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Towards Inclusive Workplaces for Employees with Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Coping at work, perceived performance effects and HR practices that
promote wellbeing

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ABSTRACT:

This thesis examines how employees with Generalized Anxiety Disorder cope with their condition at work, how they perceive its influence on their daily functioning and performance and which organizational practices they believe best support their wellbeing. Existing research shows that anxiety disorders can affect concentration, emotional regulation and work performance, and that workplace conditions such as high demands, unclear expectations and limited support may intensify symptoms. At the same time, earlier studies indicate that supportive leadership, clear structures and inclusive organizational practices can reduce psychological strain and improve work functioning. However, there is still limited research that focuses specifically on the everyday work experiences of employees with GAD and their own perspectives on coping and support.

A quantitative cross sectional survey was conducted using an online questionnaire completed by 156 participants who self identified as having GAD. The survey explored anxiety symptoms at work, coping strategies, perceived impacts on performance, disclosure decisions and preferred forms of workplace support. The results show that anxiety is a frequent part of the workday for many respondents, particularly in situations involving deadlines, meetings and interactions with colleagues or managers. Participants relied on a range of coping strategies, with short breaks, calming sounds and breathing techniques reported as the most effective.

Workplace conditions emerged as especially important for wellbeing. Clear instructions, predictable routines, supportive leadership and flexible working arrangements were most often described as helpful. Many participants had not disclosed their condition at work, although those who had disclosed often reported improved understanding and support. Overall, the findings suggest that while individual coping strategies matter, organizational structures and workplace culture play a central role in shaping how manageable anxiety feels at work. The study highlights the importance of HR and managerial practices that promote clarity, flexibility, fair workload management and psychological safety in order to support employees with long term anxiety conditions and foster more inclusive and sustainable working environments.

KEYWORDS: Generalized Anxiety Disorder, workplace anxiety, coping strategies, employee wellbeing, work performance, Human Resource Management, psychological safety, inclusive HR practices

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TIIVISTELMÄ:

Tämä tutkielma tarkastelee, miten yleistynyttä ahdistuneisuushäiriötä (Generalized Anxiety Disorder, GAD) sairastavat työntekijät selviytyvät työssään, miten he kokevat häiriön vaikuttavan päivittäiseen toimintakykyynsä ja suoriutumiseensa sekä millaisia organisaatiokäytäntöjä he pitävät hyvinvointiaan parhaiten tukevana. Aiempi tutkimus osoittaa, että ahdistuneisuushäiriöt voivat heikentää keskittymiskykyä, tunnesäätelyä ja työssä suoriutumista, ja että työolosuhteet kuten korkeat vaatimukset, epäselvät odotukset ja vähäinen tuki voivat voimistaa oireita. Samalla tutkimukset viittaavat siihen, että tukeva johtaminen, selkeät rakenteet ja osallistavat organisaatiokäytännöt voivat vähentää psyykkistä kuormitusta ja parantaa työssä toimimista. Tutkimusta, joka keskittyisi nimenomaan GAD:ta sairastavien työntekijöiden arjen työkokemuksiin sekä heidän omiin näkemyksiinsä selviytymisestä ja tuesta, on kuitenkin edelleen rajallisesti.

Tutkimus toteutettiin määrällisenä tutkimuksena verkkokyselyn avulla. Kyselyyn vastasi 156 osallistujaa, jotka tunnistivat itsensä GAD:ta sairastaviksi. Kyselyssä tarkasteltiin ahdistusoireita työssä, selviytymiskeinoja, koettuja vaikutuksia työssä suoriutumiseen, sairauden esille tuomista työpaikalla sekä toivottuja tukimuotoja. Tulokset osoittavat, että ahdistuneisuus on monille vastaajille toistuva osa työpäivää, erityisesti tilanteissa, jotka liittyvät määräaikoihin, kokouksiin ja vuorovaikutukseen kollegoiden tai esihenkilöiden kanssa. Vastaajat hyödynsivät monipuolisia selviytymisstrategioita, joista tehokkaimmiksi koettiin lyhyet tauot, rauhoittavat äänet ja hengitystekniikat.

Työpaikan olosuhteet nousivat keskeiseen rooliin hyvinvoinnin kannalta. Selkeät ohjeet, ennakoitavat rutiinit, tukeva johtaminen ja joustavat työjärjestelyt koettiin erityisen hyödyllisiksi. Monet vastaajista eivät olleet kertoneet ahdistuneisuushäiriöstään työpaikalla, mutta ne, jotka olivat kertoneet, raportoivat usein lisääntyneitä ymmärrystä ja tukea. Kokonaisuudessaan tulokset viittaavat siihen, että yksilöllisillä selviytymiskeinoilla on merkitystä, mutta organisaatorakenteilla ja työpaikkakulttuurilla on keskeinen rooli siinä, kuinka hallittavalta

ahdistuneisuus tuntuu työssä. Tutkimus korostaa henkilöstöhallinnon ja esihenkilötyön käytäntöjen merkitystä selkeyden, joustavuuden, oikeudenmukaisen työkuorman hallinnan ja psykologisen turvallisuuden edistämiseksi, jotta pitkäaikaista ahdistuneisuutta kokevia työntekijöitä voidaan tukea ja työympäristöistä tehdä entistä osallistavampia ja kestävämpiä.

AVAINSANAT: Generalized Anxiety Disorder, workplace anxiety, coping strategies, employee wellbeing, work performance, Human Resource Management, psychological safety, inclusive HR practices

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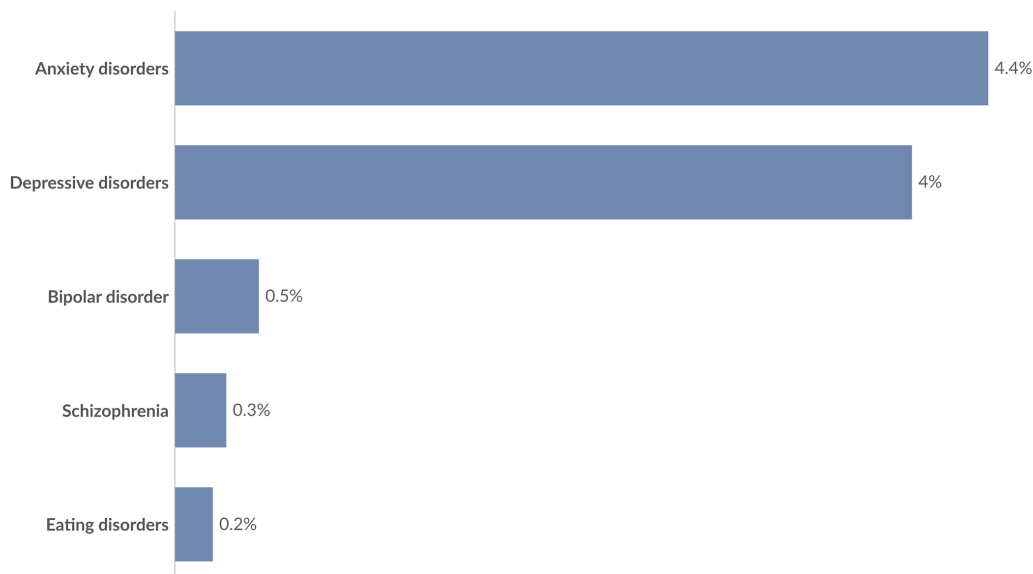
1 Introduction

Mental health problems are common around the world, and anxiety disorders are among the most common. Many people experience anxiety symptoms during a given year, which makes anxiety an important topic in mental health research. When compared with other mental health conditions such as depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, anxiety disorders affect a larger part of the population, as shown in the chart below. This high prevalence provides important background for the present study and shows why it is important to better understand how anxiety affects everyday functioning, especially in relation to working life.

Mental illnesses prevalence, World, 2021



The estimated share of people with each mental illness in a given year, whether or not they were diagnosed, based on representative surveys, medical data and statistical modeling.



Data source: IHME, Global Burden of Disease (2024)

OurWorldinData.org/mental-health | CC BY

Figure 1 Mental illness prevalence. Source: IHME, Global Burden of Disease (2024).

Generalized Anxiety Disorder is usually described as a long term condition marked by persistent worry, tension and difficulty controlling anxious thoughts (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). People with GAD often experience symptoms such as restlessness, irritability, problems with concentration, muscle tension and sleep

difficulties. These symptoms are generally ongoing rather than linked to specific situations, and their intensity may change over time. While GAD affects many areas of life outside of work, it can also influence how individuals manage the mental and emotional demands of their job. When anxiety symptoms are present, tasks that require sustained focus, decision making or emotional regulation may feel more difficult. This can shape how employees experience their workday and how they evaluate their own performance.

Across different workplaces, mental health difficulties have increasingly been recognized as an organizational concern. Previous research shows that conditions such as anxiety are linked to both absenteeism and presenteeism, which together lead to productivity losses and financial costs for employers (de Oliveira et al., 2020). Anxiety disorders in particular have been associated with reduced work functioning and, in some cases, fewer career opportunities or slower career progression (Erickson et al., 2009). Despite these challenges, many employees living with long term anxiety continue to carry out their work without formal workplace accommodations. Rather than receiving structured support, they often rely on personal coping strategies while trying to meet job demands and maintain acceptable levels of performance.

Cognitive functioning appears to be one area that is especially affected by anxiety. Research suggests that anxiety can interfere with attention, reduce working memory and make information processing less efficient. This can make it more difficult to manage tasks that require sustained focus, decision making or quick responses (Moran, 2016). Alongside these cognitive effects, emotional strain and physical symptoms such as fatigue or muscle tension may further increase the difficulty of the workday. When these challenges persist over time, they can influence how employees assess their own effectiveness at work and how confident they feel in their ability to perform in their role.

Understanding how employees with GAD experience their work is important for several reasons. Because the symptoms are ongoing, they can influence cognitive, emotional

and physical functioning in ways that affect everyday behavior at work. Persistent anxiety may affect concentration, emotional regulation and tolerance for stress, which can make even routine work tasks feel more demanding. Although many employees develop their own ways of managing anxiety during the workday, there is still limited research on how these coping strategies work in real workplace settings or how individuals evaluate their own performance while living with a long term anxiety condition. More generally, existing research points to a need for studies that focus on everyday work functioning among people with mental health difficulties (de Oliveira et al., 2020).

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how employees with Generalized Anxiety Disorder manage their symptoms during everyday work and how they perceive the impact of GAD on their performance. The study focuses on individuals who self identify as having GAD and who have developed personal ways of coping throughout the workday. Instead of focusing on the clinical features of the disorder, the emphasis is placed on work related behavior, daily routines and employees' own evaluations of how they function in relation to their tasks and interactions with others.

The thesis' research questions are as follows :

- 1. How do employees with Generalized Anxiety Disorder cope with their condition at work ?**
- 2. How do they perceive its influence on their daily work and performance ?**
- 3. What kinds of HR or managerial practices best support their wellbeing and success ?**

This study does not aim to diagnose participants or assess the clinical severity of Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Instead, it focuses on participants' self described experiences and on how they understand their own coping and work performance. The main interest is in how individuals make sense of their everyday functioning at work while managing ongoing anxiety. The key concepts explored in the thesis include

Generalized Anxiety Disorder, coping strategies, everyday work experiences and employees' own perceptions of how they function in their roles.

In addition to individual experiences, the study also considers the role of Human Resource Management in supporting employees with long-term mental health conditions such as GAD. While many organizations have developed practices to address physical health needs, support for mental health is often less consistent and still developing. By gaining insight into the everyday work experiences of employees with GAD, organizations may better recognize where existing practices fall short. This understanding can help inform more inclusive HR approaches and support the creation of work environments that promote psychological wellbeing alongside work performance.

The thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter 2 reviews earlier research on Generalized Anxiety Disorder, coping in the workplace, employee experiences, work functioning and organizational approaches to mental health. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological choices made for the study. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the empirical data. Chapter 5 discusses the broader implications of the results, addresses the limitations of the study and suggests directions for future research.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Generalized Anxiety Disorder is commonly described as a pattern of persistent and excessive worry that is difficult to control and occurs more often or more strongly than would be expected in everyday stressful situations. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, people with GAD often experience a constant sense of anxiety that can interfere with daily activities and may last for long periods of time, sometimes for months or even years (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). These worries are usually related to familiar areas of life such as work, health or family responsibilities and are often out of proportion to the actual situation. For a formal diagnosis, symptoms must be present on most days for at least six months and must cause clear distress or problems in daily functioning.

People living with GAD commonly report a range of symptoms, including restlessness, feeling constantly on edge, irritability, difficulties with concentration, muscle tension and sleep problems (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). These symptoms reflect the ongoing mental and physical strain linked to persistent anxiety. In addition to psychological symptoms, physical effects such as fatigue, stomach discomfort, sweating or trembling may also occur. The intensity of symptoms can change over time and may become stronger during periods of increased stress or uncertainty.

The development of Generalized Anxiety Disorder is generally understood as the result of several factors working together rather than one single clear cause. Research suggests that GAD may run in families and is influenced by a combination of genetic vulnerability, brain chemistry, stress regulation and individual life experiences (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). External factors such as traumatic experiences or long term exposure to stress can further increase the risk of developing the disorder. In addition, GAD often occurs alongside other mental or physical health conditions, such as

depression or chronic pain. These overlapping conditions can make both diagnosis and everyday functioning more difficult for individuals living with GAD.

