, like eating potato chips. Your style of managing anxiety will interact with the other person's style of managing anxiety, generating increasingly high levels of tension. If you have an especially intense relationship with someone in your workplace, you know how hard it can be to wake up in the morning, put your clothes on and go to work. Let's take a look at how anxiety travels, and how we can avoid absorbing too much of it ourselves--or passing it along to others.

WHOSE ANXIETY ARE YOU CATCHING?

During my first job, I learned how quickly anxiety travels, and how easy it is to participate in a downward-spiraling process. Actually, I didn't learn a thing when I was in the system--except how miserable I was and how victimized I felt. It's hard to be objective when we're in the soup. Plus, I knew nothing about systems theory at the time and viewed everything as a matter of individual pathology—the *other* person's pathology, of course. I was riveted on who was right and what was true, rather than observing and modifying my style of managing anxiety and stress.

Here was my scenario:

The Setting: *A Large Psychiatric Hospital in San Francisco*

The Players *(from the top down):*

Dr. Pattel: Director of the Psychiatry Hospital

Dr. White: Chief Psychologist (reports to Dr. Pattel) and my therapy supervisor

Me: Psychology intern at the hospital

Ms. Walters: Senior secretary

Alice: The 19-year-old daughter of Dr. Pattel

The Plot: *Alice called me for psychotherapy. I agreed to see her. Anxiety cascades down the system, at the expense of everyone's functioning.*

Scene 1: Friday afternoon at work

Alice called me at work and asked to see me in psychotherapy. She and I had been introduced at a party in Berkeley a week earlier. I had time available so I agreed to meet with her.

Scene 2: Saturday afternoon at Dr. Pattel's home

Alice told her father, Dr. Pattel, that she would be starting therapy with me next week. He became extremely anxious. Understandably, he wanted Alice to be seen by a senior therapist with more status and experience than I possessed. Also, he was not especially fond of me, which may have been why Alice chose me in the first place.

Scene 3: Saturday evening phone call

Dr. Pattel phoned my supervisor, Dr. White. He angrily demanded to know why Dr. White had allowed this to happen. In fact, Dr. White knew nothing about the situation, because I planned to inform him during our supervision meeting the following Monday. Indeed, I had no inkling that agreeing to see Alice was a big deal because I had permission to pick up appointments if I had open hours. In fact, I was flattered that Alice had chosen me as her therapist and I naively thought that Dr. White would be pleased as well.

Scene 4: Monday morning at work

I arrived at work Monday to find a memo in my mailbox from Dr. White, typed by Ms. Walters, the senior secretary, who sat at the front desk. Dr. White wrote that he was "dismayed and disappointed" that I had agreed to see Alice without consulting him and noted that my failure to talk with him before the weekend had put him in a bad light with Dr. Pattel. Dr. White said he wanted to meet with me "immediately" even though we had a scheduled supervision meeting that afternoon. The tone of the memo was stern and admonishing. I was flooded with anxiety.

Scene 5: From Bad to Worse

Before I had even met with Alice for an initial appointment, the emotional climate surrounding the therapy process was anxious and emotionally intense. Dr. Pattel had passed his anxiety along to Dr. White, who in turn had passed it on to me.

The wisest course might have been to call Alice at this point and tell her that, unfortunately, I had been mistaken and I couldn't see her. In fact, she probably would have gotten better treatment outside of her father's hospital. But Dr. White informed me that he and Dr. Pattel decided that I would see Alice and that he (Dr. White) would supervise my work with her very closely.

And so he did. What developed was an excruciating overfunctioning-underfunctioning dance. Dr. White micromanaged my work with Alice at the expense of paying attention to my work with other patients. As an inexperienced therapist, I was anxious to begin with, but under Dr. White's intense scrutiny, I had increasing difficulty reaching for my competence and drawing upon my creativity and intuition in my work with Alice. I constantly feared saying the wrong thing to her, rather than simply viewing mistakes as an opportunity to learn. Whenever I met with Alice, I felt Dr. White's stern presence in the room. I'm quite sure Dr. White felt that Dr. Pattel was looking over his shoulder, too.