An important part of understanding GAD is being able to distinguish it from everyday anxiety. Most people experience worry or stress at different times in life, usually in response to specific situations or challenges. Anxiety becomes clinically relevant when it continues over a longer period and begins to interfere with areas such as work, social relationships or personal wellbeing. For individuals with GAD, anxious thoughts and physical tension may occur even when there is no clear reason or immediate threat. Symptoms can vary in intensity and may become stronger during periods of deadlines, uncertainty or interpersonal difficulties. This ongoing and widespread pattern is what separates GAD from temporary or situation specific anxiety.

Altogether, Generalized Anxiety Disorder can be understood as a long lasting condition that affects thinking, emotions and physical functioning in many ways. Its symptoms can interfere with everyday routines and responsibilities and, because they often overlap with other mental or physical health conditions, living with GAD can be a complex experience. These difficulties may become especially noticeable in work settings, where sustained concentration, social interaction and consistent performance are often expected. Understanding these characteristics provides a useful basis for examining how GAD influences work related behavior and coping, which is discussed in the following sections.

2.2 Prevalence of Anxiety Disorders in Working Age Populations

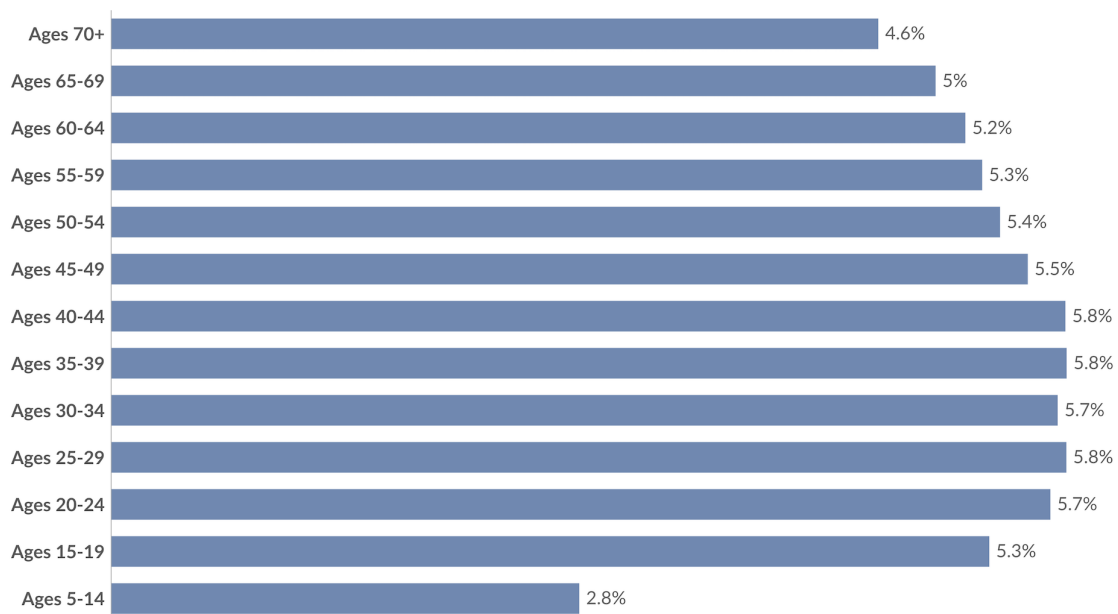
Generalized Anxiety Disorder is a long term anxiety condition marked by persistent worry that can be difficult to control, together with increased tension and ongoing difficulties managing anxious thoughts. Common symptoms include restlessness, irritability, problems with concentration, muscle tension and disturbed sleep (Generalized Anxiety Disorder: What You Need to Know, n.d.). Research suggests that GAD can also affect cognitive processes such as attention, working memory and decision making (De Oliveira

et al., 2022). These difficulties are especially relevant in work settings, where employees are expected to stay focused, communicate clearly and respond to changing demands. GAD is also relatively common among working age adults, which means that a significant number of employees may experience ongoing anxiety symptoms that influence their everyday functioning at work.

Share of the population with anxiety disorders, by age, World, 2021



Estimated share of people with anxiety disorders¹, whether or not they are diagnosed, based on representative surveys, medical data and statistical modelling.



Data source: IHME, Global Burden of Disease (2024)

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Figure 2 Prevalence of anxiety disorders by age group in 2021 Source: HME, Global Burden of Disease (2024)

The figure above presents global estimates of anxiety disorder prevalence by age group in 2021. The data show that anxiety disorders are most common among adults aged 35 to 44, with prevalence at around 5.8 percent. Across the main working age groups, prevalence remains fairly stable and generally ranges between about 5.3 and 5.8 percent.

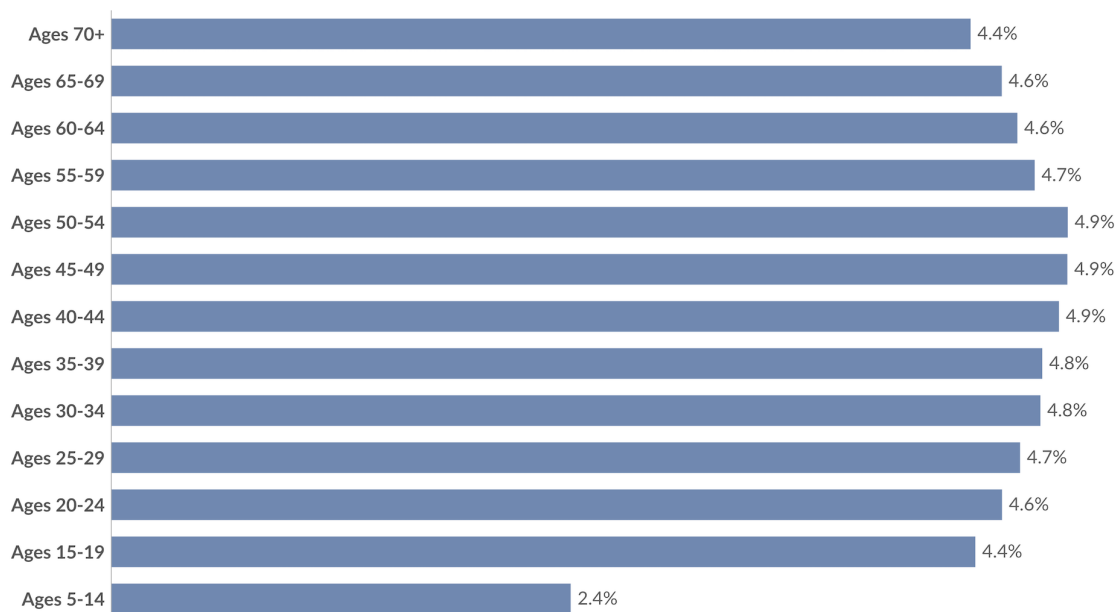
In contrast, children aged 5 to 14 show a clearly lower prevalence compared to other age groups.

Although the figure refers to anxiety disorders as a broad category rather than Generalized Anxiety Disorder specifically, it still offers useful insight into how common anxiety conditions are among adults. The fact that prevalence is highest and remains relatively stable during the main working years highlights the relevance of anxiety disorders in employment contexts. This suggests that a substantial share of the workforce may be managing anxiety symptoms alongside their everyday work responsibilities.

Share of the population with anxiety disorders, by age, World, 2011



Estimated share of people with anxiety disorders¹, whether or not they are diagnosed, based on representative surveys, medical data and statistical modelling.



Data source: IHME, Global Burden of Disease (2024)

OurWorldinData.org/mental-health | CC BY

Figure 3 Share of the global population with anxiety disorders by age in 2011. Source: Our World in Data, 2011

The figure above shows the prevalence of anxiety disorders by age group in 2011. The overall pattern is similar to the data from 2021, with prevalence among adults ranging

from about 4.4 to 4.9 percent. Anxiety disorders appear to be fairly evenly distributed across adult age groups, while lower prevalence is again seen among children. This suggests that anxiety is not limited to a specific stage of adulthood but is present across much of working life.

When compared with the estimates from 2021, prevalence rates in 2011 are consistently lower across all age groups. Although the differences between the two years may seem small in percentage terms, they represent a meaningful increase when considered at the population level. As with the previous figure, the data refer to anxiety disorders in general rather than Generalized Anxiety Disorder specifically. Even so, the figures provide a useful point of comparison and indicate that anxiety disorders among adults have become more common over time.

When the data from 2011 and 2021 are compared, an increase in anxiety disorder prevalence can be seen over the ten year period. For example, prevalence among adults aged 35 to 39 increased from 4.8 percent in 2011 to 5.8 percent in 2021. While this change represents only a one percentage point difference, it equals a relative increase of about 21 percent. Similar upward trends are visible across most working age groups, suggesting that anxiety disorders have become more common over time. Even small changes in prevalence can represent large numbers of people when considered at the population level. Although the figures refer to anxiety disorders in general rather than Generalized Anxiety Disorder specifically, they still point to a broader rise in anxiety related conditions. This provides important context for examining how long-term anxiety, including GAD, affects employees and their everyday working life.

2.3 Functional Impact of GAD

Generalized Anxiety Disorder affects several areas of functioning that are important for everyday life and for behavior at work. Ongoing worry, increased physical tension and emotional strain interact in ways that influence how individuals think, feel and respond in demanding situations. Over time, these symptoms can build up, so that tasks which

would normally feel manageable begin to require more effort. This gradual use of cognitive and emotional resources can make it harder to maintain stable performance. From an HR perspective, this cumulative strain is important because it shapes how employees engage with their roles, respond to expectations and experience the wider work environment.

Cognitive functioning is often described as one of the areas most affected by anxiety. Research suggests that anxiety can weaken attention, reduce working memory and interfere with efficient information processing (Moran, 2016). These abilities are necessary for tasks that require sustained concentration, accurate decision making or quick adaptation to new information. Persistent worry tends to take up mental resources, which makes it harder to stay focused or shift attention when needed. As a result, employees with GAD may work more slowly, make more mistakes or struggle to manage several demands at the same time. HR research also suggests that cognitive overload can contribute to lower job satisfaction and reduced performance, especially in roles with limited autonomy or unclear expectations (Wojtczuk-Turek, 2025).

2.4 Emotional and Physiological Impact of GAD

GAD is often linked to stronger emotional reactions and a constant feeling of nervousness, which can increase strain in everyday situations. Individuals commonly report symptoms such as irritability, stronger responses to stress and a lower tolerance for uncertainty (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). Physical symptoms are also frequent and may include muscle tension, sleep problems, fatigue, dizziness and stomach discomfort. These experiences often become more noticeable during periods of high workload or interpersonal pressure and can gradually reduce overall resilience. From an HR perspective, this highlights the importance of how jobs and work environments are designed, especially in relation to workload, expectations and exposure to unnecessary stress.

2.4.1 Behavioural and Interpersonal Impact

Symptoms of GAD can also affect behavior and social interaction at work. Some individuals may check their work repeatedly, seek reassurance from others or avoid tasks that trigger anxiety. Situations that involve evaluation, presentations or interpersonal conflict can feel especially demanding and may lead to increased self monitoring or, in some cases, withdrawal. While these behaviors may offer short term relief, they can also maintain anxiety over time and interfere with effective functioning at work.

Interpersonal difficulties are particularly important from an HR perspective, as they can influence teamwork, communication and overall engagement. Research suggests that fear of negative evaluation may cause individuals to limit participation or avoid asking for help, which can reduce collaboration and weaken informal support networks (Stratton et al., 2015). The broader organizational climate also plays a role. Work environments that are supportive and inclusive tend to reduce anxiety related behaviors, while environments marked by uncertainty, low trust or inconsistent leadership may increase them (Lacerenza et al., 2024).

The cognitive, emotional and physical aspects of GAD often interact in ways that increase overall difficulty in functioning. Ongoing worry can raise physical arousal, which may then disturb concentration and memory. When cognitive functioning becomes less effective, frustration and emotional strain may increase, creating a cycle that further strengthens anxiety and reduces the ability to function well. Research suggests that these processes can build up over time and lead to long term difficulties in both working life and everyday life (Erickson et al., 2009). From an HR perspective, this underlines the importance of early support and proactive approaches, as delayed responses may contribute to reduced work ability, presenteeism and higher long term organizational costs.

2.5 GAD in the Workplace

Generalized Anxiety Disorder can influence how employees experience and respond to their work environment. Many jobs require ongoing concentration, communication, coordination and social interaction, all of which can be affected by symptoms linked to GAD. Everyday work pressures may increase worry and emotional strain, which can make even routine tasks feel more difficult. From a HR perspective, this suggests that GAD should be viewed not only as a health related issue but also as something closely connected to workplace design, leadership and everyday working conditions.

2.5.1 Manifestations of GAD in Work Settings and GAD on Work Performance

Symptoms of GAD may appear in work settings as difficulties with concentration, problems managing several tasks at the same time and an increased mental load caused by ongoing worry. Anxiety related cognitive interference can make it harder to stay focused or shift attention, especially during deadlines, complex tasks or unexpected changes (Moran, 2016). Employees may also become more sensitive to the risk of making mistakes or being evaluated, which can lead to increased self monitoring or avoidance of more demanding situations.

Large scale studies show that anxiety disorders are linked to reduced work functioning, higher levels of presenteeism and increased absenteeism (de Oliveira et al., 2020). HR research also suggests that unmanaged anxiety can affect performance evaluations, team dynamics and long term career development when adequate support is not provided (Jones, 2015). At the same time, research indicates that when anxiety symptoms decrease, work performance often improves. This highlights the importance of timely and appropriate workplace support and accommodations (Erickson et al., 2009).

2.5.2 Workplace Risk and Protective Factors

Certain features of the work environment can increase GAD symptoms. High job demands, unclear expectations and limited control over tasks are often linked to higher levels of anxiety. Unpredictable workloads, inconsistent leadership and weak communication can further increase anxiety by creating uncertainty and reducing employees' sense of stability.

HR research highlights autonomy, clear role expectations and supportive leadership as key protective factors for employees with mental health conditions (Wojtczuk-Turek, 2025; Shafaei et al., 2024). Clear communication, predictable routines and well structured tasks can reduce uncertainty and make everyday work easier to manage. Supervisors who offer guidance, empathy and consistent feedback also play an important role in reducing anxiety related strain and supporting psychological safety.

Organizational resources such as access to occupational health services, flexible work arrangements and mental health training for managers can further support employees in managing symptoms and maintaining stable performance. Research on social enterprises and sustainable employment models for people with mental illness suggests that supportive organizational climates are linked to higher job satisfaction, stronger engagement and better long term retention (Drake et al., 2019; Marwaha et al., 2014).

2.6 Coping with GAD in the Workplace

Employees with GAD often use a variety of coping strategies to manage their symptoms during the workday. Coping can be described as the behavioral and cognitive efforts individuals use to manage emotions, reduce distress or adapt to stressful situations (Leen-Feldner et al., 2007). Because anxiety symptoms in GAD are usually ongoing, coping at work is rarely a single or one time response. Instead, it is often a continuous process shaped by task demands, available support and the wider work environment.

2.6.1 Coping Strategies

Coping strategies are often grouped into problem focused, emotion focused and avoidance oriented approaches. Problem focused coping includes actions such as planning, asking for clarification or reorganizing tasks in order to reduce sources of stress. Emotion focused coping refers to ways of managing emotional reactions, for example by reframing thoughts, using relaxation techniques or seeking support from others (Carver et al., 1989, as cited in Conner and Zautra, 2008). Avoidance oriented coping involves behaviors that reduce contact with anxiety provoking situations, although these strategies may increase distress over time.

Employees with GAD often use several coping strategies at the same time. Ongoing worry may lead to repeated checking of work, reassurance seeking or excessive preparation. Emotion regulation strategies such as controlled breathing, internal self talk or consciously shifting attention are also common. Research suggests that individuals who view physical anxiety symptoms as threatening are more likely to rely on effortful internal regulation strategies (Leen-Feldner et al., 2007). In work settings, access to psychoeducation, wellbeing resources or supportive supervision may help employees develop more adaptive coping strategies.

Maladaptive coping strategies have been linked to higher psychological distress and lower behavioral flexibility (Conner and Zautra, 2008). From an HR perspective, this highlights the importance of training managers to recognize early signs of maladaptive coping and creating low stigma ways for employees to seek support. These steps may help prevent difficulties from becoming more severe over time.

2.6.2 Influence of the Work Environment on Coping

The work environment plays an important role in shaping the coping strategies employees feel able to use. Supportive leadership, clear communication and predictable expectations can make adaptive coping easier. In contrast, work environments with high

workload, limited autonomy or unclear demands may increase the use of avoidance or emotional suppression.

Research suggests that organizational conditions directly influence coping and work functioning among employees with anxiety disorders (de Oliveira et al., 2020). HR policies such as flexible work arrangements, reasonable adjustments and structured feedback processes can support more effective coping and help reduce symptom intensity.

2.7 Employee Experiences and Subjective Perceptions

Employees living with long term anxiety often describe their work experiences as marked by ongoing strain, uncertainty and the need to manage symptoms throughout the day. Many report emotional exhaustion, a reduced sense of control and greater sensitivity to work demands (Mhlanga et al., 2024). These experiences highlight the daily challenge of balancing personal wellbeing with organizational expectations.

A common theme in qualitative research is the pressure employees feel to hide or mask their symptoms at work. Many describe making an effort to appear calm, capable and emotionally stable, even when they are experiencing high levels of distress. These impression management behaviors are often linked to fear of negative judgment or concerns about being seen as less competent (Stratton et al., 2015). HR research also suggests that mental health stigma is still present in many organizations, which can discourage employees from disclosing their condition or seeking help (Brohan et al., 2010).

Hesitation around disclosure is therefore common, especially due to fears of gossip, discrimination or changes in how colleagues or managers treat them. Many employees report that supportive supervisors play an important role in whether disclosure feels safe or helpful (Irvine, 2011). More inclusive organizational climates, where employees feel

respected and valued, have been shown to reduce anxiety, increase engagement and strengthen coping ability (Lacerenza et al., 2024).

Interpersonal relationships play an important role in shaping these experiences. Supportive colleagues and understanding supervisors can reduce symptom intensity and increase feelings of psychological comfort, while negative behaviors such as exclusion or subtle criticism may increase anxiety (Shafaei et al., 2024). These social dynamics can influence how comfortable employees feel when communicating, taking part in team activities and engaging with their work more generally.

Another common theme in the literature is the ongoing balancing act employees perform between managing symptoms and meeting job expectations. Many individuals describe working harder or longer to make up for difficulties with concentration or emotional regulation. Others adjust their routines, take planned breaks or avoid certain tasks in order to keep functioning. While these strategies may be helpful in the short term, they can also create additional pressure over time, especially in workplaces that offer limited flexibility or psychological safety.

Subjective work experiences are also shaped by the broader organizational climate. Inclusive and predictable environments that support psychological safety tend to reduce fear, encourage adaptive coping and make openness more likely. In contrast, environments with unclear expectations, low trust or high demands may increase anxiety and reinforce avoidance behaviors. Research on psychological safety suggests that when employees feel able to speak openly without negative consequences, they report higher confidence, engagement and overall wellbeing (Edmondson, 1999).

2.8 Stigma, Disclosure and Psychological Safety

Stigma remains one of the most important challenges faced by employees with mental health conditions. Research consistently shows that many individuals fear being judged, socially excluded or treated differently at work because of their mental health condition

(Corrigan et al., 2014). Stigma can appear in clear forms, such as gossip or intentional distancing, but it often occurs in more subtle ways. These may include hesitation in giving responsibility, assumptions about an employee's reliability or small changes in everyday interactions with colleagues. Such experiences influence how employees manage their identity at work and whether they feel safe being open about their condition. For employees with GAD, who often show higher sensitivity to interpersonal evaluation, stigma can further increase anxiety and make routine workplace interactions more demanding.

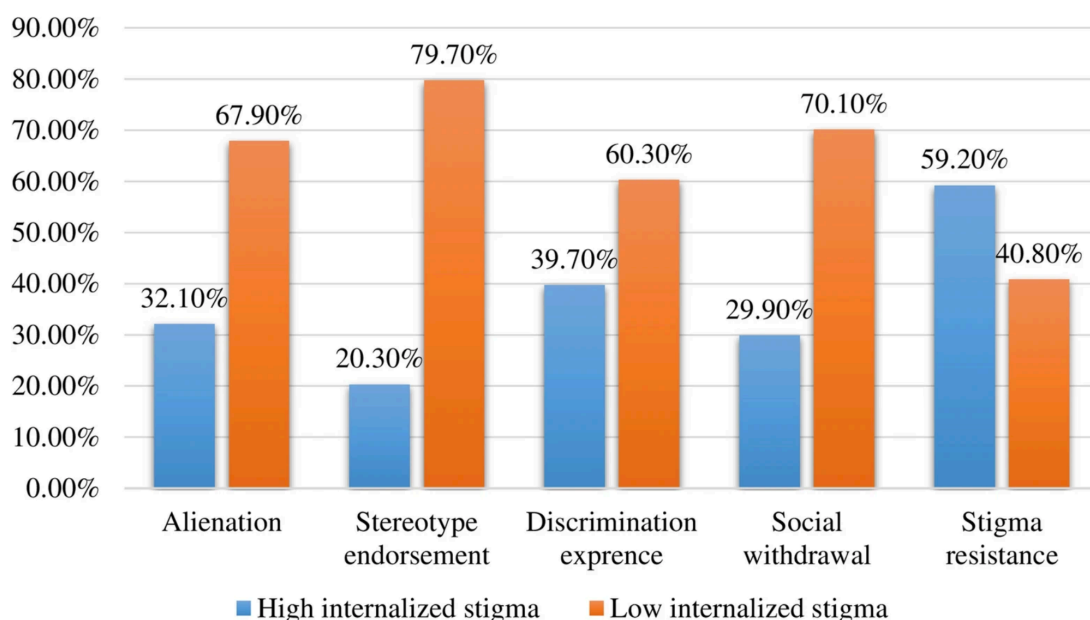


Figure 4 Internalized stigma with respect to domains among PWMI at UOGCSH, Northwest, Ethiopia, 2021

This figure shows the percentage of adults in the United States who agreed in 2021 that stigma toward people with mental illness has decreased compared to ten years earlier. While these results suggest some improvement in general attitudes, they do not necessarily reflect how stigma is experienced in workplace settings.

One of the most difficult decisions for employees with mental health conditions is whether to disclose their condition to a supervisor or colleague. Research shows that

this decision is shaped not only by personal preferences but also by expected reactions at work and the wider organizational culture (Irvine, 2011). Disclosure can make it easier to access accommodations, supportive conversations and a better understanding of an employee's needs. At the same time, many employees worry about possible negative consequences, such as career disadvantages, changes in how their competence is viewed or being treated differently by others (Brohan et al., 2010).

Experiences of disclosure vary widely. Some individuals report receiving encouragement and practical support, while others describe negative reactions or more subtle forms of exclusion that reduce trust in the organization (Toth and Dewa, 2014). For employees with GAD, who often spend considerable mental energy anticipating how others may respond, this uncertainty can further increase anxiety during the workday.

Research suggests that the quality of the disclosure experience may be more important than the decision to disclose itself. When supervisors respond with empathy, understanding and practical support, employees often report higher wellbeing, better work functioning and stronger long term employability (Bogaers et al., 2023). In contrast, negative disclosure experiences have been linked to feelings of shame, avoidance, discrimination and worries about long term career outcomes (Reavley et al., 2017). From an HR perspective, these findings highlight the importance of clear procedures, manager training and shared organizational norms that guide supportive responses to mental health disclosures.

Psychological safety is another key factor that shapes whether employees feel able to raise concerns, give feedback or share personal information such as a mental health condition. Psychological safety is commonly defined as a shared belief that the work environment allows people to speak openly without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999). Higher psychological safety is linked to greater openness, a willingness to ask questions and the ability to acknowledge difficulties. In workplaces where psychological safety is low, employees are more likely to hide problems, downplay

symptoms or avoid drawing attention to their needs. This is especially relevant for employees with GAD, who may be more likely to interpret unclear reactions or ambiguous behavior as signs of judgment or rejection.

Leadership plays an important role in shaping psychological safety at work. Inclusive and supportive leaders can help create team environments where employees feel respected, valued and comfortable speaking openly (Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006). Leaders who show openness, encourage discussion and respond in a constructive way to concerns help build climates that support learning, wellbeing and trust (Edmondson and Lei, 2014). HR research also suggests that leaders who act with empathy and transparency make it easier for employees to request accommodations, share early signs of distress or discuss flexible solutions without fear of stigma. In contrast, leadership that is inconsistent, punitive or emotionally distant can reduce psychological safety and increase silence, especially among employees living with anxiety disorders.

Across the literature, stigma, disclosure and psychological safety are closely connected. Stigma increases fear and reduces the likelihood that employees will talk openly about mental health at work. Whether disclosure leads to positive or negative outcomes often depends on the level of psychological safety within the team and on how leaders respond. When psychological safety is high, employees are more willing to express their needs and are more likely to receive supportive responses. When it is low, employees may hide symptoms, rely on masking behaviors and experience increasing anxiety over time. For employees with GAD, who already deal with persistent worry and increased self monitoring, these organizational factors strongly influence how they manage relationships at work, judge their own performance and decide whether they feel able to stay in a role over the long term.

2.9 Organizational and HRM Perspectives

Human Resource Management plays an important role in shaping the work environment, the support employees receive and the conditions that help individuals with mental

health conditions maintain both wellbeing and work ability. HR practices influence areas such as job design, clarity of roles, leadership expectations, workload distribution and access to support, all of which affect how employees handle everyday work demands. These factors are especially important for employees with anxiety related conditions, who may be more sensitive to unclear expectations, interpersonal evaluation and sudden changes at work. Research on workplace mental health shows that supportive HRM frameworks are linked to higher job satisfaction, lower psychological strain and more sustainable employment over time (Bogaers et al., 2023). This suggests that HRM decisions are not only administrative but also play an active role in shaping how employees function and stay engaged in their work.