Several months into the treatment process, I forgot a therapy session with Alice. She sat in the waiting room in her father's hospital, while I was nowhere in sight. It was the first time I had ever spaced out on a therapy appointment, and I'm sure my anxiety (and tamped-down anger) contributed to my forgetting. To make matters worse, I had neglected to give my weekly schedule to the secretary, Ms. Walters, as I was supposed to. She didn't even know where to look for me.

Ms. Walters jumped into the fray by calling Dr. White and informing him that Alice had an appointment with me and I had gone AWOL. She added that I hadn't filled out my schedule, and mentioned that I often neglected to give her a completed schedule at the start of the week. While this was true, Ms. Walters had never spoken to me directly about the problem. Dr. White's reaction was immediate and intense: *Everything* must be done to locate me. Phones starting ringing throughout the hospital, but I was nowhere to be found. Even now, decades later, I recall exactly where I was during that hour. I was in a café down the street, happily eating a roast beef sandwich. .

I walked back into a thrum of anxiety. There was a stack of memos and phone messages waiting for me, as well as disapproving looks from the secretaries. Dr. Pattel passed me in the hall with averted

eyes and no greeting. Even before I took my coat off, several people told me that Dr. White was looking for me.

Scene 6: From Worse to Worser

En route to Dr. White's office, my anxiety blossomed into anger. This was the first time I had forgotten a therapy appointment. I regretted it, but it was not a huge deal. I knew of other psychology interns, and even senior staff members, who had done the same. How could I function in this crazy goldfish bowl? I was enraged by the entire situation, including Ms. Walters' incendiary call to my supervisor, which was certainly not standard procedure.

I did exactly the wrong thing. I walked into Dr. White's office and began, "I'm sorry I forgot the appointment with Alice, ***but***…" Then I preceded to blame Dr. White for my situation, implying that he was partly responsible for my spacing out on the session, because how could I possibly do good work with him breathing down my neck?

I believe I put it more tactfully than that, but as you might imagine, this conversation did not go well. Dr. White responded to my defensiveness and blaming by becoming more defensive and blaming himself. He told me that even the secretaries found me difficult and that my failure to fill out my weekly schedule reflected "a narcissistic sense of entitlement." He noted that my poor attitude would be reflected in my written evaluation. This infuriated me further and made me sorry I had ever agreed to see Alice.

I thought things couldn't get any worse, but I was wrong. I was late for my next therapy session with Alice! I took a phone call five minutes before the appointment and didn't watch the clock. Ah, the power of the unconscious! Ms. Walters knew I was in my office and she could have simply knocked on my door or buzzed me. Instead, she called Dr. White and announced that "Alice has been sitting in the waiting room for ten minutes while Harriet is on the phone." Dr. White banged on my office door, furious. "Why aren't you with Alice?" he barked. Awash in anxiety, I proceeded to do what anxious people do. I distanced, blamed, triangled and so forth.

The Post Mortem

Only later did I understand that all of the players in this drama had the same goals, which were to provide Alice with good therapy, and to get comfortable themselves. In anxious situations, people rarely have bad intentions. In my workplace, everyone was trying to make a difficult situation better, but responded in his or her automatic, patterned way of managing anxiety. Unwittingly, everyone made it worse.

Perhaps you sympathize with one person more than another. At the time, I sympathized entirely with myself and blamed everyone else. It's easier to blame others than to observe how anxiety travels through a system and develop a plan to modify one's own anxiety-binding behaviors. Let's consider how each player *could* have managed their anxiety more functionally--from the top down.