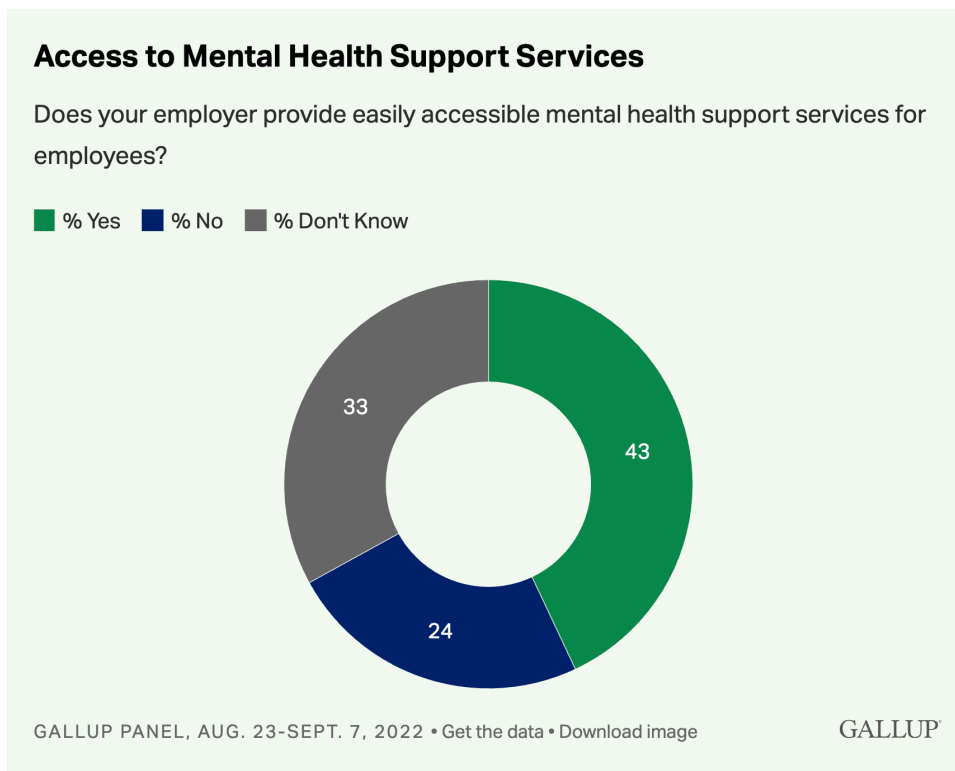


Figure 5 Access to Mental Health Support Services. Witters and Agrawal (2022)

Sustainable and socially responsible HRM perspectives emphasize the importance of creating working conditions that support employee health, autonomy and dignity. Research on sustainable HRM shows that practices focused on employee wellbeing are linked to lower psychological strain and more positive work engagement (Wojtczuk-

Turek, 2025). When HR systems are transparent, consistent and supported by constructive managerial behavior, employees tend to report higher levels of trust and stronger commitment to the organization. These factors are especially important for employees with GAD. Predictable structures, fair treatment and accessible support can reduce common anxiety triggers and help employees save cognitive and emotional energy for their main work tasks.

Leadership behavior is widely identified as one of the most important organizational factors influencing employee mental health. Research on health oriented leadership suggests that leaders who show attentiveness, fairness and genuine concern for employee wellbeing can reduce psychological distress and support healthier coping (Zada et al., 2022). Leadership that emphasizes clear communication, predictability and empathy has been linked to lower anxiety levels and better daily functioning. In contrast, unclear expectations, constant pressure, limited feedback or emotionally distant leadership can increase anxiety symptoms and reduce employees' confidence in managing their work responsibilities (Xiao and Cooke, 2021). These findings highlight the importance of leadership development and HR led training programs that focus on building supportive supervisory practices.

Organizational culture and climate also play an important role in shaping employees' experiences at work. Research on diversity climate and inclusive organizational behavior shows that inclusive environments are linked to higher psychological safety, stronger engagement and lower emotional strain (Lacerenza et al., 2024). When employees view their organization as fair, respectful and inclusive, they are usually more comfortable raising concerns, asking for adjustments and using available support. For employees with GAD, who may be more sensitive to interpersonal risk or fear negative evaluation, an inclusive climate can reduce feelings of threat and support more stable functioning throughout the workday. The culture created through HR policies, leadership behavior and everyday team practices therefore strongly influences whether the workplace feels safe or unpredictable.

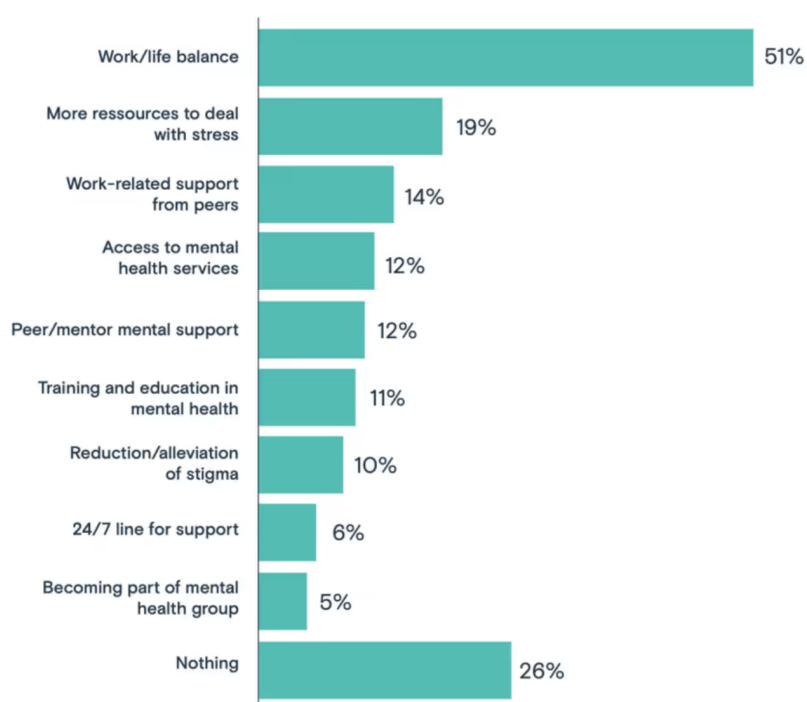
Workplace design and structural features also affect mental health at work. Research on inclusive workplace design suggests that access to quiet spaces, opportunities for privacy and flexible work options can reduce stress and support employees who experience cognitive or emotional strain (Tagliaro et al., 2024). Employees with GAD may benefit from lower sensory stimulation, predictable routines and the ability to adjust their immediate work environment. Structural adjustments such as flexible schedules, adjusted workloads or hybrid work arrangements have been linked to lower burnout and more sustainable work participation among employees with mental health conditions.

Finally, HRM systems that include mental health as part of broader strategic planning appear better able to support employee wellbeing over the long term. Research on organizational responses during times of crisis shows that organizations with proactive mental health strategies, clear role expectations and transparent communication are more effective in managing employee distress during uncertainty (Wu and Chen, 2022). Proactive HR practices may include mental health training for managers, early intervention processes, confidential support channels and regular attention to workload

pressures. These measures can help reduce stigma and create a work environment where employees feel safer seeking support.

For employees with GAD, organizational predictability, access to appropriate resources and clear communication can reduce fears of negative evaluation and support a stronger sense of stability and security at work.

What do you need to better support your mental health in the current context?



Base: All respondents (n=500). Multiple answers were allowed, therefore total may not equal to 100%.

Figure 6 What do you need to better support you mental health in the current context? Sun (2020)

2.10 Inclusive Practices for Supporting Employees with GAD

Inclusive workplace practices aim to create conditions in which all employees can take part fully, regardless of health status or personal circumstances. In relation to mental health, inclusion involves reducing stigma, promoting fair treatment and ensuring access

to structures that support psychological wellbeing. Research on diversity climate shows that inclusive organizational cultures are linked to higher psychological safety, stronger engagement and lower emotional strain (Lacerenza et al., 2024). Inclusion therefore goes beyond demographic representation and also means creating an environment where employees feel respected, accepted and able to express their needs. This is especially important for employees with GAD, who may be more sensitive to interpersonal cues, uncertainty and inconsistent expectations.

Leadership behavior plays a key role in creating inclusive work environments. Leaders who communicate openly, respond with empathy and act in a fair and consistent way can help employees feel valued and reduce concerns about negative judgment. This type of leadership has been linked to higher psychological safety and more positive emotional experiences at work (Shafaei et al., 2024). Employees with GAD may benefit in particular from leaders who provide clear expectations, offer steady guidance and show predictable interpersonal behavior. Research on health oriented leadership also shows that supportive and attentive leadership can reduce psychological distress and improve wellbeing among employees with mental health conditions (Zada et al., 2022). These leadership practices can make it easier for employees to manage symptoms during the workday and maintain a stronger sense of control.

Inclusive HRM practices also play an important role in supporting employees with anxiety related conditions. Socially responsible HRM emphasizes fairness, ethical treatment and employee wellbeing as core organizational values. Research suggests that socially responsible HRM practices are linked to higher job satisfaction, better emotional balance and stronger perceptions of organizational support (Wojtczuk-Turek, 2025). When HR systems focus on transparency, employee voice and consistent treatment, employees are more likely to trust the organization and seek support when needed. For employees with GAD, these conditions can reduce concerns about evaluation, clarify expectations and support more stable day to day functioning.

Inclusive work design and environmental adjustments can further strengthen support for employees with GAD. Research on inclusive workplace design highlights the value of adaptable physical environments, such as access to quiet spaces, opportunities for privacy and flexible work arrangements (Tagliaro et al., 2024). These features can help reduce overstimulation and support emotional and cognitive regulation. Structural adjustments such as adjusted workloads, hybrid work schedules or flexible working hours have also been linked to higher engagement and lower burnout among employees with mental health conditions. While these accommodations often require limited organizational resources, they can offer meaningful benefits for long term work ability.

Research on workplace mental health during periods of crisis further highlights the importance of proactive HR planning. Organizations that communicate clearly, define roles and responsibilities and provide accessible mental health resources tend to support employee wellbeing more effectively during times of uncertainty (Wu and Chen, 2022). These practices can help employees experience the work environment as more stable and predictable. For individuals with GAD, who may be especially sensitive to ambiguity and change, this sense of predictability can reduce anticipatory worry and support more effective coping during the workday.

Inclusive practices also depend on cooperation between employees, leaders and HR systems. Research on sustainable employment shows that long term work participation among people with mental health conditions is more successful when organizations offer accessible support structures, encourage collaborative problem solving and treat mental health as a core part of employee wellbeing (Bogaers et al., 2023). When organizations take a systematic and proactive approach to inclusion, employees with GAD may be better able to manage symptoms, maintain daily functioning and contribute effectively at work.

2.11 Research Gap

Although a large amount of research has examined anxiety, stigma and workplace wellbeing, important gaps remain in understanding the specific experiences of employees with Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Much of the existing literature focuses on anxiety in general or on broad categories of mental health conditions rather than examining GAD as a separate condition. As a result, there is limited understanding of how the ongoing and pervasive worry typical of GAD shapes day to day functioning at work. Quantitative studies show that anxiety symptoms are linked to reduced performance as well as higher levels of absenteeism and presenteeism (de Oliveira et al., 2020). However, far less is known about how employees with long term anxiety manage symptoms throughout the workday or how they judge their own functioning in these situations.

There is also a clear lack of qualitative research that focuses specifically on how employees with GAD experience interpersonal expectations, workplace norms and coping demands in their daily roles. Many qualitative studies address broader mental health categories or more severe conditions, which means that the specific cognitive and emotional challenges linked to GAD are underrepresented (Mhlanga et al., 2024). Aspects of subjective experience such as increased self monitoring, sensitivity to uncertainty and changes in concentration are therefore still not well explored in work related contexts.

Another gap relates to HRM practices. While previous research has examined topics such as supportive leadership, psychological safety and inclusive work design (Lacerenza et al., 2024; Shafaei et al., 2024), less attention has been given to how these practices specifically support employees with long term anxiety conditions. Many organizational frameworks focus on general wellbeing initiatives or accommodations for more visible health needs. This leaves uncertainty about how effectively workplaces respond to the less visible cognitive and emotional demands linked to GAD.

In addition, research rarely examines how coping strategies interact with workplace structures. Although existing models distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive coping, there is limited empirical evidence on how specific organizational conditions influence coping choices among employees with GAD or how these choices shape individuals' views of their own performance. A clearer understanding of this interaction is important for developing HRM practices that support long term participation at work.

Altogether, these gaps highlight the need for research that explores the lived experiences of employees with GAD and examines how organizational and HRM practices can better support their wellbeing and everyday functioning.

2.12 Summary of the Literature Review

This chapter reviewed previous research on Generalized Anxiety Disorder, its effects on functioning and its relevance for workplace behavior and wellbeing. GAD is characterized by persistent and excessive worry that affects cognitive, emotional and physical functioning (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). These symptoms can influence everyday activities and work performance. Earlier studies point to difficulties related to attention, working memory and emotional regulation (Moran, 2016). Over time, anxiety related challenges may build up, meaning that complex or demanding tasks require more effort to complete.