Dr. Pattel

The anxiety could have been contained right here. Dr. Pattel had the authority to tell Dr. White that I was not to see Alice. Or, if he did want me to see his daughter in therapy, it was not constructive for Dr. Pattel to make an intense call to Dr. White at home over the weekend. Dr. Pattel could have waited until Monday and calmly communicated that he was concerned about my inexperience, but confident that Dr. White would do a good job supervising me. Then he could have bowed out of the process. This would have helped to create a calmer emotional climate, which ultimately would have given the therapy the best chance of succeeding.

Dr. White

Dr. White could have contained the anxiety that Dr. Pattel passed on to him, rather than passing it on down the pike. When Dr. Pattel called him on Saturday, Dr. White could have stayed factual and calm. ("I'll check with Harriet on Monday, since I didn't know about this. Would you like me to tell her to refer Alice to another therapist?")

The critical memo that Dr. White left in my mailbox Monday morning also drove the intensity higher. He could have waited to talk to me during our regular supervision hour later that day. He might have said lightly, "You know, Harriet, what you did was totally understandable, since the policy is that you can accept patients who call you directly when you have open hours. But since Alice is the daughter of the head of the department, you should have checked it out with me before agreeing to see her." Obviously, I would be more likely to be able to hear constructive criticism if it was delivered calmly and respectfully.

Dr. White also could have gotten a grip on his own pattern of overfunctioning under stress. By focusing on me as "the problem" in an intense and worried way, he only made the situation worse. Ditto for his supervising me too closely, and focusing more on my incompetence than on my competence. Also, his comment on my personality ("You have a narcisstic sense of entitlement") was a form of blaming and one-upmanship that only drove the anxiety higher. It would have been better if he had stayed with facts and expectations. ("Giving your schedule to Ms. Walters each week is part of your job and you need to do it.")

Ms. Walters

Ms. Walters escalated the anxiety further by overstepping boundaries. It was not standard procedure for a secretary to call a therapist's supervisor about a late or missed appointment. She should have talked directly to me, whether the issue was Alice sitting in the waiting room or my failure to give her my schedule.

When we talk *about* a person being a problem, rather than directly *to* them, we add to the underground anxiety and make it harder for the talked-about person to behave with confidence and competence.

My Part In the Dance

I did most of the automatic things we do under stress. I underfunctioned, blamed, distanced, and gossiped--the whole works! Let's take a closer look at the five styles of managing anxiety, with an eye toward learning more about the patterned ways we move under stress.

THE FIVE STYLES OF MANAGING ANXIETY

Underfunctioning

My sibling position (the younger sister of a sister) primed me for *underfunctioning*—doing too little. You don't need to be a youngest child to underfunction. But youngests are naturals, just as eldests are natural overfunctioners and can become control freaks under stress.

Underfunctioning in the workplace can take many forms. You may not meet the requirements of the job. Or you may be quite competent, but present yourself in a manner that invites people to see you as spacey, immature or irresponsible. You may project an image of helplessness and vulnerability, inviting others to take over for you. You may do brilliant work, but underfunction in a specified area, such as not doing your paperwork, meeting deadlines, or showing up for meetings on time.

In the youngest child's quest to be a creative and charming free spirit, she may underestimate the importance of following rules, respecting hierarchies, and attending to the more tedious requirements of the job. Youngests tend to be very critical of authority, and quite certain they will do a better job—but may drop leadership like a hot potato if it's actually offered to them. Youngests may also underfunction by sharing personal information at work before taking enough time to test out the maturity level of the individuals they take into their confidence.

I needed to get a grip on underfunctioning. It was my responsibility to figure out how I could do my best work with Alice. It was also my responsibility to meet all the requirements of my job, including filling out my weekly schedule and getting it to Ms. Walters in a timely fashion. If I had a lot of status, perhaps I could have gotten away with underfunctioning around the edges. But as a junior person, I needed to do everything required of me, rather than thinking that my talent for the "real work" of psychology excused me from the parts of the job I disliked.

Here are the lessons I learned, if not on the job, then after the job.

Lesson #1: Take Responsibility

Meet all the requirements of your job before asking for a special project or privilege. Abide by the rules. Many details of the job may seem trivial or tedious to you, like meeting all your paperwork deadlines or returning from lunch on time. If they are important to your boss or supervisor, do them.

Underfunctioners often get labeled "a problem." So in addition to meeting your job requirements, be cautious about sharing personal problems and other sensitive information in your work setting. Take time to assess who is mature, kind, trustworthy and discreet—and who is not.

Blaming

It has always been my strength to speak openly and directly to authority when I am angry about injustice. But the productive use of anger is different from non-productive blaming that gets nowhere or even makes things worse. Dr. White was already anxious himself, and my attempts to be "open" with him, especially when I had no consideration for such matters as timing and tact, only raised the intensity higher.

Instead, I should have focused on my part of the problem, and figured out how I could lower the negative intensity between us. For example, it didn't help matters when I criticized Dr. White for supervising my work with Alice too closely. Instead, I might have said, "Dr. White, I appreciate your help with Alice, but I feel as though I'm neglecting some of my other patients." (This was true) I need to use this supervision hour to talk about Charles. I'm really stuck in my work with him right now and I really need your perspective." That way, I would have related to his competence and I would not have been seen as a blamer and complainer.

Likewise, I could have found a diplomatic way to talk about my anxiety working with a VIP under such close supervision, without implying that Dr. White was responsible for my feelings and behaviors. For example, "Dr. White, I appreciate your help with Alice but it also makes me anxious to know that you're watching my every move. Do you have any advice on how I could deal with this anxiety, or work more collaboratively with you on helping Alice."

Lesson #2: Think it Through

Blaming is an automatic response to anxiety. You overfocus on what the other person is doing to you (or not doing for you) and underfocus on your own creative options to change your part in the problem. You lose your capacity to see two sides of a problem, or better yet, six or seven sides.

Your anger may be totally legitimate, but as my friend Marianne Ault-Riche says, "It is when the other person is being the biggest jerk, that you are called upon to be your most mature self." When anxiety is high, it's far more important to be strategic than spontaneous. When an organization is under stress, any one individual can easily become a candidate for the position of "Problem Employee." Don't raise your hand and volunteer for the job by getting seen as a blamer or complainer.

While clear and direct communication is always a good move, people confuse "honesty" and "clarity" with blaming. ("I told my boss he was sexist and threatened by strong women.") Blaming is the easiest way to ruin your career. It's surprising how many people blame when it *never* benefits the blamer. If you observe the best employees or bosses they don't blame, they just talk about the facts of what happened with another person.

When you're feeling angry or intense, take time out to consider what you want to accomplish and how you can state your different views without getting critical or defensive yourself. *Strike when the iron is cold.*

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Distancing

When anxiety hits, we all withdraw from the people we find difficult. When I got sufficiently uncomfortable, I said to myself, "Dr. White is so impossible that I am just going to stay in my office, shut the door, and speak to him only when absolutely necessary in our weekly supervision meetings." And, "Ms. Walters and the other secretaries are gossiping about me and I'm going to avoid them, too." And, "Dr. Pattel should be staying the hell out of this therapy process, and I don't want to see his face."

So what's wrong with that? As a family therapist friend says, "Thank God for distance and cut-off!" We *do* need to protect ourselves when the feelings evoked by connecting are unmanageable or simply too painful. Withdrawal does relieve anxiety and intensity. The flight response (like the fight response) is wired into us for good reason.

Here's the problem: Other people's misperceptions about you will only harden if you avoid showing your face. The more you distance from people in your work group, the more you will become the target of other people's inaccurate perceptions and gossip. You will carry more underground tension in the long run if you avoid the short-term anxiety that is evoked by making some contact.