The review also showed that workplace conditions play an important role in how GAD is experienced at work. High job demands, unclear expectations and inconsistent leadership are linked to increased strain, while supportive supervisors, structured communication and predictable routines can help reduce stress and support more stable functioning (Erickson et al., 2009). Employees often use different coping strategies to manage anxiety, but how effective these strategies are depends strongly on organizational structures and leadership behavior. While adaptive coping can support everyday functioning, maladaptive coping may contribute to longer term strain and reduced confidence.

The chapter also examined the roles of stigma, disclosure and psychological safety in shaping employees' experiences at work. Stigma can prevent employees from seeking support or disclosing their condition, while supportive leadership and inclusive organizational climates help create psychological safety and make it easier for employees to communicate their needs (Bogaers et al., 2023; Shafaei et al., 2024). Organizational and HRM practices that focus on fairness, wellbeing and inclusion have been linked to better mental health outcomes and more sustainable participation in working life. Research on sustainable HRM, inclusive workplace design and health oriented leadership further highlights the importance of coordinated organizational approaches in supporting employees with long term mental health conditions.

Despite the growing body of research on workplace mental health, important gaps remain in understanding the specific experiences of employees with GAD. Only a limited number of studies focus directly on this condition, and little is known about how individuals with long term anxiety manage daily tasks, interpersonal expectations and organizational demands at work. These gaps form the basis for the present study, which explores how employees with GAD cope with their symptoms during the workday, how they perceive the impact of GAD on their performance and how HRM practices can be developed in more inclusive ways to support long term wellbeing.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Purpose and Approach

The aim of this study is to examine how employees living with Generalized Anxiety Disorder manage their symptoms at work and how they perceive the impact of these symptoms on their performance. Because the focus is on identifying patterns across a larger group rather than exploring individual cases in depth, a quantitative survey design was selected. Survey-based research makes it possible to collect experiences from a wider group of participants and to examine how common certain behaviors, perceptions or workplace needs are among employees with GAD. The data was collected at one point in time. This approach offers a practical way to study a sensitive topic such as mental health while allowing participants to respond anonymously to the questionnaire.

3.2 Research Design

Data for this study were collected using an online questionnaire created with Microsoft Forms. This format was chosen because it allowed participants to complete the survey at a time and place that felt comfortable for them, which is especially important when the topic involves personal mental health experiences. The questionnaire was fully anonymous. Anonymity was intended to reduce concerns about being identified, judged or misunderstood, which can affect how openly people respond in research on anxiety and work experiences.

The questionnaire consisted of structured multiple choice questions. The use of closed questions made it possible to compare responses across participants and supported the descriptive focus of the analysis.

The methodological design of this study is descriptive and exploratory. The goal was not to test specific hypotheses or identify cause and effect relationships but to gain a clearer

understanding of how employees with GAD manage everyday work demands. Because much of the existing research focuses on clinical symptoms rather than workplace behavior, an exploratory approach is suitable for identifying emerging patterns and lived experiences. Descriptive research designs are also common in HR and organizational studies, especially when the aim is to understand how employees view their work environment, cope with challenges and evaluate organizational practices as helpful or unhelpful. By focusing on participants' own perspectives, the study aims to provide a strong foundation for future HRM initiatives and more targeted research on GAD in working life.

3.3 Target Population and Sampling

The study focused on adults who self-identify as having Generalized Anxiety Disorder and who are either currently employed or have recent experience in the workforce. This group was chosen because the aim of the research is to understand how individuals with GAD manage everyday work tasks, cope with symptoms as they arise and evaluate their own performance within organizational settings. To make sure that responses were based on relevant work experience, three inclusion criteria were used. Participants had to be at least 18 years old, have experience of paid employment and identify themselves as having GAD. Self-identification was considered appropriate for this study, as many individuals manage anxiety without a formal diagnosis or may prefer not to share diagnostic details in a research context.

Participants were recruited through social media platforms and online communities related to mental health, wellbeing and work experiences. These spaces were selected because they often offer a sense of anonymity and openness, which can encourage participation in research on sensitive topics. Recruiting individuals with diagnosed or self-identified mental health conditions can be difficult, as concerns about stigma, privacy or negative judgment may reduce willingness to take part through more formal recruitment channels. For this reason, a convenience sampling approach was used. Although this limits the ability to generalize the findings, it allowed the study to include

participants with direct experience of managing anxiety in everyday working life who were willing to share their views.

Convenience sampling is also suitable for exploratory research in HRM, where the goal is not to represent the entire population but to understand how individuals interpret organizational practices, workplace expectations and the support available to them. Employees with GAD may have very different experiences depending on factors such as industry, job role and work environment. This sampling approach made it possible to gather perspectives from a wide range of contexts. Although the sample is not statistically representative, the responses provide useful insight into how employees with long term anxiety experience work and which HR practices they view as supportive or unhelpful.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The survey link was shared online together with a brief explanation of the study's purpose, instructions for participation and information about anonymity. Respondents were able to complete the survey on any device, and no personally identifying information was collected. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, particular attention was paid to using respectful and non-intrusive wording throughout the questionnaire. The survey remained open for a set period of time, after which responses were downloaded and prepared for analysis.

3.5 Measures and Questionnaire Structure

The questionnaire was divided into several parts.

Demographic information and work context

The first questions collected background information. Participants were asked to indicate their age group (under 18, 18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, or 65 and older) and gender (woman, man, non binary, or prefer not to say). One item asked what type of

work they do, with response options for office based, hybrid, remote, shift based and customer facing work, as well as an “other” option. These questions make it possible to describe the sample and place the results in the context of different types of jobs.

GAD status and symptom experience at work

Participants were first asked whether they currently have Generalized Anxiety Disorder, using a simple yes or no question. Two follow up questions then focused on how anxiety appears during the workday. One question asked how often participants experience anxiety symptoms at work, with response options including rarely, occasionally, often or almost every day. Another question asked when symptoms usually occur. Multiple choice options included before starting work, during meetings, during tasks with deadlines, when interacting with colleagues or managers, randomly throughout the day or that symptoms do not usually appear at work. An “other” option was also provided so participants could describe additional situations.

Coping strategies at work

Several questions focused on how participants manage anxiety during the workday. One question asked which coping strategies they use, with the option to select more than one response. The listed strategies included breathing exercises, taking short breaks, listening to music or calming sounds, planning tasks in small steps, avoiding triggers, using medication and talking to someone. An “other” option was also included. A follow-up question asked which of these strategies participants found most effective, using the same response options. Together, these questions provided information about both the range of coping strategies used and which strategies participants experienced as most helpful.

Workplace conditions and desired support

The next section focused on the work environment. One question asked which work conditions help reduce anxiety, allowing participants to select more than one response. Options included a quiet workspace, flexible working hours, clear instructions, a

supportive manager, predictable routines and low social interaction, with an “other” option for additional responses. Another question asked which types of support from the workplace would help the most. Response options included access to mental health resources, clearer expectations, more flexibility, manager training on mental health and reduced workload, along with an “other” option. These questions were designed to link employees’ experiences with specific organizational practices and forms of support.

Disclosure of GAD at work

Two questions focused on disclosure of mental health conditions. Participants were first asked whether they had disclosed their condition at work, with response options “yes, to my manager,” “yes, to colleagues,” “yes, to both,” or “no.” A follow-up question asked how disclosure affected their experience, with options including that they did not disclose, that it improved their experience, made no difference, made it worse, or “other.” Together, these questions provide information about how common disclosure is and how employees evaluate its effects.

Avoidance of work tasks

The questionnaire also included questions about avoidance behavior. One question asked whether participants had ever avoided work tasks because of anxiety, with response options “yes” or “no.” If participants answered yes, a follow-up question asked what types of tasks they avoided. Options included presentations, meetings, phone calls, social events, high pressure tasks, and tasks with tight deadlines. There was also an option for participants to indicate that they had not avoided tasks due to anxiety. This section was designed to capture how anxiety may affect the types of tasks employees feel able to perform.

Perceived impact on work performance

The final question asked participants to indicate how strongly they feel that GAD

affects their work performance, with response options ranging from “not at all” to “very strongly.” This provided a general self-assessment of the impact of GAD on work.

The survey mainly used multiple choice and multiple response questions to allow clear descriptive analysis. Where an “other” option was available, participants could provide short open text answers if their experience did not fit the predefined categories.

4 Results

4.1 Participant Characteristics

A total of 157 participants reported that they currently have Generalized Anxiety Disorder and were included in the analysis. The age distribution shows that most respondents were between 25 and 34 years old, making this the largest group in the study. This age range is often linked to growing work responsibilities and early career development, which may explain its prominence in the sample. Smaller numbers of participants were in the 18 to 24, 35 to 44 and 45 to 54 age groups, showing that the study includes perspectives from several stages of working life. No participants were under 18 or over 65, which aligns with the inclusion criteria and reflects the age groups most active in the workforce.

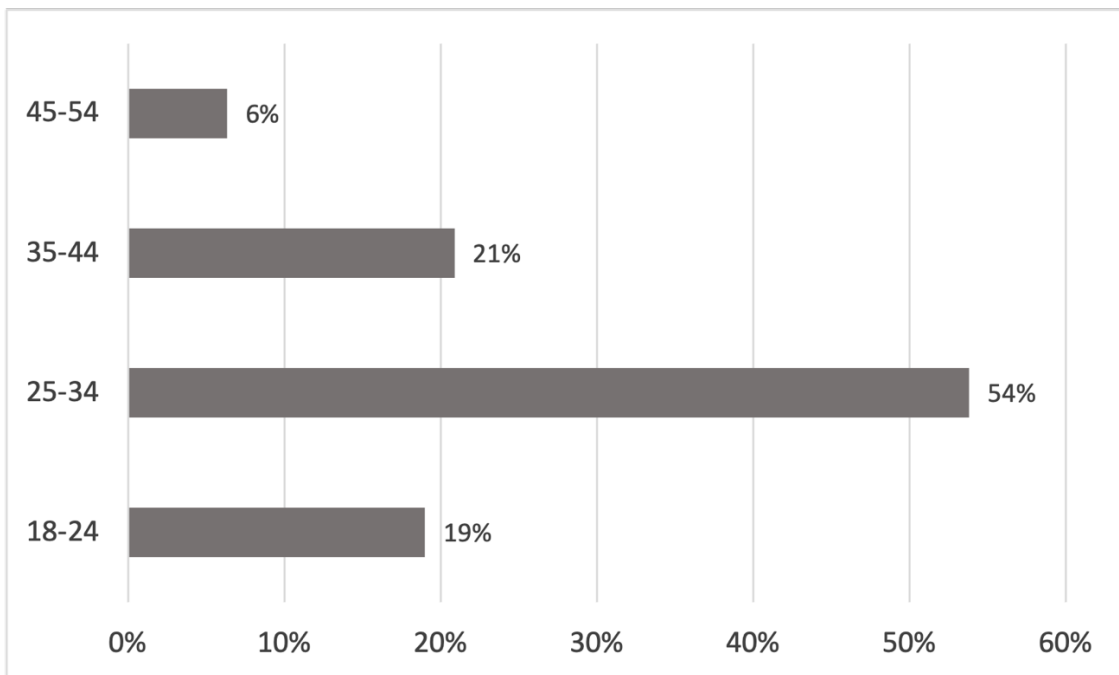


Figure 7 Age of participants

Gender distribution in the sample was fairly balanced. A slight majority of participants identified as men, while women made up just a bit under half of the group. A small

number of respondents identified as non-binary or chose not to disclose their gender. This distribution suggests that experiences of GAD at work are not limited to a single gender and adds diversity to the perspectives included in the study.

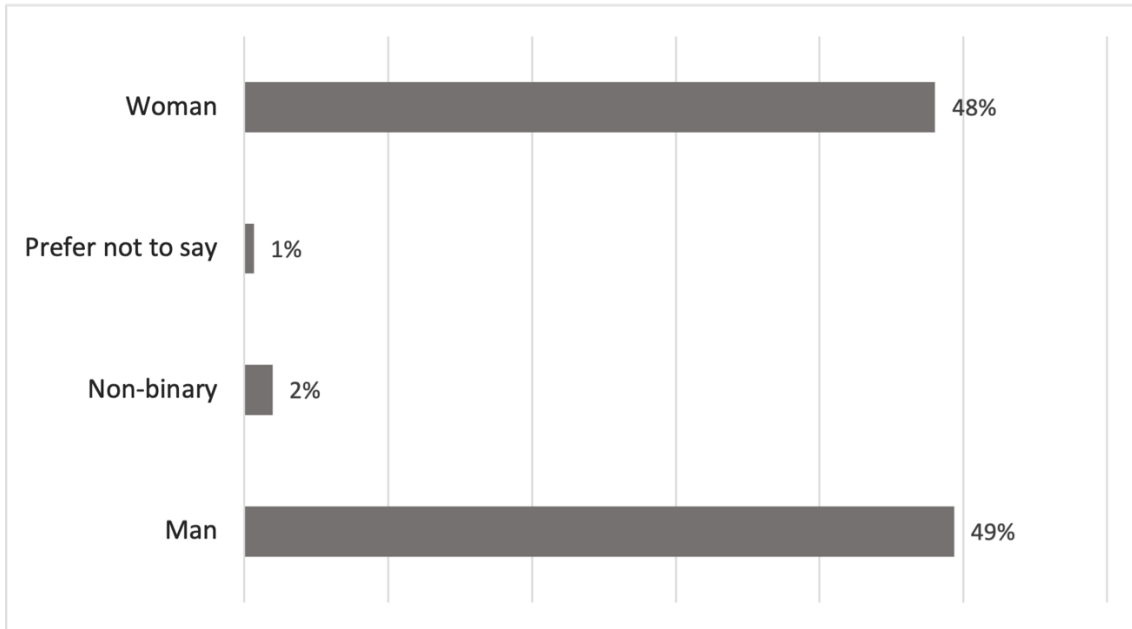


Figure 8 Gender of participants

Participants reported working in a variety of settings, reflecting the different contexts in which workplace anxiety may occur. Office-based work was the most common, reported by 29 percent of participants. This was followed by remote work at 18 percent and hybrid work at 16 percent. The presence of remote and hybrid workers suggests that anxiety experiences are not limited to traditional office environments. Smaller groups of participants worked in shift-based roles or customer-facing positions, which often involve higher interpersonal demands and time pressure. Some respondents chose the “other” option to describe work situations that did not fit into the predefined categories. Overall, the sample represents a variety of occupational settings, allowing insight into how employees with GAD experience work across different environments.

4.2 Frequency and Situations of Anxiety Symptoms at Work

Anxiety symptoms were a regular part of the workday for many participants. Around half of the respondents reported experiencing symptoms occasionally, suggesting that anxiety occurs with some frequency even during routine or manageable tasks. Almost one third of participants said they experienced anxiety symptoms often, showing that for a significant group, anxiety is a recurring and noticeable part of their working life. A smaller but still important group reported symptoms almost every day, reflecting the persistent nature of GAD and the difficulty some individuals have in separating symptoms from work responsibilities. Only a few participants described their symptoms as rare during working hours. Overall, this pattern suggests that anxiety is a common part of everyday work for many participants rather than an unusual or infrequent experience.

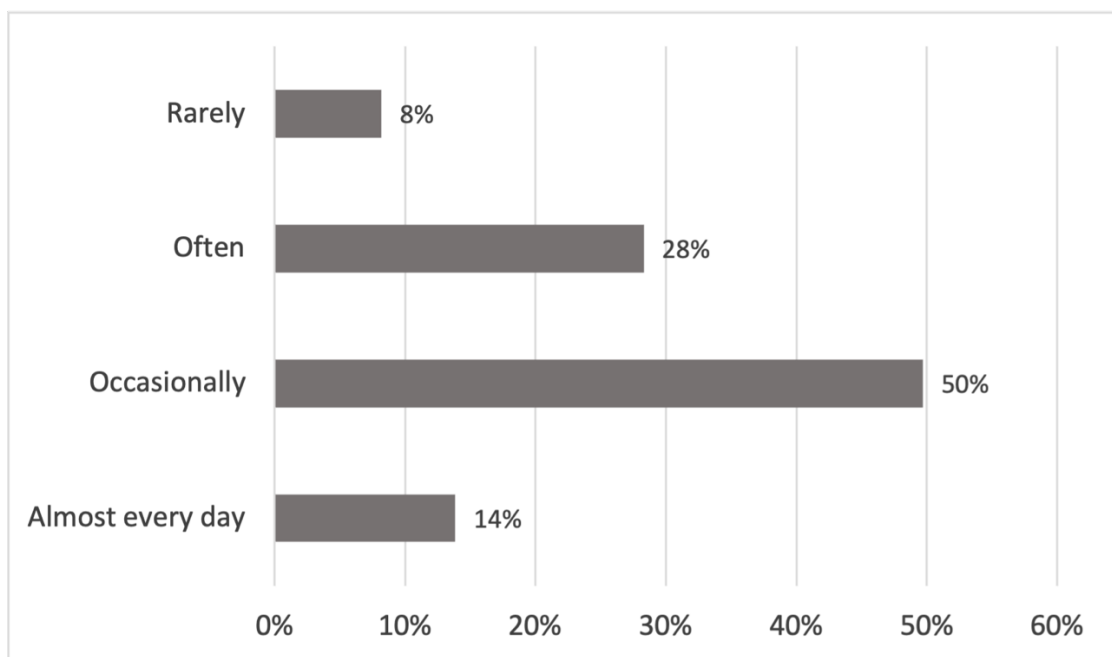


Figure 9 Frequency of anxiety symptoms of participants

Participants were asked to indicate the work situations in which their anxiety most often occurs. Responses showed that anxiety symptoms appear across many different contexts rather than being linked to a single type of task. Deadlines were among the most

frequently reported triggers, reflecting the pressure and time sensitivity common in many work tasks. Random moments during the day were also commonly selected, suggesting that anxiety can appear even without an immediate stressor and may be related to ongoing or anticipatory worry throughout the workday. Interactions with management were another situation where anxiety was often higher, showing that supervisory relationships can carry particular emotional or evaluative weight for many participants.

Many participants also reported higher anxiety before starting work, during meetings and when interacting with colleagues. These patterns highlight the social and anticipatory aspects of anxiety, where interpersonal expectations and group situations may feel especially demanding. Only a small number of respondents said their anxiety rarely appears at work, suggesting that the workplace is often a context in which GAD symptoms are experienced or intensified. Several participants used the open text field to describe additional triggers specific to their roles, including customer interactions, performance reviews or periods of high multitasking. Overall, these responses show the wide range of work situations that can trigger or increase anxiety for employees with GAD.

A one way analysis of variance was conducted to examine whether the frequency of anxiety symptoms during the workday differed across age groups. The analysis compared participants aged 18–24, 25–34, 35–44 and 45–54. The results showed no statistically significant differences between age groups, $F(3, 155) = 0.57, p = .64$. This indicates that the frequency with which anxiety symptoms were experienced at work did not vary significantly by age in the present sample.

4.3 Coping Strategies at Work

Participants reported using a variety of coping strategies to manage anxiety during the workday. Listening to music or calming sounds, taking short breaks, and using breathing

exercises were among the most frequently chosen strategies. Planning tasks in smaller steps, using medication and avoiding known triggers were also common. Talking to someone was selected less often, although a noticeable number of participants included it in their coping routine. A small group of respondents described additional strategies in the open text option.

When asked which strategies they found most effective, a slightly different pattern appeared. Listening to music, breathing exercises, and taking short breaks were most often rated as helpful. Smaller groups reported that planning tasks in small steps, using medication, or talking to someone worked best for them. Avoiding triggers was chosen by some participants, and a few added other suggestions. Overall, these responses suggest that while employees with GAD use many coping strategies, those that provide immediate relief or help regulate stress are generally seen as the most effective.

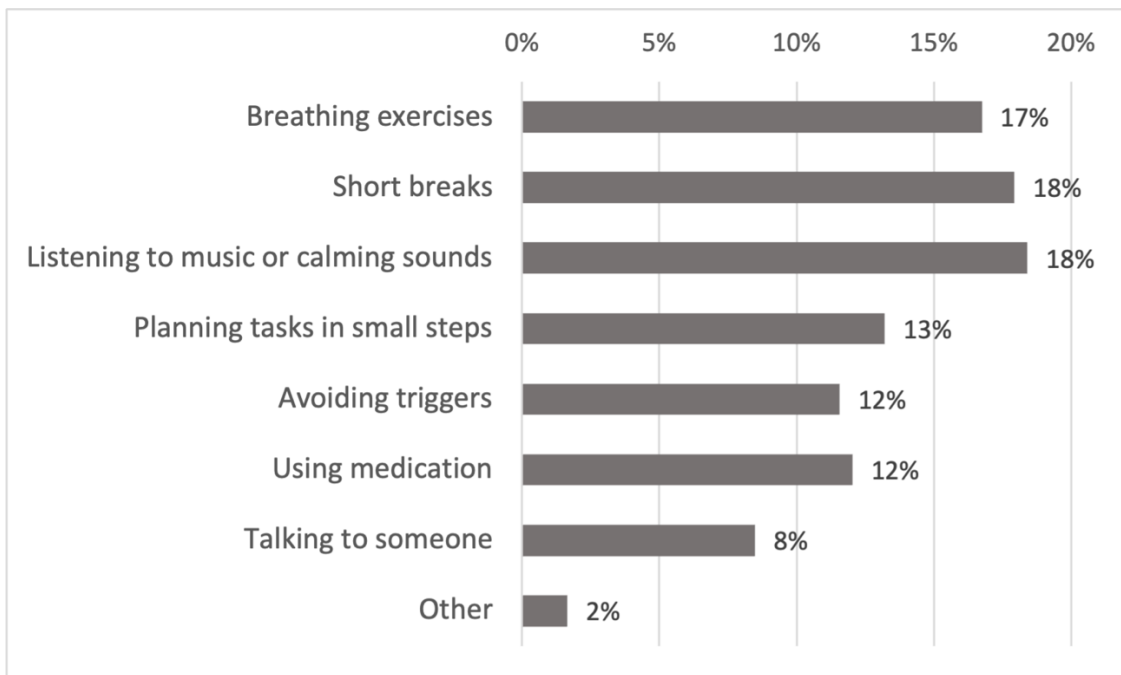


Figure 10 Most effective coping strategies at work

4.4 Workplace Conditions That Support Anxiety Management

Participants were asked which work conditions helped reduce their anxiety, and the responses highlighted several aspects of the workplace that seem important for managing symptoms. Clear instructions were selected most often, suggesting that explicit expectations and structured tasks help employees feel more secure and less overwhelmed. Predictable routines were also frequently reported, showing that stability in daily work patterns can reduce uncertainty, which is a common source of anxiety for people with GAD. Having a supportive manager was another commonly chosen factor, emphasizing the role of leadership and interpersonal relationships in emotional comfort and perceived safety at work.

Flexible working hours and access to a quiet workspace were also seen as helpful by many respondents. Flexibility allows employees to organize their work around fluctuations in energy or symptoms, while quiet spaces may reduce sensory overload and support concentration. Although selected less often, low levels of social interaction were helpful for some participants, especially those who find frequent interpersonal demands tiring. A small number of respondents chose the “other” option and used the open text field to describe more personalized adjustments, such as being able to take short breaks, having more time to prepare for meetings, or working independently when needed.

Overall, the responses suggest that clarity, structure, and supportive interpersonal conditions are important for helping employees with GAD manage their work. At the same time, the variety of preferred conditions shows that employees’ needs are not the same. Effective support seems to depend on a combination of predictable work processes, supportive leadership, and access to environmental or structural options that help employees regulate symptoms during the workday.

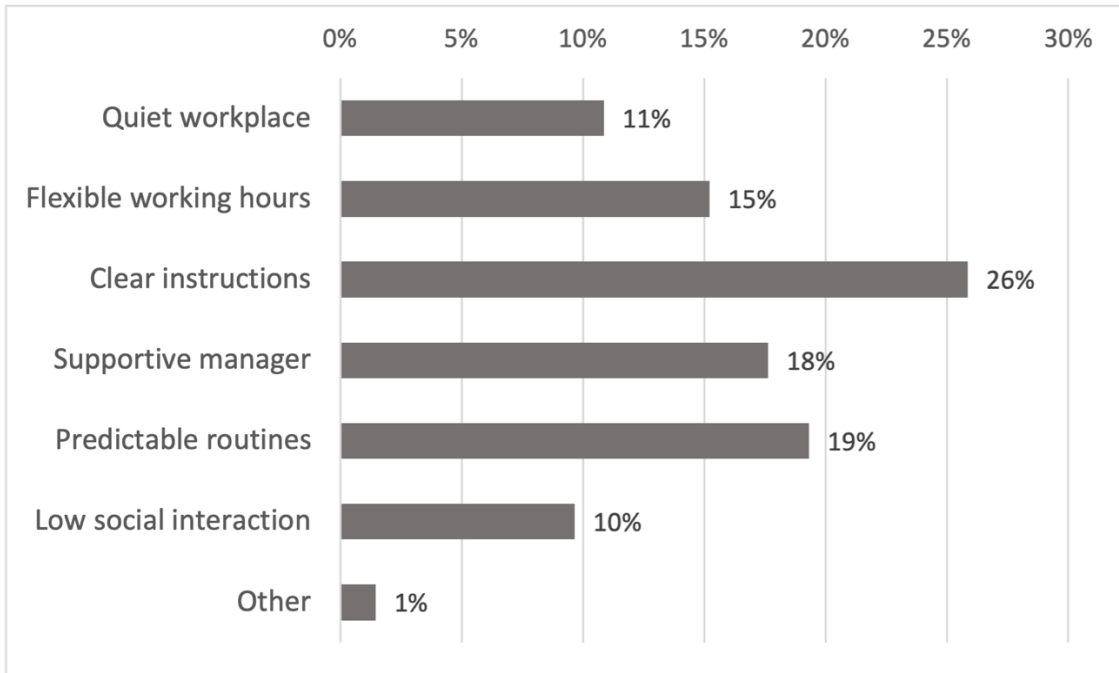


Figure 11 Work conditions that help reduce anxiety

4.5 Disclosure of GAD at Work

Disclosure patterns varied among participants. About half of the respondents reported that they had not disclosed their condition at work, suggesting that many employees with GAD prefer to manage their symptoms privately rather than share this information with managers or colleagues. Among those who did disclose, responses were fairly evenly split. Some participants shared only with a manager, others only with colleagues, and some with both. This variation suggests that decisions to disclose are influenced by personal comfort, perceived trust and the nature of specific workplace relationships.