Lesson # 3: Hang Out Rather than Hide Out

Show up at events, office parties, and informal gatherings around the coffee pot. Look people in the eye, smile, and say hello. Use humor, bantering and small talk to lower the tension with difficult people. Try to move *toward* the person who is most critical of you, show some interest in his work and ideas, and give the difficult person credit for good qualities they have.

Temporary distance is crucial, especially when we need to calm down, think and make a plan. Just don't let it get entrenched. Plus, if you don't make regular contact and engage in bantering and small talk during calm times, there's no chance you'll be heard when you try to address a controversial issue.

Emotional Distancing

This is a subset of distancing: You may show up bodily, but withdraw emotionally. You fail to say what you really think about important issues. You silence yourself because you don't want to make waves, criticize, or draw negative attention to yourself. Or maybe you've just "given up." You may sit in meetings entertaining your own private fantasies. Or you may try to pay attention, but you're not an authentically engaged participant.

Emotional distancing isn't my automatic style, or at least not my first line of defense. I tend to over talk hot issues when I'm anxious, rather than avoiding them. But I have been in work settings where emotional distance prevails--and boredom and flatness result. Lifelessness, disengagement, fatigue, "burnout," the loss of spontaneity, creativity and vitality, are the hallmarks of a system where silence and secrecy prevails and anxiety is managed primarily by emotional distancing.

Lesson #4: Stay Present and Be Real

That doesn't mean you need to speak to every irritation that comes along. My automatic tendency to confront every injustice in the workplace has often been unproductive. It's an act of maturity to choose your battles and let other things go. When when an issue is important to you, you need to be able to ask clear questions, say what you think and believe, and clarify where you stand. But choosing your battles is especially important because anyone who tries to change too much of the organization is seen as a "problem person."

Gossip! Gossip! Gossip!

What is "gossip?" We gossip when we talk *about* someone, rather than directly *to* them. Two people move closer toward each other at the expense of the gossiped-about party, who is focused on in a critical or worried way. You can measure the amount of anxiety in any system by the amount of gossip going on.

When things got intense with Dr. White, I gossiped away! For example, I tried to get some sympathy from a bright young psychiatrist by badmouthing Dr. White and telling her how impossible he was. I described him as "a nasty little ferret," zealously nosing around to uproot my imperfections. At first she was sympathetic. But Dr. White also supervised her, and she needed to have a good relationship with him. She soon become Dr. White's "golden girl" and distanced from me. As the outsider in a triangle I had helped to create, my anxiety increased further.

Can it ever be useful to involve a third party? Of course. When I was having trouble with Dr. White, it would have been helpful for me to seek out a wise, clear-headed person for advice about better managing my relationship with him. But I wasn't looking for helpful coaching, which requires a focus on the self. I was looking for an ally--a perfectly normal human impulse. So I grabbed anyone I thought might be sympathetic.

The higher my anxiety, the more I wanted to corner everyone and say, "Let me tell you what that horrid, intrusive little ferret is doing *now*!" That would have been fine to do with my husband or best friends. But talking about Dr. White to others in the workplace, and especially to the young psychiatrist who needed to have a good relationship with him, was unwise. A good rule about gossip is to try not to say anything that you wouldn't want to be overheard.

Lesson #5: Be Straightforward

When you are having a problem with someone at work, talk directly to that person. If you're angry with Gregory, don't complain about Gregory to Sue, especially if Sue needs to have a viable work relationship with him. At best, gossiping can only work short-term. If you stop Sue in the hallway to spout off about Gregory and she responds sympathetically, your anxiety may diminish. Letting off steam this way may help you to calm down and manage things with Gregory in a better way. We participate in this kind of transient gossip all the time, sometimes with no harm done.