Participants who had disclosed were also asked how it affected their work experience. The most common response, reported by 36 percent, was that disclosure improved their situation. A smaller group indicated that disclosure made no noticeable difference, suggesting that sharing the information did not significantly change their work environment or interactions. Only a very small number reported that disclosure made

things worse, which may reflect experiences of judgment, changed expectations, or subtle shifts in interpersonal dynamics following disclosure.

A few respondents selected the “other” option and used the open text field to describe more nuanced experiences. These often pointed to mixed or context dependent outcomes. For example, some participants described disclosure as helpful with certain colleagues but uncomfortable with others, while others noted that initial reactions were positive but the longer term impact remained unclear. Overall, the findings suggest that disclosure is not a simple or uniform process, but one shaped by workplace context, interpersonal trust, and employees’ perceptions of psychological safety.

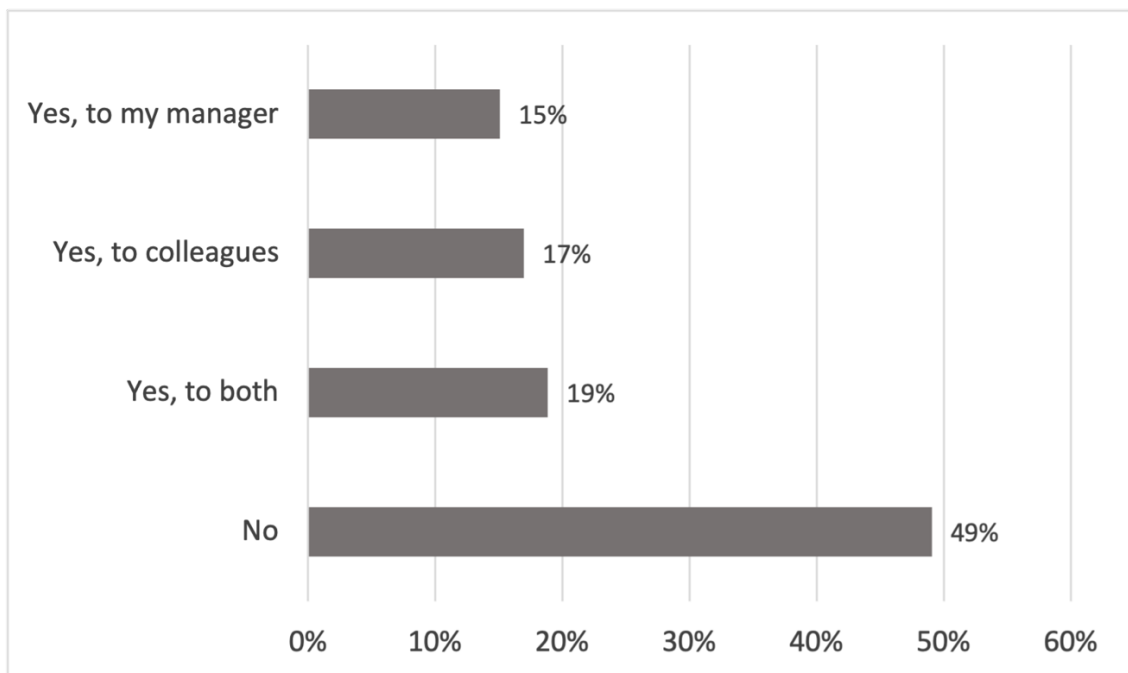


Figure 12 Workplace disclosure of GAD of participants

4.6 Desired Workplace Support

Participants were asked to indicate which types of support they felt would be most helpful for managing anxiety at work. Clearer expectations were selected most often, suggesting that explicit communication about tasks, deadlines and responsibilities helps

employees feel more secure and capable during the workday. Alongside clarity, many participants reported a need for greater flexibility, including flexible scheduling, adaptable working hours or the ability to adjust work patterns during periods when anxiety symptoms increase.

Reduced workload was also commonly identified as important. Those who selected this option often faced high job demands, which made it harder to manage symptoms and maintain concentration. Access to dedicated mental health resources, such as counseling services or wellbeing initiatives, was another frequently chosen option, indicating that employees value structured support and professional guidance.

Manager training on mental health was selected by a smaller, but still notable, group of respondents. While less frequently chosen than other options, this highlights participants' awareness of the role supervisors play in shaping everyday working conditions and interpersonal dynamics. A few participants used the "other" category to suggest more individualized forms of support, such as extra time for task preparation, opportunities to take breaks or access to quiet spaces for independent work.

Overall, the responses suggest that employees with GAD place high value on clear structures, manageable workloads and knowledgeable, supportive leadership. At the same time, the variety of selected options shows that support needs are complex and multifaceted, involving a combination of practical adjustments, interpersonal support and organizational resources. Together, these elements help create a more stable and accommodating work environment for employees managing anxiety.

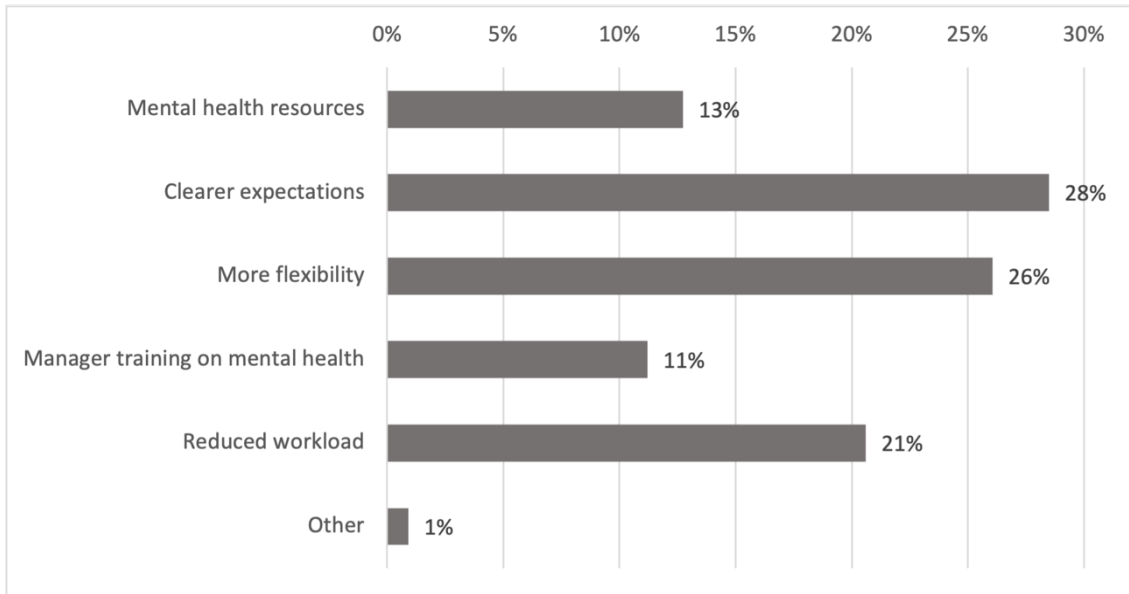


Figure 13 Desired workplace support

4.7 Avoidance of Work Tasks

Two questions looked at whether employees with GAD avoid tasks at work. Most participants said they avoided certain tasks because of anxiety, suggesting that avoidance is a common way to manage distress or reduce exposure to anxiety causing situations. A smaller group said they did not avoid tasks, showing that avoidance is not

the same for everyone and may depend on individual coping styles or the type of work tasks involved.

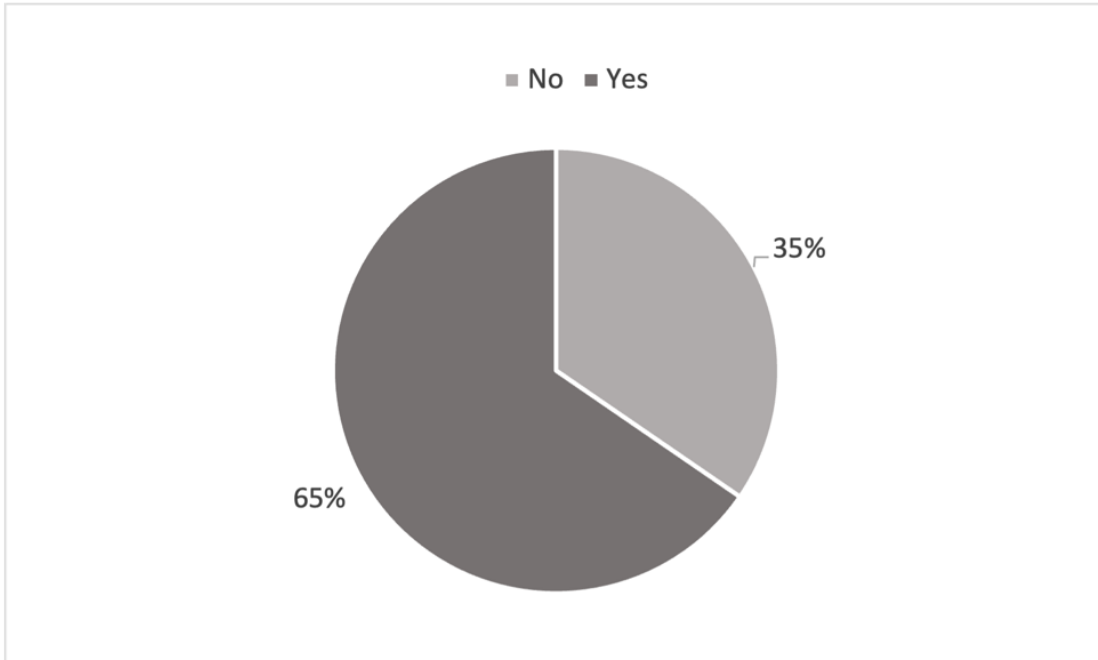


Figure 14 Avoidance of tasks of participants

Among participants who reported avoidance, high pressure tasks were most often avoided. These tasks usually involve strong performance expectations, time pressure or a higher risk of making mistakes, which can increase anxiety for employees with GAD. Tasks with tight deadlines were also commonly avoided, reflecting the strain that time pressure can place on individuals who already experience ongoing worry or cognitive overload.

Social events, phone calls, presentations and meetings were also situations where avoidance was common. These activities often involve interaction with others, visibility or speaking in front of others, which can feel especially challenging for employees who are sensitive to evaluation or judgement. Overall, the findings suggest that avoidance is not limited to demanding work tasks but also includes social and communication related aspects of the workplace.

A small number of participants selected “I have not avoided tasks” even though they previously indicated some avoidance. This may mean that avoidance is situational or limited to specific contexts rather than being a consistent behaviour. This may also reflect differences in how participants understand avoidance, with some considering only repeated or more significant avoidance, while others may include brief hesitation or minor delays. Overall, the responses show that avoidance is an important strategy for many employees with GAD, although its form and frequency vary across individuals.

4.8 Perceived Impact on Work Performance

Finally, participants were asked to rate how strongly they felt GAD affected their work performance. Most respondents indicated a moderate impact, suggesting that anxiety influences concentration, decision making and emotional regulation during the workday, but does not necessarily prevent tasks from being completed. A smaller group reported a strong or very strong impact, which may indicate more frequent or ongoing interference from symptoms, including difficulties with concentration, increased fatigue or heightened sensitivity to work demands.

Around one third of participants rated the impact as small, showing that while symptoms are noticeable, their effect on daily functioning may be limited or more easily managed through coping strategies or supportive work conditions. Only a few respondents reported that GAD had no impact on their work performance at all. This suggests that while some employees are able to control the influence of anxiety, this is not common within the sample.

Overall, the findings indicate that anxiety is an ongoing part of the workday for many participants, shaping how they manage tasks, organise their workload and navigate social interactions. Even when the perceived impact is moderate or small, GAD influences everyday work behaviour, highlighting that it is not a temporary or minor challenge but a factor that interacts with the structure, pace and social demands of the workplace.

A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to examine whether perceived work performance impact differed across age groups. The analysis showed no statistically significant differences between age groups, $F(3, 155) = 0.60$, $p = .61$. This suggests that employees across different age groups perceive the impact of Generalized Anxiety Disorder on their work performance in broadly similar ways.

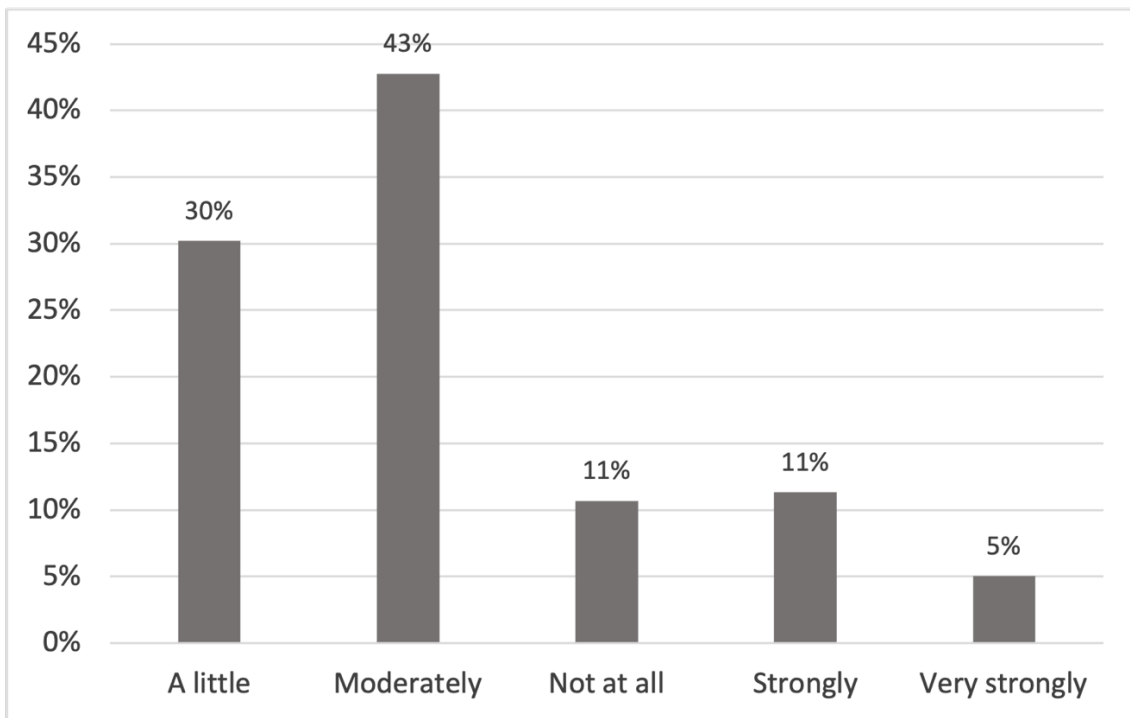


Figure 15 Work performance impact of participants

5 Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how employees with Generalized Anxiety Disorder manage their symptoms at work, how they perceive the impact of GAD on their daily functioning, and which organisational practices they consider most helpful for their wellbeing. The survey results show that anxiety is a common part of the workday for many participants and that personal coping strategies alone are often not enough to fully manage its effects. Taken together with previous research, the findings highlight how individual, social and organisational factors interact to shape the work experiences of employees living with GAD.

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

Frequent anxiety during the workday

Most participants reported experiencing anxiety at least occasionally, with many describing symptoms that appeared around deadlines, meetings or unpredictable work demands. This fits with earlier research showing that high job demands and low control are linked to higher anxiety, especially in roles that involve emotional or interpersonal pressure (Agyapong et al., 2022). For example, studies of preschool teachers have found that anxiety is closely connected to workload stress, unclear expectations and emotionally demanding interactions (Wang et al., 2024). The similarity between these findings and the present study suggests that workplace anxiety may be influenced less by the type of industry and more by working conditions that increase cognitive or emotional strain.

Coping strategies: effective but limited

Participants reported using a variety of coping strategies, such as taking breaks, listening to calming sounds, doing breathing exercises and planning tasks in a structured way. These strategies are in line with previous research on emotion-focused and problem-focused coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). At the same time, many participants reported using avoidance, which reflects concerns noted in earlier studies.

Although avoidance can provide short-term relief, research shows that it often maintains anxiety over time and can limit opportunities for learning and professional growth (Mennin et al., 2005). The frequent use of avoidance in this study may suggest that some employees rely on compensatory strategies when workplace structures are unpredictable or when adequate support is not available.

Workplace conditions as central to functioning

Participants most often described clear instructions, predictable routines, supportive managers and flexibility as helpful work conditions. These results match previous research on mental health and employment, which shows that supportive supervision, reasonable work adjustments and psychologically safe environments are linked to higher job satisfaction and more stable work participation for people with mental health conditions (Borg et al., 2011; Xavier et al., 2020). Similar patterns have been found in jobs with high emotional and interpersonal demands. For example, studies of preschool teachers show that anxiety tends to be lower when leadership is consistent, expectations are clearly communicated and daily routines are predictable (Wang et al., 2024).

Overall, these findings suggest that support for employees with GAD depends not only on personal coping strategies but also on the work environment. Clear structure may reduce cognitive overload, while supportive relationships with managers and colleagues can increase feelings of safety and reduce worry about being judged.

Disclosure patterns and trust

Almost half of the participants said they had not disclosed their condition at work, even though most of those who did report disclosure experienced some improvement. This highlights an important dilemma for employees with GAD. Research shows that decisions to disclose are strongly influenced by the perceived organisational culture, worries about stigma and trust in HR or management (Munir et al., 2020). Employees may hesitate to talk to HR because of concerns about confidentiality, judgement or possible negative effects on their career (Altarawneh, 2024). These findings match the

results of the present study, suggesting that even when workplace support could be helpful, employees may feel that the risks of disclosure outweigh the potential benefits.

Impact on performance

Most participants reported that GAD affected their work performance at least moderately. The impact was especially noticeable in tasks that required sustained focus, confidence in interactions with others, or managing emotions during challenging situations. These results align with cognitive models of GAD, which suggest that ongoing worry can reduce attention and make problem solving more difficult (Moran, 2016). Studies of employees with mental health conditions more generally also indicate that performance problems are influenced not only by symptoms, but also by workplace factors such as unclear role expectations, limited feedback or inconsistent managerial behaviour (Borg et al., 2011).

5.2 HR and Managerial Implications

The findings underscore several practical implications for HR policies and everyday managerial practice.

Clarity reduces unnecessary cognitive load

Clear instructions and predictable routines were among the most important support factors identified in this study. This aligns with research in teacher-focused settings, which shows that clarity and routine help reduce uncertainty and protect employees from anxiety-related strain (Wang et al., 2024; Agyapong et al., 2022). From an HR perspective, this suggests that providing written instructions, structured workflows and transparent communication about deadlines or changes can play a key role in supporting employees with anxiety.

Supportive leadership as a protective factor

Supportive managers were seen as very important for reducing anxiety at work. This supports earlier research showing that leadership with empathy, consistency and open

communication is linked to higher psychological safety and lower emotional strain (Ekornes, 2017). The results of this study suggest that when managers understand mental health and respond calmly and without punishment, employees with GAD may be able to perform their roles more effectively.

Flexibility enables sustainable performance

Participants often highlighted flexibility and workload adjustments as important forms of support. This aligns with research on sustainable employment for individuals with mental illness, which shows that adaptations such as flexible schedules, modified tasks or temporary workload reductions can improve job retention and satisfaction (Warner and Mandiberg, 2006). Overall, these findings suggest that flexibility should be seen not as a special accommodation, but as a practical way to support sustainable participation at work.

Workplace culture influences disclosure and help seeking

The reluctance to disclose seen in this study mirrors findings from HR research, where employees often hesitate to approach HR because of concerns about privacy or being judged (Altarawneh, 2024). This suggests that uncertainty about confidentiality and disclosure processes can prevent employees from seeking support. When organizations communicate clearly and show that confidential information is protected, employees may feel safer using mental health resources. Supportive workplace cultures, therefore, not only reduce anxiety around disclosure but also increase the likelihood that employees will use available support.

Accommodations support long term stability

Research on social enterprises and mental health employment suggests that supportive work environments, reasonable adjustments, and strong interpersonal relationships are associated with more sustainable employment outcomes for people with mental illness (Borg et al., 2011). These findings emphasize the value of organizational approaches that address mental health in a proactive way, instead of focusing only on crisis situations.

For employees with GAD, support appears to be most effective when it is embedded in everyday work practices, rather than offered only during periods of acute distress.

5.3 Contribution of this Study

This study adds to existing research by focusing on employees who self identify as having GAD and by showing how anxiety is experienced and managed in everyday working life. By looking at symptoms, coping strategies and workplace conditions together, the study shows how these factors are connected rather than separate. The findings also point to the importance of HR and managerial practices in creating inclusive and sustainable work environments. While the results are in line with earlier research on mental health at work, they provide additional insight from a diverse group of employees with experience of GAD.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be noted. The use of self reported diagnosis means that participants were not clinically assessed, so experiences of GAD may vary across the sample. In addition, convenience sampling limits how far the findings can be generalized, as participants may differ from employees with GAD who did not choose to take part. The cross sectional design also captures experiences at one point in time and does not allow conclusions about changes in symptoms or coping over time.

Future research could address these limitations by using qualitative interviews to explore lived experiences of GAD in more depth or by examining the effects of specific HR interventions in workplace settings. Studies comparing different industries could also provide further insight into how organizational culture and working conditions shape experiences of GAD at work.

6 Conclusion and HR Recommendations

The aim of this thesis was to explore how employees with Generalized Anxiety Disorder cope with their symptoms at work, how they understand the influence of GAD on their daily functioning and performance and which organizational or managerial practices they believe best support their wellbeing. The findings show that anxiety is a regular part of the workday for many participants and that coping is not a one time action but an ongoing process. Although individuals use different strategies to manage their symptoms, these efforts are strongly influenced by workplace conditions. Clear expectations, predictable routines, empathetic leadership and flexible working arrangements were seen as especially important in helping employees with GAD feel more stable and capable in their roles.

The results also suggest that the impact of GAD should not be viewed only at the individual level. Anxiety was most often reported in situations involving uncertainty, interpersonal pressure or tight deadlines. This supports earlier research showing that workplace stressors can interact with anxiety symptoms, making the work environment either easier or more difficult to manage. The strong focus on clarity and structure in the responses suggests that employees with GAD may benefit from environments that reduce uncertainty and provide a stable basis for planning and decision making. Many participants also highlighted the importance of supportive relationships with managers, pointing to the key role of leadership behavior in shaping how safe and understood employees feel at work.

Responses related to disclosure further highlight the role of organizational culture. While many participants who shared their condition reported some improvement, almost half chose not to disclose at all. This hesitation reflects ongoing concerns about stigma, confidentiality and possible changes in how employees are viewed at work. As mental health receives more attention in workplace wellbeing discussions, these findings

suggest that organizations may need to consider how policies, communication practices and everyday managerial behavior affect employees' willingness to seek support.

6.1 HR Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and the wider literature reviewed, several implications can be identified for HR departments and managers seeking to create more inclusive and supportive work environments for employees with GAD.

Promote clarity in communication and expectations

Uncertainty related to tasks, deadlines or expectations emerged as a significant source of anxiety for many participants. The findings suggest that increased clarity in how work is organized may help reduce this strain. Practices such as providing written instructions, clearly defining roles and responsibilities and maintaining predictable routines were perceived as particularly helpful. Consistent communication also appears to play an important role in reducing misunderstandings and unnecessary worry.

Support managers in developing mental health literacy

Participants frequently identified a supportive manager as a factor that helps reduce anxiety at work. The findings suggest that managerial support may be strengthened when managers are better able to recognize anxiety related difficulties, respond calmly and offer reassurance when appropriate. Managers who communicate with empathy and allow space for open and respectful conversations may contribute to higher psychological safety and help reduce the emotional burden experienced by employees with GAD.

Increase flexibility in work arrangements

Flexible working hours, remote work options and the ability to adjust workload during periods of increased anxiety were described as meaningful forms of support by many respondents. The findings suggest that HR policies that allow reasonable flexibility may help employees manage symptoms without relying on avoidance strategies or

experiencing reduced performance. Rather than being viewed only as a special accommodation, flexibility appears to function as a practical way to support long term wellbeing and sustained participation at work.

Develop clear pathways for disclosure and support

Because disclosure decisions were closely linked to trust, the findings highlight the importance of employees understanding how mental health information is handled within the organization. Clear and transparent processes around confidentiality, including who has access to information and what types of support are available, may help reduce uncertainty and fear of negative consequences. When these procedures are clearly communicated, employees may feel more comfortable seeking support and discussing mental health concerns when needed.

Implement workload management practices

High pressure tasks and tight deadlines were among the situations most often avoided by participants. The findings suggest that anxiety may be reduced when workload planning is more realistic and when larger tasks are divided into smaller, more manageable steps. Reducing the use of consistently compressed deadlines may also help limit ongoing pressure. Such adjustments appear important in preventing cycles of anxiety that can interfere with concentration and overall productivity.

Enhance access to mental health resources

Many respondents identified access to mental health resources as a form of support they would value. This may include employee assistance programs, counseling services, self help materials or partnerships with external mental health providers. The findings suggest that when these resources are visible and their use is normalized, employees may be more likely to seek support at an earlier stage rather than waiting until difficulties increase.

6.2 Final Remarks

This study adds to the growing understanding that mental health is an important part of working life and that organizational practices play a meaningful role in shaping employees' everyday experiences. While employees with GAD develop a range of coping strategies, the findings suggest that their ability to manage symptoms is closely influenced by the clarity, flexibility and interpersonal climate of the workplace. The results highlight that HR professionals and managers can support employees not only through formal policies, but also through everyday interactions, communication styles and leadership behavior. Work environments that promote psychological safety and clear expectations appear to provide a more supportive basis for employees with GAD to perform their roles with greater confidence and long term sustainability..

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