Of course, it's better to say, "Sue, I'm having some trouble working with Gregory. Do you have any advice on what I can do to make this easier?" When you make gossiping a habit, it can backfire big-time. If you keep up the negative focus on Gregory, Sue may become more distant from Gregory or more reactive to him. If Gregory is underfunctioning, he will have to work even harder to gain competence if he's the subject of gossip. Or, if Sue begins to like and respect Gregory, she may begin to distance from *you*. Gossip creates insiders and outsiders. It makes it more difficult for all parties to resolve the issues between them and to feel competent and included.

Overfunctioning

Overfunctioning—doing too much--takes several forms. It's the natural province of firstborns, who tend to think they know what's best not only for themselves but for everyone else on the planet. Dr. White overfunctioned in typical firstborn fashion, supervising my work too closely and failing to recognize that his hyper-vigilance only increased my anxiety.

Overfunctioning was the one thing I did *not* do in my first workplace. But I did my share of it over the course of my long career at the Menninger Clinic. My particular "youngest" style of overfunctioning was to act as though I had the truth of the universe and to zealously try to convince my misguided colleagues of the error of their ways. I jumped into the center of every hot issue, overtalking my point even after it was clear that my listeners had had enough. The combination of my overfunctioning (trying to change, educate and reform my colleagues) and underfunctioning (losing forms under piles on my desk, ignoring administrative protocol) did not endear me to my superiors. In fact, I was told I had the "largest personnel file" of any psychologist in the history of the institution. While my friend Stephanie considers this distinction to be "a shiny badge of honor," it caused me considerable pain to be the target of negative focus.

Lesson #6: Know When to Stop

To begin to let go of overfunctioning, it may help to consider how your sibling position may influence your style.

If you are the older sister of a sister, you may overfunction in a manner that gives you the reputation of being a bossy control freak.

If you're an older brother (or the first male in your sibling group), you're in luck. Your overfunctioning may lead you to be seen as a "natural leader" and a person who knows how to take charge. (If you think this might be sexist, you're right.)

If you're the older sister of a brother, you won't rustle feathers. But in your unassuming, tactful way of assuming leadership, others may overlook your competence and contributions.

If you're a middle sibling, you may be seen as a "good team player." Your style of overfunctioning may involve taking on extra work and responsibilities, while ignoring your own career goals or failing to formulate them in the first place.

If you are a middle sister with brothers, you may be particularly dutiful, sensitive to the needs of others, as well as conflict-avoidant. You may also be overly tolerant of the underfunctioning of other, and overfunction by picking up slack for others who screw up or slack off.

Overfunctioning youngests, as I said earlier, can act like bossy, know-it-alls but are typically more interested in feeling included, appreciated and understood, than in assuming leadership.

Of course, a person in any sibling position can adopt any or all of the five styles in the same work context--and even on the same day. All of these styles are normal and ordinary ways of navigating relationships under stress. The higher the anxiety, the more we "overdo" these behaviors. This contributes to more anxious reactivity. So we need to calm down, think clearly, and modify our own style of navigating relationships under stress.

THINK SYSTEMS!

When my workplace drama (still painful after all these years) unfolded, I had no idea how to "think systems." To understand anxiety from a systems perspective, keep these key points in mind:

1. Anxiety is a characteristic of human systems, not something that exists only in the individuals who comprise the group.
2. Everyone in a system is connected to everyone else. That means you will always be reacting to how other people manage their anxiety, just as they will be always be reacting to how you manage your anxiety.
3. Anxiety never stays contained. Rather, it zooms through a system at high-speed, gathering steam at every point along the way.
4. Anxiety is contagious. Intensity and reactivity only breed more of the same.
5. Calm is also contagious. Nothing is more important than getting a grip on your own reactivity.

In an anxious system, someone will always be dumping his or her anxiety on you. It's an automatic process, not anybody's villainous plan. Keep in mind that blaming, gossip, distancing, underfunctioning and overfunctioning are normal expressions of anxiety. As you learn to recognize the signs of an anxious system, you will begin to stop taking things so personally and start observing people's automatic style of managing anxiety--your own included. If you can learn to think in terms of anxious systems, you will understand that anxiety makes nice people do obnoxious things. Or, as Jeffrey Miller puts it in his gem of a book, *The Anxious Organization*, "anxiety makes smart organizations do stupid things."

The challenge is always to observe, think about, and modify your part in the relational impasses that are causing you pain. The only part of the system you can change is your own reaction to anxiety. You can learn to let other people's anxiety float by you, and to pass on less anxiety than you receive. When we can transmit less intensity than we receive in the systems we belong to, we are not only moving in the direction of calming things down. We are also doing what the world desperately needs: creating a more peaceable, openhearted place to live.

WHAT ANXIETIES DO *YOU* BRING TO WORK?

Your workplace is an anxious system that will pass anxiety along to you. But you also bring your personal anxieties to the workplace. First, there are situational stresses that you currently face. If your house just flooded and your daughter's illness flared up, you won't be in a very calm place when you go to work.

Then there are emotionally loaded issues that you carry with you from your past, including your place in your family of origin. What meanings do success and failure have for you? How have your fears of succeeding and failing been influenced by your parents' hopes, fears, expectations, struggles, work histories and unfulfilled longings? You may come from a family where it was important to dazzle and shine. Or, by contrast, your parents may have considered it sinful to "have a swelled head" or to draw attention to the fact that it was you who hit the winning home run. You may be especially anxious about being unrecognized, or you may prefer invisibility and fear hurting others if you're not perpetually dimming your lights.

You will also have particular emotional triggers that activate at work, depending on your experience growing up in your family. For example, your past may prime you to be especially reactive to being unappreciated, or feeling like "the outsider" or incurring other people's anger and disapproval. Or your emotional trigger may be the thought of being laughed at. You don't necessarily need to go into therapy and root around in your past to explore all the factors that evoke your anxiety in the world of work. But you do need to learn how to observe the five styles of managing anxiety in yourself and others. When stress is high you will automatically fall back on one or more of the five styles--and so will everyone around you.

Most important, you need to know that you can survive without a particular job, if need be. You must be prepared to leave. Many people feel they can't live without their jobs, but when they must, most manage to find a way to survive, and even to generate creative new options they never even knew existed. If you're convinced you can't live without your job, then you can't really act on your principles, say what you think and feel, and maintain a clear bottom line. You will be vulnerable to anxiety, depression and a host of stress-related physical ailments—all symptoms of helplessness. By contrast, when you recognize that you will ultimately survive without any *particular* job, you gain enormous power.

A CAVEAT: DON'T CONFUSE WORK AND FAMILY!

For the most part, work systems and family systems operate in pretty much the same way. That said, never confuse your workplace with your family! There is one important difference. The family you grew up in might have been pretty crazy, but when financially hard times hit they probably didn't put you out on the street to fend for yourself. It is rare for a parent to put a memo on a child's desk, saying, "You've been with us for ten years, and you've always been a loyal family member, but money is scarce now, so we

have to terminate you. Please have your belongings cleared out by 3 p.m. Our very best wishes for your future." A work system will do just that.

Sometimes a workplace will pretend it's a family. If an organization is thriving economically and does not feel threatened, it can pay a great deal of attention to your professional goals and job satisfaction. My organization claimed to be "family" when it saw itself as having unlimited resources and a future that stretched out forever. But as a family systems therapist reminds me, organizations live, sicken and die just like people do. When survival anxiety is high, you will discover just how expendable you are. In fact, your "work family" may treat you in such an insensitive and uncaring manner that it will take your breath away.

I say this not to demoralize you, but rather to encourage you to keep your expectations realistic and your options open. The primary goal of a work organization is to ensure its own economic viability. Unlike a family, it does not exist to nurture your growth, offer you intimacy or make you happy, although it's wonderful when those things happen. But work is work. Family is family. Don't confuse them--and you'll have one less thing to be anxious about.